

The tools do not exist

Conversation between Andrea Branzi
and Alessandro Rabottini

ALESSANDRO RABOTTINI: The first time we met, I told you I didn't have any training in the field of design and architecture, to underline the fact that my interest in your work comes from the intuition that there might be a form of proximity, almost of intimacy, between your practice in design and its theory, and many of the conceptual forces and formal tendencies I see today in the visual arts. On the one hand, we have over a century of history that has witnessed the absorption of the useful object into artistic practice, with its poetic and conceptual re-articulation. On the other, we are seeing a recent acceptance of design production as a form of art, a phenomenon that is now quite popular and widespread, with many collectors, but one that depends in most cases on a sort of preliminary condition: the limited edition or even the one-off. For many years you have worked along this borderline, and your production often contains themes and scenarios that are more frequently found in art than in the field of design.

ANDREA BRANZI: We should remember that design was born as an "applied art," and even in the work that seems closest to art there is always the concept of the "project" and the "useful object": this is very important, and it lays out a precise strategy, not a mere linguistic mixture.

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My path has been quite a long one, taking on greater awareness in recent years. In the series “Domestic Animals” in 1984, in the seats with tree trunks, there was already the idea of making a break with the self-referential character I still see in design today. Those objects were conceived as forms of intersection with nature, though they did not belong to environmentalist thinking (or at least that was not my main concern). I felt the need, not just in individual terms but also from an intellectual and generational perspective, of recovering a form of realism inside design, of inserting a certain brutality in its language.

I have the impression that industrial design, today, is made of increasingly refined languages that are more and more isolated from reality, almost as if its scenario were still that of the white telephones, a 1930s world inhabited by butlers and women in evening gowns ...

AR : It cannot be said that a strong experimental impulse was lacking in Italian design in those years ...

AB : At the start of the 1980s I was coming out of the experience of Alchimia, which had become a “Mendinian” academy, just as the experience of Memphis had rapidly turned into a “Sottsassian” academy, what I ironically called “Sottsass-art,” a formal code that was so recognizable that you could no longer tell who had made what. Something very similar had happened inside the Bauhaus, when in 1922 László Moholy-Nagy showed a series of paintings whose making he had organized by giving instructions over the phone to a commercial sign painter, thus demonstrating that the project had, to an increasing extent, become the application of a range of pre-set forms.

I was actively involved in those realities, but I felt the need to take my distance from experimental forms that

were degenerating in the repetition of already familiar codes. I sensed a need to make a break with the abstract optimism that was in the air. So I began to use fragments of the botanical world, because I was interested in the fact that the natural universe had always been excluded from the language of modernity. Design was lacking in contact with the real world and I wanted to get it back, to address themes modernity has always overlooked, like the universe of the sacred, of death, life, history. In short, I felt design culture had remained extraneous, until then, to the anthropological dimension of existence.

AR: Let's delve into this need for realism you expressed with the "Domestic Animals." To my mind, these are works that are capable of narrating a form of disjunction, between nature and human construction, but also between the unique and unrepeatable character of botanical forms and the reproductive potential of the forms created by man. I think this strategy of visual friction — between a natural element like a branch left untrimmed and the minimalist structure of the chair and the bench — is capable not only of freeing up a traumatic potential, but also and above all of making a connection with the collage technique. The latter, in the art of the past century, provided a type of visual experience based on the friction between images, materials and themes, with a dual function: on the one hand, to trigger unconscious associations, and on the other to act out political critique and social provocation. In design this experience came later and appeared almost exclusively in the field of limited editions, without ever reaching the level of widespread distribution, apart from rare exceptions. In general terms, in fact, design culture seems to have been engaged with the idea that a certain form should absorb the elements of conflict, instead of

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expressing or heightening them. Instead, you say that design too can and should narrate incompleteness, trauma, conflict: in your view, what have been the most important passages in this evolution?

AB: The whole 20th century has been crossed by a submerged path of a minority, that of anti-design. A radical trend that began with the first avant-gardes and followed the long road of the tragic history industrial design has totally ignored, indifferent to two world wars, racial massacres, the atom bomb, rightwing and leftwing dictatorships. The path of anti-design has accompanied and attempted to undermine the most naive moments of modernity, like the optimism of the Bauhaus and its faith in a future of order and rationality. I am talking about optimism in the sense of a thought that resolves and smoothes out an opposition intrinsic to the industrial dimension, which can be a devastating reality, on the one hand, but can also generate a hedonistic civilization on the other.

