

Bruno Munari. Designer of aesthetic sense. The experimental zeal. By Pedro Medina

Fantasy

“Everyone knows a different Munari”. Paolo Fossati said these words to introduce Munari in the book *Codice ovvio* (*Obvious Code*, 1971). Indeed, nowadays words like “interdisciplinary” or “multidisciplinary” are on everyone's lips -but, effectively, on almost none-. However, this Milanese artist embodies the journey through different professional fields, as very few do. For this reason, he is one of those figures that sometimes generates perplexity, since we are accustomed to perceiving each new character framed in a unique category or disciplinary field.

Hence, one of the most common approaches to Bruno Munari is through his book *Artista e designer* (*Artist and designer*, 1971), a classic reference to emphasize the differences between the designer and the artist from a methodological point of view; although the type of artist from whom the “romantic artist” is separated. In a very synthetic way, in those moments, that distance was described in the following terms: the designer works in a group. He has no style, he is solving problems, inventing neutral and anonymous solutions, and he does not produce works of art, but only functional objects, through a specific method within an objective system.

We are not going to go into these differences now, but we should stop for a moment in this book, given that one of its benchmark is the concept of “fantasy”, which is praised as a source of artistic creation.

Regarding this concept, he will write in 1977 the book of the same name, which is corrected, in part, by *Artista e designer*. Here fantasy appears as the “pre-vision” of the work, and it is transferred to the world of creativity, which will transform it into a method. Given this situation, it is worth asking whether there is really a clear separation of these two areas of creation. When Munari is well known, what becomes evident is that he systematized a method for a discipline, but this was thanks to being an inhabitant of both worlds.

In fact, in *Fantasia* there is also a “pre-design” being actually the fantasy of creativity delivering itself to absolute potentiality of doing. As recognised by Marco Belpoliti, regarding the presence of this concept in the two books: “He has brought in through the window what he had thrown out the door”, thus becoming the driving force of his work. Otherwise, we cannot understand works such as his variations on the *Talking Forks*, which are forms of fun that he designed “without any practical purpose, only to play with fantasy” –as Claudio Cerritelli pointed out.

What, then, are the paths that fantasy creates? On the one hand, it becomes a generator of pure possibility and, on the other hand, it brings the idea of “totality” beyond traditional categories and watertight compartments. Indeed, Cerritelli starts talking about Munari as a “total artist” through his absolute experimentation about complexity, through a universe of possible choices. In this case, reference to his “totalism” is described on number 5 of the *Bollettino* of MAC (1952), where Franco Passoni speaks about “his fanciful and encyclopaedic activity”. This is a model like no other in global dimension of art, being considered as a cognitive field.

Just this vision is the one adopted by Marco Meneguzzo on the occasion of Munari's first anthological exhibition at the Royal Palace of Milan in 1986. Thus, beyond the “method of permanent doubt”, as a non-dogmatic rule, his entire career can be understood on the basis of the following criterion: “It is the global sense (...) of Munari's versatility and ideation that must be object of a critical analysis”. Francesco Bonami understood it similarly when he reviewed Italian art between 1968 and 2008 in his work *Italics*, where he included Munari as a cornerstone to help us understand this transition.

Cerritelli provides a summary of this trajectory when he says that the artist is “an anomalous inventor of aesthetic and social communicative forms, and, at the same time, an original and atypical experimenter of linguistic plots; without ever renouncing subjectivity of an approach drawing the different elements of real creating unity in the totality”.

Possibility

This “entirety” is complemented by another dimension which is displayed by fantasy: the -all-encompassing-range of possibility beyond disciplinary barriers. Thus Bruno Munari sees unsuspected horizons that are the passage to other experiences closed to those who are not true inhabitants of the openness.

This experimentation space in Munari is devoted to the infinite game of “virtuality”. This should be seen in its scholastic use, that is, it refers to its “potentiality” and not to its being in action. In this way, the virtual becomes a particular way of being we tend to, giving value to the processual and to the project of a future, open to each “user” with whom this artist shares his works. Since in front of them we cannot be simply spectators, but only experimenters of the possibility offered by each piece, which must not mark the limits in a single gesture or interpretation.

In this way, we are navigating between signs and archipelagos of meanings, acquiring the entity of new places from which to draw different paths with regard to those already travelled, being convinced of the creation of new harmonies and contrasts. For this reason, the public becomes a bundle of relationships with what surrounds us in order to establish, in turn, endless correspondences.

This is how Munari should be understood when he claims to be a producer of “aesthetic sense”, where art is a game. Furthermore, *divertissement* –as Gillo Dorfles warned in all his work–, which leads to shared articulation of a suggestive system of combinations.

This is observed in *Da cosa nasce cosa (How objects are born?, 1983)*, from his references to the Gestalt Psychology school, to address the “variation in perception”, to criteria avoiding monotony, applied to the *Falklands*, but also to *Flexi* and, of course, to *useless machines*, and to any experiment in chromatic harmonies, shapes or folds. As he acknowledges in this book, it is shown in all of them that “what counts is the combinatorial possibility, repeatedly changing, testing and more testing. The mind becomes flexible, this is dynamic thinking. The creative individual”.

This is a way of proceeding that could be related to so many other combinatorial thinkers, from the logical *ars*, that Ramon Llull applies to knowledge of the world, to the lighting experiments on the same object carried out by Sol Lewitt to produce logical systems where covering all possible variations.

Furthermore, this vocation is related to Robert Musil's experimentalism, where acceptance of future takes the form of perspectivism. This is clear when he affirms in *The Man Without Qualities* that “utopia means approximately as much as possibility (...). Utopia is the experiment in which the probable transformation of an element and the effects produced in that complicated phenomenon that we call life” are observed.

In short, each of Munari's works is a system of systems, an open encyclopaedia of variations, the product of entertainment and the ambition to represent new optics to glimpse a world that should be anything but a rigid and boring container. Following Italo Calvino's lesson: “Today a totality that is not potential, conjectural, multiple is no longer conceivable”. Munari has always accepted this condition; it is now up to us to continue imagining the plurality of languages, the infinity of horizons and the inexhaustible map of the multiplicity of points of view.