

One of the multiple ways to practice criticism relates an artist's work or entire activity to a code-style in order to find proximity or distance, confirmation or innovation, orthodoxy or heresy that such activity presents in respect to the parameter of reference which is the code. In the present essay, I intend to follow this course wishing myself luck not to fall into a serious discourse in which Munari's irony won't forgive me. The exercise of comparing work to a code is more useful than in other occasions. In fact, Munari's artistic production does not solely relate to the many interests - painting, sculpture, graphics, design and all the other trades - practiced by him, but also to the various tendencies in art and taste that he has come in contact with: from the second futurism to aeropicture, from abstractionism to concretism, from dadaism to constructivism, from informal to programmed art, from pop art to "arte utile", the last one bridges Munari's production to design. I will consequently try to show his activism in current trends and at the same time his way of situating himself in respect to these. Let us proceed from the "line of arte utile", useful art, just as I proposed in my *Story of Contemporary Art*: "The problem of an art that does not adorn or console, but positively contributes to raising people's living standard; that helps them in their daily work; that does not demand to be interpreted, relived, understood, but only to be used" (Argan) gives me the starting point to define a category different from the one simply noted as "applied art". With the expression "applied art" I intend to pick out the demonstrations of painting, sculpture or at least of plastic shape that though having a utilitarian intent, remain such, that is they are not to be confused with architecture, craftwork, and design. Arte utile is predominately characterised by four invariant factors. The first one disowns traditional naturalist referents and makes art into a formal-conceptual mimesis of industrial reality. The second has the old theme of the "death of art". Notwithstanding all the ambiguity that it carries, it is legitimate in the line of art utile if we accept its premise as indispensable for whomever wants to produce forms that anticipate and aim at practical functions, that are not individualistic expressions, that contain the ephemeral and transitory, that are in fact signs that contradict in all or nearly all the attributes of art: the death of art has the dual scope of a radical transformation of art in aesthetic dimensions disseminated within society and of a death to give life to other forms of artistic manifestations. The third invariant factor of art utile comes from the precept of "art synthesis"; a double meaning can also be found here: an artistic production born out of the concourse of different plastic-visual experiences or else a reduction of painting, of sculpture, of photography, of graphics into "objects" which surpass the specifics of each singular field. The fourth factor of the line in question is the presence of a "plan", meant not as a preparatory study of paintings and sculpture, but as a program defined in every detail similar but not identical to those of architecture and design. In fact, while the plan of these more technical activities is geared towards a specific, practical function, that of art utile predominately serves to build "figures" and objects whose function stays inferior or at least subordinated to the image, charging this kind of art with both the greatest potential meaning and ambiguity. Let us contrast now some features of Munari's work to the listed unchangeable factors of arte utile - a direction which would seem the most suitable to fit Munari's production. It is certain that his production favors the formal-conceptual mimesis of industrial reality over that of the traditionally naturalistic; on the other hand, Munari's proposals and experiments do not contain any apology of industry and of its most typical components: the standard, mass production, mechanicalism. Of course, the context in which he works is unthinkable without labels of the most famous companies, be they plants, distribution centers, warehouses, promotional and public relations firms; but despite all this, if some symbol phenomena, i.e. Pirelli, La Rinascente, la Campionaria, stress the environment that formed Munari, and in which he lives and produces, the craft environment, popular or sophisticated, does not remain foreign to him at all. It is not by chance that Munari's best art and design can be tied to the gallery and production of Danese thus emphasizing the craft of culture aspect

of the work. If we should think of his relationship with large industries, it is not that of a a-critical admirer, but rather that of an ironical critic: many of the contraptions that make life difficult for the Chaplinesque character of could easily have been invented by Munari. A dadaist vein lurks in such a relationship: how else to account for the titles of his first and most significant proposals such as *Macchine inutili* and later ones such as *Libri illegibili*? Nor can it be sustained that nature is completely foreign to his interests: his studies and observations on *Oranges, Peas, the Rose*, equally interpreted as design objects, can be considered; likewise mentionable are all the series on "found objects", on curiosities of nature: the forms of some stones, their veining, the unusual knots of trees and branches. Discovering these objects, amasing them, setting them aside and occasionally scribbling some graphic marks on them, suggest that Munari sees nature not as something that art should imitate, but as a very instructive organic process for the same esthetic experience. Speaking about a group of works entitled *Strutture continue*, he observed "how the form of mineral and even vegetables in nature and in general everything that grows according to a particular internal structure is limited by environmental conditions, likewise the limit of a continuous