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## ***A Life-Long Modern. On Armando Testa***

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A man dressed in a tailcoat returns from a party, amid a whirl of shooting stars. We deduce that he is cheerful from the curve that cuts his head at the neck, and that intersects with the other curve of the brim of his top hat. The two short lines that meet at a point denote a crooked smile, open and satisfied, unequivocal proof of pleasure. The body of our "drunken gentleman" is a perfect spinning top, black and white, upright on its tapered point. The lively merriment in which it is caught up is made evident by the continuous red line that surrounds it with its dynamic spirals, as if to delineate a circular trajectory.

The message could not be more explicit and captivating, ideal for advertising a sparkling wine, so that the writing in red at the top of the poster ("today is a party!...") becomes superfluous. The image says it all, and it does so in concise and dynamic language. The poster is dated 1948, and it already formulates the different approaches Armando Testa has employed thus far in dealing with visual language in the service of advertising and elsewhere. On the one hand there is a predilection for simple geometric shape, easily perceivable in its formal clarity, which inspires him in 1937 to create a poster for ICI, a paint and ink company in Milan. Conceived as a pure abstract-geometric composition, it centers on the sharp image of a band, its edges folded and ending in elongated triangles. At that time his passion for abstract art, transmitted to him by the painter Ezio D'Errico and oriented towards a Bauhaus-derived visual rationalism, does not lend itself to graphics applied to commercial communications, a field where figuration reigns. However it provides Testa with a model and a method that always will be attentive to the structure of the created image (whether obvious or hidden), and he will draw upon this means to refine the message to its basic core, expressing it with rare concision.

On the other hand rationalist abstraction is static, or it expresses only a potential dynamism (indeed, Mondrian, responding to a question from Calder, maintained that his paintings were even too mobile...). Among the Italian contributions from the 1930s in the Galleria del Milione in Milan - an island of experimentalism - the most successful are those of Fontana, Melotti and Licini, who escape the Euclidean rigor of their colleagues with a freer and more allusive vocabulary, in search of new harmonies as well as new materials.

Testa's sign is dynamic, the form he seeks is charged with energy, not only potential and restrained, but expressed in action, with an appropriate language. This is an energy that also, if necessary, can keep in check any redundancy, even when the client specifically invokes it, which is what happens with Martini in 1946. In the rich formal apparatus conceived on this occasion, the figures are drawn as if they are collages, constructed through juxtapositions and superimpositions of different elements. There is an almost Baroque superabundance, eased, however, by the levity of the sign, often defined in short, curved segments.

Then there is irony, which is and always will be one of the distinctive traits of all Testa's multiform work. In a tendency to downplay, his ironic approach generates vaguely caricature-like figures like

that of Re Carpano (King Carpano, 1949-51) involved in his toasts with Cavour, Vittorio Emanuele, Verdi and Napoleon.

Our man in a topcoat stands at the juncture of these various aspirations and reminds us that Testa's approach to the relationship between synthesis and dynamism is guided by his interpretation of the sole grand school that Italy, in this sense, had to offer: namely Futurism. The young graphic artist can be seen within the context of Futurism if one compares him to the most brilliant Italian poster designers, from Andreoni to Sepo to Carboni, "via" Depero. Behind the shooting star of the spinning top-gentleman are Balla's *successive lines*, his *abstract velocities*. The figure of the cyclist for Superga, 1947, seems to refer explicitly to certain developments of the so-called Second Futurism, with its sinuous and leaping outlines and the superimpositions of different chromatic planes. Here, the red cyclist is bent over an arrow-handlebar, on which the white outline of an automobile stands out, while the bicycle is defined solely by the scrolls of a continuous black line. References to the poetics of mechanical art are also present, in a tendency to merge the organic with the mechanical and to treat the character as an animated object or robot. Other visual themes also reveal Futurist influence - not only the "modernity" of the bicycle that is as speedy as an auto, but also *the feverish figures of the bon viveur, the cocotte, the apache and the absinthe drinker*, as the first Futurist manifesto reads, updated with the necessary ironic swerve in the spinning top-gentleman or in the glass of sparkling wine that unleashes a colored spiral (Asti Gancia, 1949-50).

This capacity for synthesis - which already had furnished proof of his extraordinary communicative abilities - paired with a focus on full legibility of structure, pushes Testa to cultivate a taste for images with a heraldic bent, the result of a fusion of iconic fragments of varied provenance, as Germano Celant has noted,<sup>1</sup> and which brings to mind the extravagant aspect of grotesques. Originating in classical antiquity and taken up again during the Renaissance for room décor, grotesques demonstrate a subversion of any distinction between the various realms, merging animal, vegetable and mineral (as well as, in our case, the organic and the mechanical), which are united in a new corporeality, in fantastical conformations that can border on the perverse.