Starting from that moment, the problem of design has not been to express the anthropological dimension of objects, but to channel the inhabitability of the world through their industrialization. At the heart of the Bauhaus there was still the pursuit of a process of individual interiorizing of the logic of machines; just consider the extent to which all the work of Oskar Schlemmer is aimed at man who also formally becomes “product.”

Alongside these forces, we find experiences opposed to them. One example will suffice: the *Merzbau* Kurt Schwitters built between 1923 and 1937, a cave made of debris and fragments, in continuous evolution, which is the scenario of the return of man to an animal condition, the place of the possibility of a reversal of the evolutionism of Darwin, inside which the recovery of an animal heritage is interpreted not as “regression” but as extreme freedom

and modernity. This idea that the human being can return to an original condition also becomes explicit and emphasized in Jackson Pollock, who in the 1950s brutally stated “I am nature”, and in the painting of Francis Bacon, with the resemblance between the human figure and that of a gorilla, prisoner of a modernity closed off inside itself.

Then, in the summer of 1978, the French art critic Pierre Restany took a trip to the Amazon, going up the Rio Negro, the main tributary to the Amazon River. On that occasion he wrote his *Manifeste du Rio Negro du naturalisme intégral*, in which he compares the condition of contemporary man to that of the Indios: they both live in a totally saturated environment — the metropolis and the forest — where dreams, nature, magic, technique, worship of the dead, animals and mystery form a single experiential reality. In this text urban man and the Indio are described as fish immersed in the sea, deprived of an “external” view of their habitat, a plankton without borderlines or horizons.

- AR: The deformed physiognomies of Bacon, not coincidentally, appear in certain pieces in your series *Grandi Legni* (Big Woods, 2009), together with images from Giotto and remnants of Roman mosaics and frescos, Romanesque bas-reliefs and Chinese silks. Speaking of the line of anti-design in opposition to the optimism of the Bauhaus you mention Schwitters and Restany, the theorist of the Nouveau Réalisme: are there any examples in the history of design and architecture you feel are pertinent, in this sense, or has visual art been the main driving force of your relationship with the line of anti-design?
- AB: In my view there is no direct relationship between art and design; though it may be that the universe of objects has an

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influence on art. They are two independent territories whose boundaries tend to blur but not to mingle. Today everything seems to lose its specificity: the human realm approaches the animal realm, like agriculture and architecture — I am thinking about my project *Agronica* in 1985 that condenses almost twenty years of thinking about agriculture, urban planning, landscape and society — or theology and technology, as is happening in India. Everything gets closer and blends, but without producing permanent unities.

AR: So according to you, in spite of continuous crossings of disciplines, their forays and overlaps, we are living in a moment in which the proximity between things does not produce a coherent horizon of meaning. Things accumulate, but they do not construct units of meaning. This brings to mind the frequency, in all your work, of the appearance of metal screens, orthogonal planes, frames that set off the object as if to fence it inside a plane of contemplation, rather than letting it act in the everyday dimension of use. I am thinking of the *Blister* series in 2004, the *Portali* vases in 2007, the exhibition *Open Enclosures* in 2008 at Fondation Cartier in Paris, the tree trunks and rocks shown in 2012 at the Friedman Benda gallery in New York. What does this experience of containment and isolation of the object, the fragment, the material, represent for you?

AB: This is a difficult question, because the works you mention did not come from theorems, but from intuitions, experiments, inspirations (as people used to say). They are not didactic diagrams but signs that often remain incomprehensible even for me. If everything were clear I'd stop designing!

- AR: You have expressed your idea of realism by bringing into design elements that seem reluctant to be tamed, like unworked wood or stones, things that conserve a very strong expressive value. This compositional method produces a tension between structure and irregular form, rhythm and improvisation, order and freedom. Bringing the principle of realism into play, then, we are talking about something bigger than a poetics of recording of what happens around us...
- AB: When you introduce a fragment of nature in a project, it unleashes an expressive force that is infinitely superior to the whole geometric system of modernity, while its uniqueness makes it almost a sacred presence. I interpret realism as the possibility of getting beyond certain prohibitions. The rigor and perfect self-referential character of the Italian Renaissance, for example, are the forms classicism used to counter the brutal society described by Niccolò Machiavelli and represented by Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel. That visual world, however, excluded everything that Baroque painting would later reintroduce in the culture of the 1600s, with the grand still lifes of fruit, meat, fish and vegetables, using nature to break out of the cage the Renaissance had built around itself.
- AR: Realism, then, becomes a sort of device that makes it possible to liberate a repressed impulse ...
- AB: The Baroque, long interpreted as gratuitous exaltation of forms, was actually based on a desire for emancipation, on the need to dematerialize the rigidities of the Renaissance, for example through the exuberance of the clouds that burst into the vaults of churches, or the sensory stimulation in the orchestration of music and incense. If we think

