Bruno Munari and the invention of modern graphic design in Italy, 1928 - 1945

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Conclusion
A quiet revolution

> All my work has followed two main paths: one experimental, the other pedagogical (…) Because of this work I've always been considered someone who plays (given that superficial types think experimentation is useless) rather than someone who makes art (for pedagogy).[1]

For Munari, the role of editorial art director for Mondadori and Domus in the 1940s was an important professional caesura, which temporally coincided with WWII. As such, it signalled the beginning of a new season, which in many respects distanced itself from the work he had done over the previous decade. In fact, Munari 'reemerged' after 1945, inventing a new career for himself—not only as an artist and graphic designer, but also as industrial designer and pedagogue devoted to democratizing culture. Indeed, among the avant-garde Futurist works and the Italian graphic design of the immediate postwar period there is a clear continuity—not so much on a formal level, but rather in their fundamental approach.[2]

Compared to European models, Italian modernity had its own unique characteristics that stemmed from the country's cultural and structural backwardness, and on the lack of a comprehensive theory in particular. Besides the radicalism of their constructivist aesthetics, the inroads made by the new European advertising designers had also depended on their ability to turn those ideas into operational principles against which their own

1. Bruno Munari in *Didattica 2. Perché e come* (1977), reprinted in *Bruno* Munari 1979: 50.
2. Branzi 2008: 94, 98–100; cf. Branzi 1984: 'The phenomenon of fifties Italian design (…) has more roots in late Futurism than in the modern movement' (ibid.: 43).

work was to be measured. Instead—as the situation of Munari and others who had had a brush with Futurism shows—in lieu of unifying points of reference, Italian graphic design was born of artists who were largely self-taught—artists who, in a certain sense, 'lived off reflected light.' Of course, this tendency to imitate should not be seen in the reductive sense of slavish copying, but rather as evidence of a formal line of visual research that moved forward intuitively, by trial and error, sometimes pulling together discordant idioms. Such 'bricolage' allowed for a different development of the basic set of ideas and values underlying modernism: compared to the rationalist definition of modernity, which can ultimately be traced back to the Enlightenment, the Italian approach seems instead to have responded more to a 'personal calling to follow a process of mediation' between extremes such as Futurism and the retreat into tradition.[3]

Exposure to Swiss graphic culture was another key factor that led to the birth of the 'Milanese style' of the 1950s. But the intimate connection with the fine-arts milieu, which in the 1920s and 1930s made up for the lack of adequate training in the graphic arts, persisted for a long time, and to a large extent determined the specificity of Italian graphic design. Rather than springing from an established tradition or a new, shared vision, this can be described as the spontaneous achievement of a generation of self-taught artists whose common background was in the pioneering field of applied arts. Their formative years fell between WWI and WWII when, prior to the arrival of any Constructivist theory, the Futurists' post-Cubist tradition remained predominant. The Swiss influence, which acted as a direct intermediary with the legacy of the Bauhaus, was therefore grafted onto *that* particular heritage, which had slowly concentrated into the Milanese avant-garde that counted Munari amongst its leading exponents.

As far as graphic design is concerned, Italian Modernism developed in two distinct phases. In the first, which occurred in the 1930s, the Modernist paradigm assumed peculiar features contingent on the political situation under the Fascist rule, and was limited to the assimilation of values on a strictly formal level. This left all social, utopian components out of the picture, although they were essential to the discourse of the 'new advertising designers' in Europe.[4] In addition, this formalistic reception of New Typography principles was totally oblivious of its fundamental functional aspects, from which all other compositional principles ensued as a corollary.[5] While the social dimension was

3. Branzi 2008: 14–6, 18–9. The central axiom of Branzi's analysis is the fundamental Italian inclination towards discontinuity, which supposedly reflects its long history: 'Italy is a country that has never had a revolution.' The lack of radical turning points would explain the constant opposition between modernity and tradition throughout the twentieth century (ibid: 15).