The tension of Testa's syntheses leads to the creation of images in metamorphosis in his posters from the 1950s where he associates first a lion, then an elephant with a tire (Pirelli, 1954), to signify robustness and adherence to the road, or where he creates a snorting rhinoceros on the run, the rear portion of which is transformed into a car, for Esso gasoline (1956). There is also, more unexpectedly, the association between tinned Galbani meat (1956) and the ox sadly destined for that fate and to all appearances hardly at peace with the situation.

In 1958 he merges the image of the Coliseum with that of a torchbearer, in a style that deliberately recalls the archaism of Sironi. Immediately comprehensible, "grasped" at a point where sports and modern painting intersect, the sketch, winner of a competition for the symbol of the Rome Olympic Games, was considered too daring for Italy in 1960.

Beginning in the late 1950s there is evidence of creative activity that is not connected to advertising, such as the silk-screens with which he was involved from around 1958 until the early 1980s. This work, too, features animals as characters. Testa's interest in metamorphoses is joined with a love of word play, where the image finally becomes an iconic equivalent a witty slogan.

Thus in addition to the *Gallina tipografica* (Typographic hen), delineated in typewriter characters, there is a stove pipe-stray dog with a dangling tongue, a marabou that is actually a flexed human finger, an open scissors walrus and a tobacco-dog in the form of a mottled cigarette butt.

With the use of fluorescent colors, another distinctive aspect of Testa's work emerges, that is the ambition to try out every new technical means, and the desire to test those means to their limits. Working with images and words, Testa seems to be seeking to verify their entire potential, to the brink of risking their very ability to communicate. Ready-made men's suits by Facis are shown

almost in their entirety and frontally in advertising posters, but the fluorescent color oozes out from them, outlining them like a halo of dazzling yellow or red light, almost annulling the details of their structure and making them seem like phantasmatic figures. A similar intention is at work in the creation of the filmstrips for the "Carosello" spots in the late 1960s, and in many of his photographs.

Before then, Testa had created at least two works that had such a subtle relationship between image and word that they moved beyond the efficacy generally sought in an advertising message. The first of these is a series of six images for Borsalino (1954), dedicated to the famous hat's different styles and colors. The subject in all its variations is photographed in the upper portion of the poster; at the center, the extremely beautiful head and shoulders portrait of a model in the act of removing the hat is defined in a sort of *frottage* which refers to both Seurat's works on paper (Testa has stated as much) and Surrealist practices (which Testa always had regarded with interest). Running along the lower portion of the poster, however, is the Borsalino trademark, in elegant script. The product, more than presented to the public's "buying impulse," seems formulated in a sort of comparative analysis of different expressive protocols: realistic photography, in color; drawing, concise but weighty with meaning like a true connotative sign, indicative of an entire life style; and finally the name, the verbal definition of what the icons are communicating. Clearly this is not the name of the object, but that of the product, which, however, given its dissemination, has become almost synonymous with the object itself. As Jeffrey Deitch states in another essay in this catalogue, the work has the analytical precision of a work by Joseph Kosuth and the function of the message, as advertising, seems to fade into the back ground.

The second work dates from 1960 and is the famous Punt e Mes trademark for Carpano. Testa invents a logo that will remain one of the most powerful images in Italian advertising graphic design, and belying its simplicity, it is based on a subtle play of semantic shifts. The dialectical expression refers to a traditional beverage and thus to a vernacular culture that it is meant to preserve and show off to advantage, but with the intent of moving beyond its local connotations. When the slogan appears, it translates from dialect into Italian the specificity of the aperitif: "a bit of bitterness and a touch of sweetness," and it makes the message more fully comprehensible. The image thus aims to make the message universal, creating an abstract visual equivalent through the language of geometry, which directly, literally translates the word into an icon. In yet another shift, the icon then assumes an effect of plasticity, thanks to the chiaroscuro that turns the point into a sphere. The logo suggested to Testa by the product name has become one of the most famous in existence, despite the fact that it does not illustrate what it is advertising, or perhaps precisely because of this. With one of his ironic leaps, the work seems to introduce us into a linguistic game that parodies the utopia of the rediscovered correspondence between words, images and things that engages so much of the semiological sciences.