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about the vestibule made by Michelangelo for the Laurentian Library in Florence, we can understand the dramatic nature of the trap constructed by the Renaissance, to which it fell prey itself. That atrium enclosed by four blank facades of buildings bears witness to the idea that epoch had about its own evolution. Precisely this closed space that does not communicate with the outside becomes the scenario in which the disquieting things that period tried to manage, without success, are activated. The reflections on the human condition of Leon Battista Alberti are frightening: man as phantom, as the most uncertain of all animals, a suffering figure that tries to mediate between Christianity and polytheism, in a state of opposition that leads to madness. The definition of the Renaissance as an epoch and culture that “put man at the center of the universe” is profoundly wrong: just look at the work of Donatello, from which the image emerges of a man who raises anguishing questions but does not, cannot find their answers. Our modernity springs precisely from the end of monotheism and the return to a polytheism of relative truths, uncertainties, doubts and weaknesses.

AR: While in your work the botanical fragment portrays the irreducibility of that which cannot be tamed by the forms of rationality, what do you think about its specular counterpart, namely technology? According to a vision that has always marked science fiction literature and cinema, in fact, alongside the image of the natural catastrophe as a punishment with respect to man and his will to dominate nature, there is also another apocalyptic scenario in which technology winds up getting the upper hand over the human beings that have created it.

AB: Faith in technology or, on the other hand, a dramatic vision of it, is a dimension that does not belong to me. Today technology is something completely different from the mechanics that nurtured certain scenarios in the past. The technology of the industrial revolution was truly anti-human because it was based on a transmission of movement through friction, the stress of materials and parts. But as time has passed technology has evolved, taking on the forms of human physiology and thought: today the noise is almost gone, and the construction processes tend to reproduce the performance of natural materials. Ours is a world in which things attempt to mutually imitate each other and to blend, a world of fluctuating identities, of ongoing osmosis between objects, sensations and surfaces.

Behind the so-called “technologist architects” — like Richard Rogers, Renzo Piano and Norman Foster — there is always the idea that technology can provide a scientific, stable and certain basis for architectural practice, and this principle of a modernity achieved through the certainties of the combination of science, technology and democracy has nurtured a vision of redemption through design and through progress. On the other hand, today the most advanced technology has become a seasonal product, just like fashion, so it offers no kind of permanence, in fact it contributes to create a scenario of continuous evolution, a plankton that is the antithesis of geometric certainties.

AR: In your work one sees a clear interest in all those poetic and visual elements, or those episodes of history and culture, that put up a sort of resistance to absorption in a systemic vision or thought. This is evident in your theoretical activity as well as in your production of objects and spaces, which are born under the sign of asymmetry,

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incompleteness, in a fragmentary state of instability.
What traumatic elements do you see in the start of this
new century?

AB: The last century came to an end with the hope that we had entered a definitive phase of capitalism, a scenario in which the globalization of markets would guarantee a sort of *pax universalis* after the end of the Cold War and the antagonism between the two great political and ideological systems that had divided Europe after World War II. The very concept of globalization seen as a form of political standardization based on a mono-logical economics began to show its shortcomings even before it was born. The present global situation makes it clear that the crisis is not an unexpected phenomenon but, instead, necessary for the development of capitalism, a phenomenon endemic to the energetic logic of this economic and social system, whose law of growth through the free market has always been based on competition and economic conflicts, rather than on a pacific flow of goods. The relationship between major economic crises and planetary conflicts — World War II, for example, helped the US to bounce back from the Great Depression of the 1930s — confirms a more than plausible hypothesis, namely that a worldwide conflict of a religious nature between Orient and Occident is already under way, with which our secular culture has difficulty in coming to terms. After the failure of socialism we are now seeing the failure of capitalism, and this is a horizon in which design exists in total solitude: it no longer has a direction for development, because it belongs to a system that strives only for expansion. The true identity of the 21st century lies in this reflection on the most remote roots of design, its primordial, archetypal and deepest roots.

