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disegno industriale › industrial design

Design and Art

68/19



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disegno industriale › industrial design

Design and Art

The issue 68 of **diid** offers a cultural dialogue on the relationship among the disciplines of design and art.

On the one hand, the essays stimulate reflection on possibly overcoming this relationship, while investigating similarities and differences; on the other hand, they critically analyze the mutual influence that design and art have constituted in the contemporary world, in terms of interference and cross-pollination.

In its complexity, the landscape is marked by a cultural context that, on a number of occasions, has historically articulated these reflections, seeking to critically grasp the most significant elements in their mutual contemporariness. The current affirmation of the new digital tools for action and production in the work of the artist and designer has ushered in new horizons and perspectives that, in this "new contemporariness", raise the need for an updated reconnaissance of the state of the art.

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Daily art for the design company

Beauty inspires people. Mediating creativity and needs is the goal of enlightened entrepreneurs who get involved in an approach process, in certain cases of fusion, between “making design”, that is, between producing everyday objects, and “making art”: they are “art mediators” capable of hybridizing the worlds of art, design and market transforming the best expressions of designers and artists creativity into objects able of touching the public’s heart. Through cases study of avant-garde design companies that have experimented with “commercial art”, an attitude emerges that places at the centre of the project the “fascination of the object” sought by Alessi and Vitra, as well as the design “imaginative-visual” matrix, supported by Osvaldo Borsani, and which contributes to preserving the design from the danger of passive assimilation to the mechanics of serial production, confirming that “good design” is an alchemic formula that results from the balance between technical, economic, but above all, conceptual experience. Without denying the importance of aspects relating to the use of the object, materials, or production processes, we want to highlight the dominance of the idea, which is capable of arousing attention in a world in which the indiscriminate proliferation of images reigns : the idea, which arises upstream of an object to make the public think, amuse it, or provoke it, without denying the nature of the object, which usually also includes a utility. The designers-artists, or artists-designers, are today custodians of quality in a world that is quantifying, because the quality of an object reinvented through an artistic approach, free to act on the deepest aspects of the human being, has the capacity to resonate with him reflecting his own nature and inventiveness. And if the company accepts this challenge, innovative products that can become design icons can be born.

[art, beauty, design, company, innovation]

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Attraction for beauty

«When the objects we use every day and the environment in which we live will also be works of art, then we can say that we have reached a vital balance». (Munari, 1997)

With these words Bruno Munari in the mid-sixties promoted the designer as a “designer with an aesthetic sense” capable of creating useful objects made artfully to be integrated into daily life, so that there should not be an art detached from life, with beautiful things to look at and ugly things to use.

The attention to beauty, and the recognition of the fundamental role of art to improve society and inspire people, began to infect a way of designing that was widespread in Italy already after World War II, and the famous artist and designer is a brilliant spokesperson.

The history of our design was written in those years by entrepreneurs and designers who exchanged thoughts and visions in handcrafted laboratories, in literary salons, in small and medium-sized companies factories as well as in art galleries and cafes. Today, in a hectic and lack of memory age, where few seem to remember people and places that made history, when you hear the name “Bar Jamaica” you immediately think of artists like Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni, poets like Salvatore Quasimodo and Giuseppe Ungaretti, but also to the designers who from the fifties onwards have transformed the language of the project compared to the tradition of the “Modern Movement”. In the autobiography of Ettore Sottsass (2010) the historic Milanese bar – located in the heart of the Brera district and a stone’s throw from the Academy of Fine Arts – is cited as an authentic laboratory of artistic avant-gardes, a theatre of confrontation and discussion often burning. This perhaps explains why almost all the Italian designers of the second post-war generation come from the world of architecture and art, and are united by a strong ethical and aesthetic connotation. Many of them in the development of the projects have challenge themselves, often with remarkable results, with technicians and engineers sensitively immersed in a humanistic culture that invited them to look first at the “sense of things”, beyond the pure technical function, where thought is the basis of making – whether it is the major arts or minor arts, as *artes mechanicae* – and drives the artist’s vision.

The conceptual idea that anticipates the project plays a main role in the creative process of Italian designers and has its deepest roots in a rich and complex heritage of expressions and languages built over the centuries in continuous dialectical and rhetorical clashes, where thought, united to a continuous experimental verification, it gives life to the ideal figure of “artisan-philosopher” (Bosoni, 2007) present as much in the studio of the prince as in the atelier of the master, but which over time is still found in a large group of enlightened entrepreneurs, true own prime-designers, as well as in the atelier-workshops of many architects-designers or artists-designers, and still in the factory-laboratories of a great history of artisans-entrepreneurs.