The Punt e Mes logo was created in 1960, at the onset of the decade when color photography progressively replaces all other means of graphic design in advertising communications. Testa, as he often declared, uses color photography unconditionally, exploiting its high communicative potential, but also presenting and then fully realizing the sparkling universe of banality that it announces. Testa the graphic artist had already confronted the language of color photography, almost as a challenge to its realistic impact. In 1953, in a paint shop in Milan, he discovered flexichrome, a recently imported American product used to color black-and white photos. He immediately tried it out for his posters for Sasso olive oil, provoking great public curiosity. Between 1959 and 1960 he created a series of posters for Facis in a clearly photographic style. One of the characters portrayed, wearing an impeccable suit, appears in profile and bent forward, as if enclosed within the now linguistically codified space of the frame.

Testa will later return to drawing, in reaction to the realism of color photography, but even during the 1960s at the height of his success in advertising, he produces images that muffle their usual recognizability rather than emphasize it. This is true with the female face that emerges only up to eye level from the water, for Stilla eye drops, 1966, or the face half-hidden by the bottle of Peroni beer, 1968. These are signs of negation that above all interfere in the full perception of the fetishized female body, and they return in 1979, with the same type of "negative" rhetoric, for San Pellegrino.

As mentioned earlier, these images also involve a desire to call into question the technical means at the very moment they are adopted. This characteristic then moves into the foreground, particularly in the film strips created from 1964 on, first for cinema advertising, but above all for television. It is significant that from the very beginning, Testa chooses to focus on animated film rather than a realistic genre with actors and sets. Instead he opts for a "stop motion" technique, where inanimate objects are photographed in sequences that create the illusion of movement, as in a cartoon. Thus the protagonists become first the Sasso oil vegetables (for films), then the simple plaster cones invented for Lavazza, for the "Carosello" TV spots. The gunslinger Paulista is born, with poncho, moustache and toothy smile, and is then disguised in the more unassuming Caballero Misterioso (Mysterious Caballero), all in white, like Carmencita, for whom he constantly and anxiously searches. Our heroes are equipped with sombreros and styled hair, eyes, mouths and noses, but lack both arms and legs. It is precisely these "anatomical" limitations, brilliantly overcome with a twirl of pistols and a roll of the eyes, or with a flick of the braids, that contribute to the success of the Lavazza spots and become positive factors in the acceptance of characters and the stories they tell. For they stimulate the viewers' imagination to fill in the blanks, instead of surprising them with the latest special effects. On the contrary, here it seems that the authors are playing at simulating a technology that is less-advanced than what is actually available, specifically to obtain a high level of involvement on the part of the public, in an unexpected but effective confirmation of Mies van der Rohe's axiom, *less is more*, often cited by Testa. The planet Papalla has the same appeal, with its inhabitants reduced to the dimension of the sphere, with potato noses and eyeglasses like small monitors, bouncing and sliding away, just like balls. Among them there is always someone who is *expecting a Philco*.

But even when the protagonists of the filmstrips are flesh and blood actors, with sets or natural settings, with or without period dress, Testa's appeal never swerves off in a realistic direction, as Omar Calabrese has noted.<sup>2</sup> Cinema, which is essentially narrative in approach, serves in other ways to test the limits of cinematographic narrative. Testa's micro-narrations in his "spots," thus tend toward the oneiric and the fairy-tale. They recount to us dreams and visions: Mimmo Craig's nightmares about being fat, the romantic dream of Ave Ninchi, the improbable Juliet, Francesco Mulè's desert mirages. The register is comical and, as in the stories of Paulista, Papalla and, later, Pippo the hippopotamus who speaks with a Russian accent, it is suitable to a predominantly young audience. However there are other "Carosello" spots that are influenced by a decidedly refined and avant-garde film culture. In the sequences created for Saiwa we witness true visual paradoxes, such as the train made up of passengers running along single file, the irascible passerby who uses a colleague as a musical instrument (a literal and therefore crazy practical application of the expression "I am going to play you!"), the restaurant where opera excerpts are served instead of main courses. In another vein, in a spot for Carpano, women in evening gowns move about a cemetery of cars. All this brings to mind the free associations of the Surrealist tradition, which Testa often has claimed as a source of inspiration (the 1974 poster with the leg that is transformed into a ski, or vice versa, comes from Magritte). Other sources can be discerned in films from the 1960s of a Surreal-grotesque bent, with a certain vein of cruelty, from Buñuel's *The Milky Way* to the early