- AR: I think there is a productive, profound relationship between this state of crisis in which design finds itself and the rise, on a global level, of what you call “anthropological platforms.”
- AB: The new geopolitical relationships that are taking form on a worldwide level following the economic and cultural growth of nations like India, China, Russia and Brazil have had the effect of making new anthropological platforms emerge. This phenomenon is linked to the loss of stability of our concept of “quality,” and its historical roots. This phenomenon is linked to the loss of stability of our concept of “quality,” which has historical roots in Europe with the French Revolution, in China with the Celestial Empires, in South America with the Entertainment Economy, and in Japan with the culture of hospitality. One of the consequences of this uprooting has been that design has found itself immersed in the boundless territory of the Imaginary, the only continent in continuous expansion: blinded by the hypersupply of the real world — where everything seems to be designed, produced, varied — design has had to operate in the immaterial world, producing new iconologies that expand beyond the physical limits of the experience of objects and spaces. After the fall of the Berlin Wall a strange period began, which I would call an “intermission in history,” a period that finished with the tragedy of the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. September 11th woke us up from a state of unaware weakness and anesthetized calm, putting us face to face with a fact that had been overlooked by the 20th century: namely that theological questions and religious cultures have not been erased from our lives at all, not dissolved in the logic of worldwide industrialization. The Occident found itself utterly unprepared for a new dimension of

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conflict, no longer between socialism and capitalism, but between Christianity and Islam.

AR: Might we say that one of the tenets of Postmodernism in architecture — i.e. that its forms are disconnected from the cultural and symbolic functions it expresses — is now obsolete? So we are faced with a resurfacing of the symbolic and cultural dimension of forms?

AB: There is an important consideration to make on this point. Mohamed Atta, one of the hijackers responsible for the attack on the World Trade Center and the whole terrorist plan took a degree in architecture at the University of Cairo, and completed his studies in Hamburg. Atta's religious and political ideas matured here, next to us, in the Occident, and his stated distaste for western modernity cannot be separated from a symbolic counter-position in the field of architecture. I am tempted to interpret the choice of the two towers as one that was not random, taking them as a symbol of a fragile modernity that is identified with the monumental form of a corrupt, blasphemous, exhibitionist society. One of the hard cores of the conflict between Orient and Occident lies in the clash between a society based on the project to find its own future — namely the West — and a society that rejects the project to return to the theological certainties of its own Middle Ages, namely Islam.

AR: What are the consequences of the scenario that is taking form in the field of what you call "New Dramaturgy"?

AB: Unlike what has happened across the last century in the fields of art, literature, philosophy and music, in design culture no trace of disturbance has emerged: this culture

has remained self-referential, elegant, intelligent, but utterly extraneous to history. The way design has lagged behind the 21st century is still very evident, and to a great extent it can be attributed to the narrowly professional dimension in which this culture has taken shelter, assigning clients the task of guiding its updating. When I talk about New Dramaturgy of design I am not referring to a “dramatic” dimension, but to the renewal of the tone, the narration, the emotional level, the relationship that design can finally establish with respect to those anthropological themes that have always been left outside the narrow confines of the old Modernity. Only in this dimension can the term “globalization” take on its true meaning.

- AR: I'd like to get back to the contradictory but productive tension between art and design. A lot of what we call “modern art,” in fact, originates precisely in that solitude in which you would place design today, though in a specular, opposite way with respect to the theme of the clientele. The isolation in which artists have found the reasons for their freedom, in fact, developed in the context of the withdrawal of the patronage of the church and nobles, while the phenomenon you describe in design and architecture seems like a form of solitude connected with an excess of dependence on the clientele. Often those who work in cinema, architecture or fashion, all fields where production processes imply complex passages and the contribution of many different professional figures, see the solitude of the visual artist as a place of creative freedom. What do you think about this dialectic between freedom, creativity and clientele?
- AB: The problem is that this alliance excludes the experimental autonomy of design, so in my view the relationship you are

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talking about between creativity and solitude is a more complex question. The moment we are living through constitutes a great opportunity for art and for culture more in general, because they have become tautological presences, forms of a revealed religion that supplies dogmas without expressing aesthetic judgments or using comparative tools. But it is in this state of extreme alienation that we find the highest level of creative freedom.