structure is given by the interest of whomever possesses it and by the environmental conditions in which it is installed. When natural forms grow, the environment continually modifies their forms. Theoretically all the leaves of the same tree should be the same, but only if they grow in a sealed environment deprived of influence and variation. Ali the oranges should be of equal spheres, instead one grows in the shade, another in the sun, another between two strait branches, and all are different, This diversity is the mark of a life that is lived, the internal structure adapts and gives life to many different forms, all of the same family but diverse." It can be briefly noted that Munari discovers one of the most current principles of contemporary design here: variety within a series either large or small. But beyond that, there surfaces a subversive element of heresy in respect to the rigorous and mechanical Concretism of which Munari has been a significant exponent. Returning to the main reference parameter, "Arte utile", we find the theme of the death of art. I doubt that Munari has ever seriously though it; nonetheless this aspect turns up in the dual meaning of an activity that bestows upon objects of daily life qualities that give pleasure and estheticity to even the most banal and poorest things- often those most ubiquitously disseminated in society - and that proposes new ways to understand art: the many images and objects with functions that are playfull, pedagogic, critical ironic, etc. can be mentioned. On the other hand - and another heresy can be detected in respect to those who in the name of the useful, or I don 't know whatever other, intellectualism, give art up for dead - some of Munari's works (among which are the sculpture present in this exhibition) display no other intention than that of disinterested contemplation; nothing other than the appearance, the beautiful appearance of things. As for the "sythesis of art" factor, many artists have dealt with this theme, chiefly those in the abstract-concrete area, but few have succeeded like him in uniting the so-called major arts, other than producing "objects" basically unusual and outside of the confines of painting, sculpture, design. In addition, he has "translated" into Italian the experiences of a Lissitsky and of a Moholy-Nagy, in the sense that, not taking away their precusorial value, he has made them more familiar, possibly less precise and more approximative, but certainly less pretentious, morass-like and accademic notwithstanding their avant-guard radicalism. Arriving at the "project" factor which may be the most meaningful and complex invariable of the line of useful art. Tue version that Munari has given to this component fully incarnates what I wrote in the cited book. His projects - when they are specifically of design - do not retain the designer's technicalism nor the visual artist's habit of notes, of annotations; there is just enough to solidly fix an image. Of the rest, all useful art can be understood as a reduction of the object and the relative function to an image. Rietveld's work in this sense becomes emblematic. His red-blue armchair is not seen as a design object, but rather as a plastic shape, a conformating synthetic experiment in the many aspects of neoplastic language, translated, or "strait-jacketed", immediately into the form of an armchair. In fact the key starting point for Rietveld and other De Stijl artists begins with an object-image that finds its internal coherence within the linguistic system to which it belongs and later, only later, does it find a type of destination of use. The same can be said of many of Munari's

proposals: he moves, though, from entirely other and discontinuous reference points and discovers, often thanks to sheer chance, the value of an image and successively confers a utilitarian worth on it. A most typical case is that of a filanca tubular in which he inserted some metallic rings of different diameters resulting in a very attractive plastic and elastic object that could dignifiably fit among his suspended sculpture if the introduction of a light source did not turn it into a unusual lamp. Let's discard the parameters of "useful art" to pick up Munari's heresy in respect to the other "isms" of contemporary art. We have already stressed his being inside and outside of Concretism, as well as his surrealist and dadist vein. It might be opportune to return to this last one. His dadaism is never desecrating, nihilistic, or depreciative as that of the historical version; his is a positive irony: he makes us discover in a playful spirit what was already under our noses and what we have never realized; it is his way of saying that many images and objects belong to a "obvious" code whose understanding only requires a trust in the most elementary fantasy. His taste is not so much to bewilder and astonish but to reveal; it closely resembles the amusement that a conjurer feels when having finished his tasks, he reveals his tricks. In the space of the present essay, rather than stress the well known contributions of Munari: the *positivenegative* paintings, the studies on the square, those on topology, etc. which are entirely classifiable in the abstract concrete current, I would prefer to emphasize his production that, in my opinion, relates to the Informal. He is also influenced by this tendency, possibly as a reaction against the massive reliance upon geometry, to research an iconography that admits irregularity and accident; nevertheless he does not abandon himself to pictorial gestuality and most assuredly not to the filtering of colors: his informal is "clean" and technological: in the place of gigantesque canvases he trusts minaturized compositions, the size of a slide. We can let the author speak on this singular procedure: "In the tiniest house in the near future ... we can have a thousand canvases in a box as big as a dictionary ready to be projected on a blank wall, when and how we wish, with a normal slide projector. Not colour photographs. in