works of Marco Ferreri, to Pasolini's *Hawks and Sparrows* and other film shorts featuring Totò. Beginning in the late 1970s Armando Testa gradually disengages from full time advertising activity, which he turns over to the agency he had created, now one of the most important in Italy. He also devotes himself to wider research, on the one hand creating posters and logos for events and cultural and humanitarian organizations, returning to his work as a graphic artist, and on the other hand directing his creative energies to painting. Since 1973 photography has been used almost exclusively to create the greeting cards that Armando Testa S.p.A. sends out every year to clients and friends. These works, absolutely non-realistic in tone, offer Testa an outlet for his own creative inspirations, in a grand play of appearances and incongruities, taking color photographs of subjects such as tables and armchairs made from appropriately shaped slices of prosciutto or mortadella, or islands or isolated crags in the sea that are really fried eggs or pieces of Parmesan cheese. Like a sort of new Arcimboldo, he also presents us with crocodiles made from assemblages of olives and pickled peppers, carob rhinoceroses, string bean horses and a crescent moon that is a slice of watermelon. Then, like a follower of Max Ernst, he presents us with fish balanced on a wheel of cheese, or flying with two biscuit wafers as wings. This parody of the opulent consumer spectacle is flanked by a much more sober manual activity, where, with increasing clarity, painting becomes his privileged language. The pictorial stroke signifies the re-conquest of the immediate relationship between the operator and his tools, with no further mediation of technical means or the collective context of design work. The graphic artist/painter returns to his face-to face relationship with the sign to be elaborated, and the latter becomes the expressive protocol where all his reflections converge. Concision of stroke and ironic tone, associated with the narrative structure within which the image is set - essential characteristics of his expressiveness, as he himself has often stated - return effectively in new paintings destined for posters, such as those for the Spoleto Festival, where the simple intersection of two blue brushstrokes creates the figure of a dancer (1984). All three elements also underlie Testa's pure research, free from the demands of communication, whether commercial or social. From the early 1980s on, his choice to pursue painting in an Abstract-Expressionist vein does not imply that he is giving himself over to the free flow of automatic writing. On the contrary, it enables him to define an ever-different structure that organizes the surface with the precise definition of zones of dense chromatic passages, where there are interventions of chiaroscuro that induce effects of plasticity. There are also insertions of short, nervous scratches, which accentuate by contrast rather than contradict the corpo reality of the pictorial masses. In any case they also introduce elements of meaning in agreement with the titles, which shift the value of the signs to the plane of referential allusiveness (*Inseguendo i gabbiani* [Following the Gulls], 1980; *Castello Rosso* [Red Castle], 1982; *Onda azzurra* [Blue Wave], 1984). Once again, the expressive tool is called into question precisely when it is adopted unconditionally. By means of synthesis, painting becomes a means of research, turned towards the definition of visual modules with broad signifying potential, almost as if they were absolute images or cultural archetypes, to be investigated in all their symbolic values. Testa's late work is an almost obsessive reflection on certain formal elements, true iconic themes that derive, like a mnemonic trace, from printing: printed characters or numbers considered as elements of an abstract language. In their autonomous formal value, these latter are redefined in painting, as in the curious series of figures created in 1989-91, compressed by the shape of the canvases within which they seem to be confined, and they also appear in some posters from that period.

Another persistent theme is related to human fingers, which appeared earlier in many photographic pieces in the late 1960s, where the finger is associated with extremely incongruous elements, in a Magrittian, Surrealist-like spirit that, as we frequently have noted, is typical of Testa's work. In painting, which in its flat fields at times recalls the processes of graphic design, the finger-thanks to

an innate and incorrigible irony becomes a module subject to the most diverse and unpredictable metamorphoses, proliferations or mutations, which sometimes verge on the phallic or totemic but in any case allude to an entirely reinvented organic universe, on a par with the world of grotesques mentioned earlier.

The last image Testa turns to is that of the cross, which he chooses precisely because of its nature as a cultural archetype-not only in a Christian context-and because of the fascination it inspires. His intention is to link this transcendent symbol to the body of Christ and his physical suffering, even in the absence of signs alluding to corporeality. He succeeds in doing so with a surprising gesture, as bold as it is simple. Without the slightest allusion to the bodily image of Christ, he evokes his entire passion, inclining the upper portion of the cross, thus alluding to the head bent down in death. All the tragic pathos of the Christian symbol remains intact, but the idea surrounding the human dimension of the sacrificed God becomes more intense. His urgency is all the more powerful and present precisely because he is completely absent and purely evoked by the last of the *abstract equivalents* that Testa has invented to relate his world to us, and with which he involuntarily offers us, at the end of his life, a moving farewell.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Celant, "Le sirene di Armando," in *Armando Testa. Una retrospettiva* (Milan: Electa, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> O. Calabrese, "Armando Testa e la pubblicità televisiva," in *Armando Testa*, op.cit.