We should not forget that during the last century, between the two wars, new design produced only research, experimentation, prototypes, images. The relationship with manufacturing came much later, after the end of World War II.

- AR: I'd like you to explain more about how you see your practice in this scenario you just described, in which design culture sets out to recover a series of anthropological values, like reflections on death, sex, entropy... Can this approach trigger a deeper dialogue with industrial production, or is the limited edition, even the one-off, its favored field of existence and action?
- AB: When I talk about a New Dramaturgy I am not thinking that it can directly enter the market. It is more like a latent reality that will make itself visible over the long term, or when the demand for a new cultural dimension will become the true protagonist of a society that is apparently globalized from an industrial viewpoint, but is actually already dissatisfied with the superficiality of the present system of commodities. It will be necessary to work on the long term, as well as the short term. The same thing happened with Radical Design: it was incomprehensible in the 1970s, and today it is incredibly timely.

AR: One of the deeper links your work establishes with art history, starting with the historical avant-gardes, lies (in my view) precisely in the idea of attributing a theoretical value to the object, be it a useful article or a form of archaeological document. Ever since the experience of the ready-made of Marcel Duchamp, the very action of isolating common objects from everyday life and use has implied a discourse on the dimension of the sacred and the attribution of value. This capacity of art to transform things, bringing them into its realm, has been re-examined and articulated by the Nouveau Réalisme and American Pop Art, through the experience of accumulation and/or repetition, while since the end of the 1970s artists like Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach in America, and John Armleder and Bertrand Lavier in Europe, have worked on isolating objects, but in reference to another form of contemporary religiosity, namely that of commercial display and the creation of desire for merchandise. Today, on the other hand, in the work of certain artists and designers closer to my generation I see a different attitude, one that makes me think about the timeliness of your thought. Artists like the American Carol Bove, the Romanian Victor Man, the Vietnamese Danh Vo, Cyprien Gaillard in France, Steven Claydon in England, Haris Epaminonda from Cyprus — just to name a few — often work by isolating objects inside a precise display device, objects whose cultural and anthropological value overlaps with the individual dimension of memory. And it is no coincidence that the installation settings they use often bring to mind museum displays, the *Wunderkammer* and forms of erudite, absolutely subjective collecting and classification. I think this generation of artists and the multitude of geographical latitudes from which they hail are symptomatic of a global desire to reconnect individual

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and history, fragment and narrative, debris and meaning, mystery and culture.

AB: The first works I saw by Bertrand Lavier — those where he put a washing machine on top of a safe, or a boulder on a refrigerator — made me think about the end of the additional process, that is $1+1$ no longer makes 2 but remains $1+1$, there is no increase of meaning. If in the ready-made the found object absorbs reality, while taking it to another level — also when it is an industrial reality — in my opinion the work of Lavier presents us with a process that is not one of composition, but a sum whose result is the production of a classic element of great inexpressive power, not figurative, not compositional, which also bears witness to an era. All contemporary art is “senseless,” in a positive way, because it bears witness to a historical system that makes no sense.

The objects that have always accompanied the life of man have never merely played the role of “tools” but have instead been animistic, mysteric, shamanic presences that protected the human being and its habitat. Design should not erase this mystery; on the contrary, it should explore it in greater depth. Western society has transformed itself from Architectural Civilization to Objectual Civilization, and this passage is very important. The Civilization of Merchandise, in fact, is not just a matter of consumption, commercial vulgarity, useless and invasive objects; it represents the physical reality in which our existential experience takes place.

AR: Do you also see this “augmented presence” of the technological element in contemporary visual culture? In multiple fields — from art to design to fashion — there is the idea of the trail, the footprint, the fossil. The American

artist Seth Price works on the circulation of images and information, and some of his works are plastic resin castings of ropes, faces, breasts, flowers, jackets. These creations seem to anticipate a future archaeological discovery, and while the materials and procedures are industrial in nature, the sensation of the gesture is that of an unearthing that can happen only at the end of our civilization. I can't help thinking of your *Blister* series in 2004, semi-transparent plastic containers that simultaneously conceal and reveal the presence of other objects.