The projects of the artists and designers of the second half of the last century were born precisely from the need to give answers to questions still unexpressed by the

dominant culture of the time through visions that concerned a new way of living, moving, working, living the everyday life.

Their ideas were, in most cases, autonomous to the internal logic of the company or the market, so it was rare that they could be generated in the technical design offices of the companies, or in the style centers of large industries. Entrepreneurs who managed to mediate the ideas of artists and designers with the business needs of the company, and to bring to market products that arose from research aimed at renewing aesthetic languages, would have come like original protagonists in the history of design: in fact, without an artistic vision “the stuff”, understood generically as a set of useful objects, tends to become asymptotically goods (Gold, 2008).

Mediate creativity and needs

extending the reflection beyond the Italian borders we find realities not very different from ours. If we retrace the history of object design in Europe, starting from the artistic movement for the applied arts reform “Art & Crafts”, passing through the artistic circle “Wiener Werkstätte”, the “Bauhaus”, the “Scandinavian phenomenon”, up to the experiences of “Italian Design”, we can observe that all these movements – which have had the disruptive power to resist history and to have provided models to inspire and refer to introduce objects of high aesthetic and artistic value into daily life – they are based on relatively small groups of entrepreneurs and designers who have confronted, and sometimes clashed themselves, with very powerful cultural, intellectual and even spiritual visions.

Beyond the different types of relationships that have arisen in the specific contexts of each movement, or schools of thought in disciplinary education and in the productive and economic sectors, we can recognize in all these experiences the figure of an “aesthetic operator” who can compare himself with a sculpture, an architecture, a piece of furniture, a typographic page or a mechanical part with the same “artistic-poetic” attitude.

Within this vision, the task of the design company would be to practice a continuous, tireless mediation activity between the most advanced instances of international contemporary creativity of “product design” and public expectations, approaching the definition of “commercial art” – used by the philosopher Gianni Vattimo to define those forms of activity with an “artistic-poetic” component such as fashion, cinema, rock music – which, unlike the so-called major arts, as a justification for their existence need the consent of the public. Without the consent of the public, of any kind of public, as long as it is extended and not restricted to a circle of experts, as in the major arts, design cannot exist.

Among Italian companies there are some interesting avant-garde cases that have experimented with “commercial art”, especially between the 1980s and 1990s, achieving great critical and public success and contributing to the formation of a deep and widespread belief today more extensively: that emotions play an increasingly important role in the purchasing process, and that the success of an object is

therefore closely linked to its ability to fascinate the public, just as happens with the works of artists.

The merit of the most enlightened entrepreneurs was that of being an “art mediator”, as Alberto Alessi states, mediating the worlds of design and market to transform the best expressions of creativity of designers and artists into objects capable of touching the public’s heart .

Who doesn’t know the 9093 kettle designed by Michael Graves in 1985, with the little red bird that seems to come to life and take flight in a joyful cry? A pivotal product and a forerunner of a “cartoon” trend that developed in the nineties from a playful-psychoanalytical research of the company, and based on archetypal forms linked to our childhood, able of activating emotional relationships with objects. The juicer *Juicy Salif* by Philippe Starck, the corkscrew *Anna G* by Alessandro Mendini, or the *Girotondo* trays by Stefano Giovannoni, are still “icon objects” of the company that have given life to successful extended families of products over the years.

Alberto Alessi has always maintained that the true nature of his company is that of an industrial research laboratory in the applied arts, careful to create new products bearing of artistic and poetic values, and not only based on the principle of commercial success, in which sometimes the functional aspect is provocatively denied:

You make chairs that have to afford to sit and that have to cost as less as possible, otherwise you don’t do industry anymore. But then if you sell a chair it’s because people fall in love, not because you sit well or because it’s cheap. At the centre of the project is the fascination of the object. I would have stopped producing and I would not be able to keep the company together if I only focused on the functional aspects. (Castelli, Antonelli & Picchi, 2007, p. 258)

While the Alessi brand still continues today to be synonymous of household items, its products are present in the largest number of permanent museum collections worldwide. A success that rewards the ability of “artistic mediation” in the field of design in which the role of the entrepreneur is not very different from that of the director of a museum or the manager of an art gallery, or even of a film maker, except for the fact that he uses the industry as a medium to touch the emotion of the public. If we retrace the official career of Alberto Alessi in his company that began in 1970, we realize that since then he had shown a strongly utopian and favourable vision for a form of “multiplied art” advocating – through an ideological and programmatic manifesto – a new commercial civilization able to offer the masses of consumers real artistic objects at a reasonable price. Among the authors involved for art multiples there were artists, such as the Italian sculptors Carmelo Cappello with *Forma Orizzontale Circolare*, Pietro Consagra with *Girevole*, Andrea Cascella with *Narciso*, Giò Pomodoro with *Guscio N. 1*, and the Yugoslav Dusan Dzamonja with *Multimodel X*.

