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## ***The Modernist Who Helped to Create the Post Modern***

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A startling head-on image of an elephant with its trunk metamorphosing into a Pirelli tire astonishes me when I encounter it in the Armando Testa archive. It is a hand painted flat cut-out sculpture, one of many that were placed in automobile repair shops all over Italy in the mid-1950s. It is representational and abstract at the same time, childlike in its innocence and its directness, surreal in its transformation of the everyday into a strangely compelling form. Some of the most sophisticated strategies of modern art were used to create an unforgettable image that entered vernacular culture. It was also a very effective advertisement for Pirelli.

I was astonished not just because of the power and sophistication of the image, however. The day before visiting the Testa archive, I had previewed the Jeff Koons *Easy Fun* exhibition at a Milan gallery. The featured works were flat cut-out mirror sculptures of abstracted head-on views of animals. The strongest work was a frontal image of an elephant, remarkably similar to the simplified form in Testa's Pirelli advertisement. Armando Testa had anticipated by nearly fifty years one of the formal and conceptual innovations of one of today's most influential artists.

Armando Testa was a leading member of a remarkable generation of artists, architects, designers, filmmakers, and other cultural innovators who created an extraordinary mixture of vanguard and popular culture in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s. Perhaps more than in any other country, the most sophisticated innovations in art and design were channeled into products, advertising and entertainment that entered directly into mass culture. This lively fusion of high Modernism and popular culture remains remarkably fresh and continues to inspire a young generation of artists. The Modernist vision that Armando Testa brought into commercial advertising helped to shape Italian visual culture and continues to resonate.

Armando Testa was a Modernist, pushing a Bauhaus inspired vision into the heart of commercial culture. His work brought a Modernist visual language of synthesis, simplification, and surreal juxtaposition to the selling of automobile tires, ready-made suits, canned coffee, and dozens of other products. His bold innovations often captured the public imagination, creating great advertising, but also helping to create a new visual culture. Like an artist, he created a new visual vocabulary and helped to change the way people perceived their world. Testa's advertising contributed to making the world more modern.

Although Testa was a Modernist in his vision, his practice was actually a model for a Post Modern approach. His work was often about fusion and synthesis, linking together art and business, art and entertainment, art and design. Many of today's leading artists use the language of advertising as much as they use the language of modern art. Much of the most innovative new art blurs the borders between art, entertainment, design, and fashion. A number of artists have followed the inspiration of Andy Warhol to use business as an art medium. From a contemporary perspective, Armando Testa could be described as one of the first business artists. The accumulated influence of the innovations of Testa and other design pioneers of his generation have made design central to the new economy

rather than an expendable service for "real" business. Design is now as central to the new esthetic economy as an engine of growth as industrial efficiency was for the old economy. Testa was one of the models for a new expanded role of the artist with a multidisciplinary approach and a central rather than adversarial role in the business economy.

The fusion of representation and abstraction has been one of the principal areas of esthetic exploration for many of the leading contemporary artists, and it was a primary focus for Armando Testa. From his Martini poster of 1946 where a bottle is dressed in an implied tuxedo to the radical abstraction of his famous Punt e Mes point and a half design of 1960, Testa used the fusion of representation and abstraction to create resonating images that merged the strength of both approaches. Like Jasper Johns with his flag paintings, Andy Warhol with his iconic portraits, and Jeff Koons with his frontal simplifications of animals, Testa synthesized the representational and the abstract to create powerful and unforgettable forms.

Testa's famous Punt e Mes sphere and half-sphere also fused word and image, giving the concept an extraordinarily pure visual power. The creation of the image coincided with the emergence of the first Minimal Art, putting Testa's innovation in a league with those of the most radical new artists. Testa's advertisement brought the radicality of Minimalism into the public realm, instilling it in the public consciousness before Minimal Art had emerged out of the vanguard galleries and museums. Unlike more conventional innovations in advertising, Testa's images paralleled and often anticipated the work of vanguard artists rather than borrowing from them. The Surrealism of everyday life was one of Testa's favorite themes. His work often extended the droll Surrealism of Magritte into contemporary popular culture. In advertisements of the mid-1950s for Facis ready-made clothes, a man in a fedora runs away with a stiff empty suit under his arm. His 1954 ad for Borsalino has a fedora floating above the image (in homage to Magritte,) an abstracted drawing of a man tipping his hat (in homage to Seurat,) and the Borsalino logo at the bottom. It is like a Joseph Kosuth juxtaposition of object, visual representation of the object, and the name of the object. Testa is at his most playfully surreal in his advertisements for food products. A Simmenthal can of tinned meat is sliced in half to reveal a juicy side of beef in 1962. A big bright orange replaces the eyes on the exuberant face of a model in a 1979 advertisement for San Pellegrino Aranciata. This playful Surrealism led to Testa's wonderful group of works from the 1970s and 1980s where prosciutto and mortadella are transformed into armchairs and tablecloths and two olives sleep peacefully on ravioli pillows under spaghetti bedcovers.

Testa's applied Surrealism reflects his embrace of the comedy of everyday life. It is a Surrealism fused with commedia dell'arte. It is not a Surrealism of sinister urges and psychological dysfunction, but a Surrealism that delights in childishness and the absurdity of the everyday. His ability as an adult to revel in a childlike sense of wonderment is behind the success of many of his best known campaigns, especially his television advertisements Paulista coffee in the mid-1960s featuring the characters of Caballero and Carmencita. The ability to enter into a child's world of fantasy and innocence gave him an ability to communicate with remarkable sympathy and simplicity. It is fascinating to see how the childlike fantasy worlds of Testa's 1960s television commercials for Paulista coffee, Philco, Lines, and other advertisers anticipate Jeff Koons's *Celebration* works of the 1990s and fantasy worlds constructed by other influential contemporary artists.

Studying the Armando Testa archive, it is remarkable to see how his work anticipated or paralleled Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptualism, and even artistic innovations that would be developed in the decade after his death. He not only pushed an advanced artistic vision into commercial advertising, his own advertisements often had the visual and conceptual brilliance of important art. Testa seemed to regret that his "serious" art did not receive the acclaim of his commercial work. From a

contemporary perspective, however, artists now feel free to do their "serious" work in advertising, design, and film entertainment as well as in traditional media. Testa is a model for these new types of artists who do not want to shelter their work with the inner art audience but want to share their vision directly with a wider world.