this case, but original works done by the artist". The technique is used to paint these "canvases" is mentioned somewhat before: "There exists commercially, just as in colour tubes for painting, slide colours (cellophane. etc.) that can be used for projection. There is a full range of very subtle slides for colours, of which all the desired colours from the lightest to the darkest can be obtained, by over laying different layers of the same colour to strengthen it, by putting together different colours to get the wanted blend. Slides of coloured, plastic material transparent of greater thickness, such as of a visiting card, can be found to be worked upon, written on, cut into, bumed, altered with solvents, in such a way as to get different effects. Other than these, there are various materials that have a particular structure and therefore, when projected, a particular design like the veins of leaves, certain nylon tissues, fibralin, mica, extremely fine threads such as hair, crystalin powder, etc ... Best of all is to use tiny pieces of these substances, randomly put together, without any pretension of making a masterpiece, knowing that trying means making mistakes. By dint of attempting, there can be found as in a pleasing game ... expressive possibilities, that certain colours and shapes, casually born, produce feelings, that certain strange colours hint at something; these images can arouse in the onlooker very ancient feelings or memories". While Munari does not say it, the effect of these small compositions, once projected, is the same as that of the gigantic informal canvases. Nor is the surprise limited to finding that miniturization, polymaterism, casuality, neo-dadaism, the poetics of "open work" (the different interpretations of the beholder) and so many other things make up the language of the informal; still more surprising is the fact that he gives these "instructions for use" as it were a game that anybody could easily play. Untrue of course; only in his hands does the whole of some many small pieces of heterogenous materials, coloured, written upon, burnt and tugged at, give birth to images often of exceptional beauty, but as the previously mentioned taste to disclose the *trick*, to call attention less to the result and more to the inspirational fantasy, induces him to declare a substantially complex experience within the reach of everyone. Of the rest, it is less the intent to banalize a fact of art, than a wish to carry out a pedagogic action: there is nothing more encouraging in the knowing of something than the assurance that it is accessible to all, once the key is found. Munari's sculpture, where we find the same

just described attitude, deserves a separate outline. His *macchine inutili* are not just distinguishable from Calder's *mobiles* because the latter are inspired by nature and the former by a calculated geometric equilibrium, but above all because, the American master intends to transform plastic sculpture into a great sculpture made of metal foils, while the Italian principally chooses to propose something pleasingly ingenious; a game accessible to all can be found equally here. One of the basic reasons why we find Munari sympathetic is that he seems to be one of us, barely gifted with a slight bit more of fantasy. Once again untrue, but it belongs to what he wants us to believe, it is part of his message that is far more encouraging than so many of the other pretentious messages with the pretext of changing the face of the world. But if the *macchine inutili* in some way veil the secret of their equilibrium, the sculpture of the *concaveconvex series* - a perfect plastic "companion" to the *positive-negative* paintings - finds a sense and fascination in the clear intersecting of geometric lattices, in the superimposing of well filling with the effects of a spacial *moire*. The small plastic shapes jokingly entitled "travel sculpture" represent even more explicitly the "disengaged" and "pretenseless" spirit: objects composed of parts that are bidimensional, disassemble-able, foldable, compactable, capable of being put into a suitcase and opened and re-assembled to make places more familiar and personal, such as the office or a hotel room. It seems perfectly natural and understandable that later this same taste for thin sheets and joints passed from these modestly sized objects to urban scale sculpture (those that figure in this exhibition): the author wants to mark some corners and blocks of the city with his sculptures. The plastic compositions moved by water can be considered as forerunners (if the one built in front of the book pavilion at the 1954 Venice Biennale is thought of): organisms composed of levels of thin zinc plates, set in unstable balance and moved by a spray of water; the latter then passes from one level to another, changing direction and form: the liquid thread, meets a crystal surface, becomes a level of water, returns to the shape of a jet, and thus to the sufficient weight to move down the slide, recommencing its path in an enchanting silence particular to the remarkable harmony between the artificial and the natural. The discourse on Munari's work, possibly classifiable in a "third" category in respect to art and design (this essay's title) resists a conclusion: every experience has the character of an undertaking begun without the desire of a concluding: everything still remains open, many ideas and projects are yet to be done; rather than to fall into a boring repetition, Munari has always preferred to start again each time from the beginning despite the risk of limiting himself with the first thing "found" (but there are those who see Italian Renaissance in the same way: a collection of things found). One thing, though, can be affirmed with certainty: there is enough richness of invention in Munari's output as to feed an entire school and who knows that this, a mixture of art, craft, and design, exactly an *artdesign*, might not be that indefinite, changeable, approximative and so emblematic *Italian Style*.