"Icon" objects

Art is therefore recognized the possibility of limiting the uniformity of serial production, and consequently the ways of life and unnecessary consumption, recovering the aesthetic value within the current system of production and consumption which, to quantify, de-qualifies.

The *ABV Collection* was born in 1992 with the desire to reclaim the conversation between "furnishing project" and "artistic creation" – that the historic company Arredamenti Borsani Varedo had already begun in the fifties, involving emerging artists such as Lucio Fontana, Agenore Fabbri, Giò Ponti, Fausto Melotti, Arnaldo and Giò Pomodoro, Aligi Sassu and others – to design furniture, not sculptures, on which one could "even" sit or rest. Not art multiples. Furniture, in the full sense: shapes designed specifically for a function, objects made thanks to industrial production techniques. The company therefore believed in the hybridization of the object of use, contaminating it with pure creativity, as an artist, which at the same time respected the primary functional needs:

The Tecno company culture was deeply marked by this relationship between the designer and the artist. We can certainly say that the figure of Giò Ponti is the one that comes closest to the image of the architect-artist, and that his *Tripосто* in the *ABV Collection* can be considered the ideal – *trait d'union* – between the past and the present design experience. (Pomodoro & Squatriti, 1992, p. 9)

The initiative undertaken by the Borsani family was aimed at supporting the belief that the whole history of design witnesses the coexistence of "invention and project", albeit with greater or lesser incidence of one and the other, highlighting that yesterday as well as today the "imaginative-visual" matrix of design is not only vital, but helps to preserve the design from the danger of passive assimilation to the technical mechanics of serial production.

Therefore not only architects and designers but also artists, as "image technicians", are involved in an action that is essentially aimed at preventing the imagination from ceasing to be an intellectual faculty. But why the artists?

According to Carlo Argan (1992) the artists live the life of their time and simply reject consumption as a goal, therefore they propose beyond it a new value of being, of doing, of using. Through the intellectual recreation of the serial object, they recreate the individuality of the subject: using objects reworked by art means re-proposing the value of intersubjective communication, which the seriality of industrial production tends to eliminate.

The designer-artist does not communicate anything other than his own being an artist, his ability to invent and invent his own authentic way of being and doing, which includes a critical attitude to the existing, and very often an ironic and poetic component. This type of designer ironizes about the design obedient to the laws of consumption, always and in any case, just as artists keep the irony in their history: we think of Marcel Duchamp, but also of René Magritte, Man Ray, or Paul Klee. The serial

object reinvented by the artist, who does things that are useful to live, solicits criticism and judgment, freeing the user from the obligation of unreflecting consumption. *Nastro di Gala*, the enamelled steel bench by Agenore Fabbri, "is a demonstration of the artist's non-conformism and freedom of thought. The slight sign that seems to defy gravity derives from a gesture of the author", who took the metal sheet and bent it in the same way as when he paints or sculpts, obtaining an object that is not only functional, but stimulates sensations and emotions that transcend styles and fashions. The proof is that even today, thirty years later, Tecno exhibits in the main shop windows of its showrooms this "icon-product" precisely because of its attraction that it is able to exercise outside of time, thanks to the relationship that the artist was able to create with the material. The *Table 1/2/3/4/5* by Getullio Alviani also highlights the close relationship that exists between creativity and matter and the need to discover and deeply feel the "material soul" that gives shape to the idea of a project:

I think that art should affect the evolution of doing and I believe that in designing functional objects there is the same spirituality as in making purely visual art. For me, designing always happens as an interrelation with some primary, simple, elementary material, to which I can give something that it never had; this creates the third thing that is the interaction which is established between me and it. Today, however, I think that the function of the maker, of the doer, is a more critical function than the sole function of manual work, of activity. The role that an ideational artist can play at this time, rather than that of producing new things, is to look at and suggest new ideas, which can also be very far from those already realized. (Alviani, 1992, p. 31)

Tecno's design culture has always been deeply characterized by a patronage aimed at promoting "the relationship between the Designer and the Artist" because Osvaldo and Fulgenzio Borsani, anticipating a trend that is very evident today, had already understood that the designers-artists are the only guardians of quality in a world that is quantifying, because the quality of an object reinvented by art has the ability to resonate with the user, arousing in him emotions and reflecting his inventiveness. The confirmation of the value and success of the strategic choice pursued by the two entrepreneurs and aimed at involving artists' thinking in the creation of objects has determined the exponential growth of the Varedo company that has brought the Tecno brand to the top of the market and to become the world leader in the office world, and beyond, for several years.