AB: There are certain arguments that don't touch me very much, and one of them is the subject of memory, a theme I think is improper, because the condition of the artist and the intellectual is one of amnesia, since it is possible to invent and create only with the desire to start over again, every time, from scratch. When I hear talk about the culture of memory I have the sensation of being faced with a pedagogical falsification. Even the idea that forgetting history is tantamount to being condemned to repeat it is a simplification. I am much more interested in what we have forgotten than in what we remember, and archaeology has the charisma of this amnesia and the mystery it reveals to us.

The essence of a single direction of growth, a single horizon towards which to strive, in recent decades has modified our perception of space and time: we are living in a time that is no longer linear but circular, in fact, where present, past and future cannot be distinguished from one another, a time that can be lived in the shadows of our experience.

AR: What is clear is that ours is a culture that has enormously expanded the media and methods connected with the

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conservation of data. The Internet itself, our everyday interface with the world and the main tool of work and knowledge for a great many of us, is based on the image of an archive that continuously self-generates and expands the memory of the world. Much of the cultural output of my generation has to do with the rediscovery of forgotten narratives or the study and recontextualizing of archival documents, while the continuing stylistic revivals that have appeared since the 1990s seem to bring a part of our culture closer to a form of hypertechnological Rococo.

AB: We might almost say that the latent destiny of this inexpressive and catatonic art and culture, that have nothing to express to others but only to themselves, is to produce new categories of beauty that can only be realized through traumatic processes. And that ours is a period of continuous transition, in which it is not possible to think of a definitive beauty, but only to nurture a progressive, slow slippage of the aesthetic sensibilities of the individual, without being afraid of the ugly, the monstrous, the unpleasant, of that which is unpredictable and senseless. A New Dramaturgy comes from this continuous shifting, until it reaches new levels that are not consoling but “cathartic” in nature.

AR: It is also true that all avant-garde culture is based on a form of retroactive comprehension, on the absorption of elements of traumatic rupture, and on the creation of categories whose aesthetic, poetic and political value can only be perceived further on in time.

AB: A specific condition of our contemporary world is that of providing responses in pathological and traumatic but also evolutionary forms. From this standpoint I see the loss

of meaning we are going through as a good thing. Mine, for example, has been a paralyzed generation that saved itself through the music of Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan and the Beatles, which had a therapeutic, liberating function. There are psychosomatic operations man accepts and performs on himself, that over time turn out to be utterly positive, because they nourish the gastric and mental juices.

- AR: What signals of this type do you see today in the global metropolises?
- AB: Disquieting and magical signs are spontaneously appearing in our unknowable metropolises, which like virgin forests contain the Hikikomori hermits, who live apart, relating to the world only through media tools. Or the Plumbkers, who seek their natural roots by putting themselves upside-down on toilet bowls, indifferent to the world that surrounds them, like the ancient stylites. I am thinking about “Bodies in Urban Spaces,” the series of performances of Willi Dorner and Lisa Rasti, who squeeze walls of human beings into metropolitan crevices, or the Voguers, who live exclusively inside the media universe, internalizing their sacred icons with the ritual intensity of a shaman. Or the fans of Parkour, who cross our cities like sacred monkeys, leaping through the void as if in a forest, possessed by an unstoppable animal energy. Those who adopt these lifestyles do not acknowledge urban order and spatial hierarchies, and interpret the city as a free, wild territory. These avant-gardes that theorize nothing bear direct witness to the failure and, at the same time, the human re-establishment of our urban society, without challenging its foundations, accepting them and reinventing them in the happiness of their animal condition.

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- AR: Many of the urban subcultures you have just mentioned and in which you see forms of avant-gardes without theory have become popular in recent years thanks to the Internet. On the one hand, then, there seems to be a rejection of aggregate living and the social dimension of existence, while on the other this same rejection becomes the vehicle of an extreme form of sharing and diffusion through the web. What does this contradiction imply — if indeed it is a contradiction — from the viewpoint of design on an urban scale? What is at stake for architecture when it comes to terms with this dialectic between the rejection of the physical and spatial dimension of sociality in favor of a shared way of living in virtual spaces?
- AB: The truth of the matter is that today there is no difference between material and immaterial reality; a New Dramaturgy, then, emerges as much from dreams as from real history. One of the tragedies of the 20th century has been the disappearance of the dimension of tragedy itself as a reality that differs from everyday life. The identification between normality and tragedy has been split, and the result is the establishment of a dangerous social anesthesia. The forms of possession I mentioned before, as urban and social phenomena, cross the physical and technological worlds without making any distinction between the two.
- AR: I imagine all these themes are part of your present concern regarding what you call a “non-figurative architecture” ...
- AB: Non-figurative architecture is not the architecture of the future, but that of the present. The city is no longer determined by the concentration of buildings, but by an experiential territory inside which the architectural scenario no longer transmits any emotion, no longer bears