4. Regarding the overlap between the modern movement's claims to an artistic nature and social nature, see Paul Schuitema's recollections: 'His [the artist's] designs must make true statements and clearly convey to the public the properties of particular products (…) Our activities in the workshops and factories were intended to provide people with things which are better designed' (Schuitema 1961: 16). Schuitema, like the other proponents of modernism, does not question the fact that the realm of artistic intervention coincides with the commercial realm of advertising—that is, he does not sense any ideological paradox between the two aspirations: industry is accepted as necessary fact, but the work of the designer, despite its commercial ends, can and must be conceived as having informative ends (analogous to the assertions of Swiss graphic designers in the 50s). Cf. Kinross: 'the familiar paradox in the modern movement: a system of beliefs that often encompassed revolutionary socialism and (capitalist) theories of business efficiency' (Kinross in Tschichold 1995 [1928]: xxvii).

5. In Tschichold's words: 'In my graphic design, I attempt to achieve maximum purposefulness [Zweckmäßigkeit] and to unite the individual component parts harmonically: to design [zu

absent from the debate pitting traditionalists against advocates of the modern, the stylistic elements based on the combination of typography and photography were widely exploited—alongside a monumental version of the Futurist vocabulary—for their modern connotations, not only in the field of advertising, but also in the regime's propaganda. Hence, the new visual language appeared in Italy with an ideological polarity that was the exact opposite of its original context. The contradiction between aesthetic form and transmitted values was somewhat resolved through an 'artificial' view of Fascism, corresponding to the 'revolutionary' ideology of Giuseppe Bottai's so-called Fascist Left, with which many of the Milanese and Lombard avant-garde exponents identified.[6] Furthermore, the political accommodations of the Italian intellectual class during the twenty-year Fascist rule was also favoured by relatively tollerant cultural policies, assuring its acquienscence, if not active support. Although Munari, all told, appeared to be a fairly apolitical man, he nevertheless took part in the predominantly nationalistic climate, or at least did not steer clear of the inevitable homages to power.

The second phase coincided with the country's material and moral reconstruction after 1945, which translated into a rediscovery of the social and progressive aspects of art production in relation to industry. After the regime's value system had failed, the artist's role was called into question with an increasing sense of urgency, as was the integration of the creative realm with that of the neocapitalist economy based on mass consumption that was to rapidly transform Italy.[7] Even if in seeming contradiction with his previous consensus to the Fascist climate, a progressive social utopia sustained Munari's artistic experience throughout the postwar period. First with the Movimento Arte Concreta (MAC, Concrete Art Movement), later through his writings and his commitment to teaching, Munari turned himself into the spokesman of the designer's social role as the modern artist in the service of society. In so doing he revitalized the debate, effectively affiliating himself with the ideological premises set forth by the Modernist culture of the interwar period, which in Italy at the time was an absolute novelty.[8] Even in such a difficult context, with Futurism considered unacceptable and the political Left having refused abstractionism, Munari's position, which remained staunchly on the side of abstraction, nevertheless reclaimed the social dimension of art through design, which directly became a part of the everyday.[9] So, despite the fact that he was not involved in politics, he publicly proclaimed the moral need for artists to renew their sense of social engagement, and thereby became a de facto progressive.

gestalten]' (from *Gefesselter Blick*, 1930, quoted in Kinross 1995: 70).

6. Although the architects' and abstractionists' rationalism was synonymous with modernity, it was nevertheless used explicitly in the service of the Fascist state: 'Politically, however, Antifascism wasn't the motor behind this reversal with respect to the muscular exhibitions of "twentieth-century" figuration (...) [That] constructive, ordered ideal (...) can be viewed as an offer to collaborate with the regime' (Calvesi 2000: 27).

7. Cf. Kinross 2004: 'The conditions of scarcity and disarray in the aftermath of 1945 did provide a proper context for a typography that was guided by considerations of need and use. Such conditions were general in Europe (...) They were the background for visions of the reconstruction of a social order that had so far resisted modernization. Design was recognized as having an important role in presenting this vision (...)' (ibid: 139).

8. For Munari, the 'political plan' to democratize art meant not so much the economic aspects, but rather the conceptual tools and conditions that allow one to access art (Alberto Munari in conversation with the author, 10 February 2008).