The strategic role of art for companies

the experience of Tecno shows how art – understood as pure thought, original idea from which the project originates – actually has a very important strategic role for the growth and competitiveness of companies, especially if they move in a market that has the boundaries of the world and where it is impossible to make predictions, even in the short term.

Rolf Fehlbaum quickly understood this and transformed Vitra – the company founded in Weil am Rhein by his father in 1950 – into a large project in which today, in addition to the product catalogue, there is a collection of unique pieces and a historical archive. Within another collection of architectural masterpieces, the *Vitra Campus*. In the eighties he began to buy the products of great architects and designers, from Charles and Ray Eames to Jean Prouvé, from Alvar Aalto to Eero Saarinen, with the same spirit of an art gallery owner who aims to build a collection of works, including both products characterized by the emphasis of author's creativity and the expression of an anonymous and popular action. His collection is based on selection criteria that favour designers able to go beyond the limits of realistic possibilities: you can find numerous objects that do not correspond to the traditional and qualitative concept of "good design" precisely because their authors, just to be truly original and innovative, they preferred to sacrifice the usual idea of quality. In an interview by Stefano Boeri for *Abitare*, realized on the occasion of the release of the celebratory book for Vitra's 50 years of life, Rolf Fehlbaum states that for him collecting represents a sort of "unnatural" selection process, while often tends to think that only the best objects should become part of a collection. But in reality it is not so: the interest of a collector often focuses on the most extreme objects, those that have crossed the boundaries until then shared. Let us imagine that Marcel Duchamp has created a chair. Whether this chair is more or less good and efficient is irrelevant: his is an object that has passed from the sphere of the profane to the altar of art, it is treated as art and therefore becomes art. It is this way of thinking that opens the door to the archive idea of Rolf Fehlbaum and that leads to collecting the objects obtained from experimentations on new meanings. The choice of enhancing the unique objects, the result of a search aimed at exploring the margins of the allowed, proves to be a winner due to the intrinsic ability of the same objects to preserve their original strength over time, setting themselves for this reason beyond the commercial logic that very often they feed the strategies behind the new products. The *Chaise* by Charles and Ray Eames in 1948, the *Panton Chair* created by Verner Panton in 1960, or the *Ball Chair* by Eero Aarnio in 1965 are objects-sculptures that have become symbols of Vitra as well as, in more recent times, the *Wiggle Side Chair* by Frank Gehry in 1972, up to *Vegetal* by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec in 2008.

At the center of Vitra's project there is still the "fascination of the object", researched by Alberto Alessi, as well as the "imaginative-visual" design matrix – supported by Osvaldo Borsani and which contributes to preserving the design from the danger of passive assimilation to the mechanics of serial production – confirming that "good design" is an alchemic formula which results from the balance between technical, economic, but above all conceptual experience.

If the project is a sincere expression of the idea, the work translates into an awareness of the creative gesture, into an emotional force through which it is able to touch people's hearts and create environments and objects that are works of art. This is

why the designers-artists, or artists-designers, are today custodians of quality in a world that is quantifying, and the quality of an object reinvented through an artistic approach, free to act on the emotions and on the deepest aspects of the human being, has the ability to resonate with him reflecting his own nature and inventiveness. And if the company accepts this challenge, innovative products that can become design icons can be born.

In this essay have been described three emblematic cases of historical companies recognized all over the world that have survived to the transformations of two generations thanks to their ability to integrate artistic languages in their products, and that for this have become an inspiration for many others. A very articulated and complex scenario is now opening up in which digital technologies have a new influence on all the arts and styles of contemporary living. Perhaps it is still too early to trace the behaviour of companies that are confronted today with this profound transition and the impact of their products on the market: it takes time to develop awareness on how to respond to new needs, integrate innovation and create new languages and artefacts for consumer experiences in the near future.

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