witness to anything. Non-figurative architecture is a consequence of the demise of shared social values, and a proof of the weakening of the form-function relationship. Building typologies for specialized functions have been replaced by “functionoids” capable of hosting any activity: the contemporary city can be defined in terms of the presence of a personal computer every twenty square meters. In this sense Ludwig Hilberseimer was the first to grasp the fact that the modern city is a city without meaning, where architecture reflects only itself, where the only possible utopia is quantitative in character. The catatonic reality described by Hilberseimer corresponded to a merciless, anti-ideological and anti-bourgeois realism, according to which architecture took on a non-figurative character because “there was no longer anything to look at.”

The 21st century is profoundly different from its predecessor, but it has yet to be interpreted as a whole. Our world is composed of many worlds: opaque, polluted, where everything merges and expands. A globalized world that is the sum of many local and environmental crises, mono-logical but not homogeneous, the sum of infinite images but without an overall image.

AR: The reflection on the impact that global changes — on a political, economic, social and technological scale — have on architecture and the city lies at the center of your career, since the experience with Archizoom and your *No-Stop City* in 1969-71. Already, back then, you theorized a city whose basis was the dimension of the market and the mass media, in which the distinction between the scale of the building and that of urban intervention was erased, along with the separation between interior and exterior. You imagined a metropolis capable of continuously rein-

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venting itself, adapting to its own dynamism, in which the architectural typologies responded to an utterly arbitrary logic. You have described this as an “amoral” project, “without qualities,” which consciously decided to conform to the logic of the capitalist, consumist system that was its humus, a quantitative rather than a qualitative utopia. After forty years, it seems to me that the impact information technologies have had on your idea of the city has a different character. The immaterial dimension of those very technologies and the metaphor of fluidity of relations and identities you often use make me think that your support of non-figurative architecture reflects social demands now linked to sharing and solidarity, to a form of individual freedom.

AB: *No-Stop City* was the result of a process of liberation of man from architecture, and of architecture from man. It represented a state of permanent and unresolvable crisis between project and anti-project, limits and infinite dimensions. In a certain sense the New Dramaturgy comes from this eternal failure. It is not a tragedy but a new language that takes on the failure of modernity and its optimism and contaminates it with everything the 20th century has ignored. A narrative tension that does not have to do with design as such, but with the raw, bare reality that surrounds us, and that is capable of freeing us from our unconfessed nightmares, like psychoanalytical therapy.

AR: You have often laid claim to a close proximity to Italian art and, more in general, to a broader cultural tradition of our country. Is it possible to outline a path, a trajectory that also historically takes certain experiences into account, as if they were the stages of your human, intellectual and professional existence? If we look at the experimentalism

of the years of Archizoom and the idea of an architectural theory that accepts and even emphasizes the negative, that radically exploits both the speed of capitalism and the catatonic dimension it brings with it, we cannot help but find connections with Futurism. If, on the other hand, we consider what you have been doing since the 1980s — the recovery of an anthropological dimension of objects and spaces, the poetic quality of certain materials and certain forms, the thoughtfulness of certain images packed with silence and intimacy — the almost predictable comparison is with Italian Metaphysical art, certain atmospheres of Fausto Melotti, the ambiguity between sculpture and setting of Ettore Spalletti, the dialogue between culture, existence and nature of artists like Mario Merz, Pino Pascali and Giuseppe Penone.

AB: My relations with art, music and literature have always been discontinuous and occasional, so it is not easy to answer that observation. What interests me in Italian art is its intrinsic character of critique, its spontaneous uncertainty, with which I can identify. I appreciate everything and everyone, but I do not establish constant relations. My solid ignorance allows me not to receive legacies. The only thing that forms the basis of my work is intuition, and the only thing I trust is my instinct as a degree-toting autodidact. My theoretical and teaching activities come precisely from this need to improvise, to understand and to investigate my own limits. This stated weakness might seem reductive, but instead I believe it is the greatest of all ambitions.

ANDREA BRANZI

oggetti, territori, volatili

Opening

28 June 6—9 pm

Exhibition

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