9. Culture's hostility (expressed as Antifascism) towards Futurism was paralleled by a revolt against abstractionism, which was accused of shirking social commitment: at the height of the Cold War the PCI (Italian Communist Party)—that attracted most of the

> Today, the artist must step off his pedestal and deign to design [even] the butcher-shop sign (if he knows how). (…) the artist [must] become an active person amongst others, aware of current techniques, materials, and working methods, and—without abandoning his innate aesthetic sense—humbly and competently answer the questions one might pose. The designer is now the point of contact (…) between art and the public (…) It's no longer the painting for one's living room, but rather the kitchen applicance. Art mustn't be separated from life: [with] beautiful things to be looked at and ugly things to be used.[10]

It has been argued that Munari is the only designer of his generation that did not succeed in successfully earning a living from his work. This is possibly due to his intuitive experimental attitude and the range of his intellectual interests, that in the eyes of art critics looked like triviality. Notwithstanding the number of highly original visual researches, establishing his own identity in the graphic design scene—which he partly found in publishing—was increasingly problematical to Munari. By the late 1950s he appeared to be tied up to an outdated modernist formula which was more pictorial in character than typographically structured. However, if this approach somewhat hampered his professional success as a graphic designer, it did nevertheless allow him a widespread popular recognition that few of the Milanese designers have attained.[11]

Munari's œuvre carries a twofold legacy: on the one hand, in his relationship to technology the artist and his work remained closely tied to the principles of Futurism; on the other, he looked to prewar modernism for a sense of the social worth of his artistic practice.[12] As we have seen, modern Italian graphic design has its roots in the crossbreeding of two distinct traditions of the Modern—Futurism and Constructivism: so it is not surprising that both strains are present in Munari's work as it unfolded in the latter half of the twentieth century. On the one hand, the unconditioned experimental openness to techniques, materials, and processes which is at the core of his creative practice goes back to his futurist legacy; on the other hand, the social role of the designer which he championed after 1945 witnesses a modernist legacy, rooted in the theories articulated in Europe during the 1920s. In other words, while the Futurist aesthetic guided his formal research, the modernist attitude brought a progressive dimension to it.

Those ideals of social order, coupled to this double legacy, enlivened his artistic initiatives throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and eventually culminated in the creative workshops for children, a far-reaching educational project that occupied almost exclusively the last part of his life. As the economic and political crisis of the early 1970s forced him to reposition himself, instead of assuming a public critical stance, Munari directed his attention to the world of infancy. In his allegedly most important project, he devoted his efforts to

cultural avant-garde—took a conservative stance that led to a sterile debate between realists and abstractionists, culminating in Togliatti's condemnation of abstractionism in '52 (Ginsborg 2000: 54).

10. Bruno Munari, *Arte come mestiere* (Bari/Rome: Laterza, 1966): 19.

11. In Gillo Dorfles' opinion: 'Others, in his shoes, would have made the most of their artistic work on the market (…) but Munari, after the relatively brief period in which he worked with the MAC (…) primarily devoted his efforts to design and to educating children. (…) Unlike other artists, Munari never really marketed his work. He was always a disinterested experimenter (…) This doesn't mean that every invention is a work of art, but it does attest to an invariably creative methodology and approach to life' (Dorfles in Fiz 2000: 23–4).

12. According to Branzi, the main characteristic of Italian design lies 'in the use of technique for its aesthetic possibilities, and of aesthetics for their technical possibilities,' and is perfectly suited to describe the essence of Munari's method (Branzi 2008: 14). On the other hand, the attention to technological aspects falls fully within the prerequisites of modernism.

the development of methods and tools to stimulate the creativity of new generations, bringing his entire array of experiences to fruition. In a sense, these final attempts at contributing to an egalitarian society brought his work full circle. Hence, Munari's implication with and for children assumes an explicit ideological connotation, that makes him one of the most 'radical' Italian designers of the 20th century.

> Childrens' workshops are the logical consequece of all my work up to now (...) I think that (...) [they help] develop, in the best way possible, the personality of the various individuals in the younger and youngest generations.[13]

> [These workshops for children are] very important because of their formative value for collective cultural growth, without which our revolutions would leave the world as they found it.[14]

13. Bruno Munari quoted in A. Munari 1986: 74.
14. Bruno Munari in *Didattica 2. Perché e come* (1977), reprinted in *Bruno Munari* 1979: 51.