



Proto-Povera-Radical-Sleek

Michele D'Aurizio on the “open work” in Italian art and design



In the aftermath of the recent death of novelist, philosopher and semiotician Umberto Eco, I asked myself about the resonance of one of his most cohesive theories, the *opera aperta* [open work], within my country's artistic production. Since Eco's collection of essays on this theme was published in 1962, the critical potential unleashed by the theory of the “open work” has been poorly acknowledged by the Italian artistic community, probably because Eco's own incursions within the visual arts — his proposals for “works in movement” — concerned mainly foreign examples: Naum Gabo's neoplastic sculptures, Alexander Calder's mobiles and Jean Dubuffet's “Textuologies.” He refers to Bruno Munari's *vetrini* (micro-compositions created by cutting, ripping, burning and scratching transparent plastic sheets mounted into slide frames to be projected) as portable, a-dimensional “paintings”; in a footnote to Gruppo T's “Miriorama” (from the Greek *orao*, to see, and *myrio*, countless), environmental installations designed for

“continuous variation”; and to Enzo Mari's *Oggetti a composizione autocondotta* [Objects of self-conducted composition] (geometric shapes loosely enclosed between two glass sheets), conceived to be handled by the viewer, who rotates the object and shifts the internal shapes into new compositions. Beyond these passing references, Eco did not detect nor rigorously consider other compelling embodiments of his “open work” in postwar Italian art. Rather, when expounding on the visual arts within the essay “The Open Work in the Visual Arts,” Eco focused instead on the case of the French *peinture informelle* movement. The “informal,” entropic nature of these works offered Eco an “epistemological metaphor” of the conditions of indeterminacy, discontinuity and probability that characterize contemporary science's understanding of natural phenomena: “Its [*peinture informelle*'] signs combine like constellations whose structural relationships are not determined univocally, from the start.” Facing the formlessness of these

works, Eco writes, “Here, the viewer can (indeed, must) choose his own points of view, his own connections, his own directions.” [*The Open Work*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1989, p. 86]

In eliciting a proposal for the interchangeability of viewer and user, the above-mentioned examples of Italian kinetic art, despite earning minimal attention in Eco's writing, represent stronger instantiations of the “open work” than French *informel* paintings, and embody more concretely the most radical consequences of Eco's theory. “The poetics of the ‘work in movement’ ... sets in motion a new cycle of relations between the artist and his audience, a new mechanics of aesthetic perception, a different status for the artistic product in contemporary society,” Eco wrote in the final section of his essay “Poetics of the Open Work.” He continued, “In short, it installs a new relationship between the *contemplation* and the *utilization* of a work of art.” [p. 23] This relationship would correspond to Eco's aspiration that contempo-

rary art production, with its internal capacity to transform the viewer into an active user, would offer society a potential release from its alienated coexistence with objects.

The fact that Eco failed to expand on the question of usability in Italian kinetic art could be seen as a missed opportunity to bring the relationship between contemplation and utilization into local art discourse. However, I would suggest that his concept of the “open work” still anticipated a “transformative” aesthetic object that would distinguish our country’s creative production in the second half of the twentieth century. While Eco registered conceptual strategies in visual arts that attempted to defy commodification without eliminating objectuality altogether, thus deviating from attitudes concerning the dematerialization of the art object, it would be in the context of design — a field that he barely touches upon — that “transformability” would become the *raison d’être* of the object. In his “Poetics,” *en passant*, Eco considered the products of industrial design of his times; he referenced modular book-

shelves, adjustable lamps, transformable armchairs, furniture that “allows contemporary man to render and arrange the shapes among which he lives, according to his own tastes and needs.” [*Opera Aperta*, Bompiani, Milan, 1967, p. 125] Still, Eco generally remained disconnected from the design field. Yet one can’t help but recognize that in these few words, drafted in the early ’60s, he introduced a completely new aesthetic type, an everyday item embodying an open-ended manner of use. In a few years time, this type would be considered constitutive of so-called Radical Design. Not coincidentally, Munari and Mari, Eco’s only examples of Italian creators of “open” artworks, are among the pioneers of this movement. By entering the design system, they embraced industrial production in order to programmatically transplant the structural qualities of “the open work” into the realm of mass-produced items.

In the catalogue introduction for “Italy: The New Domestic Landscape,” the seminal presentation of Italian design held at MoMA, New York, in 1972, the exhibition’s curator,

Emilio Ambasz, highlighted three different “attitudes” concerning the design of objects in Italy: first, a conformist program, aiming at answering the conventional needs of domestic life — this attitude pertains to designers who “do not question the sociocultural context in which they work, but continue to refine already established forms and functions”; second, a reformist approach — designers who “engage in [the] rhetorical operation of redesigning conventional objects with new, ironic, and sometimes self-deprecatory sociocultural and aesthetic references”; and, finally, an attitude of contestation. For the latter category, Ambasz included both designers who perform “an absolute refusal to take part in the present socioindustrial system,” and so convert their practice into direct political action or philosophy; and designers who embrace active critical participation — the so-called “radicals.” For these designers “objects assume shapes that become whatever the users want them to be.” At MoMA, Ambasz presented a number of Radical Design objects such as Bruno Munari’s *Abitacolo*



[Cabin] (1971, manufactured by Rexite), a modular steel structure equipped with a mattress, shelves and containers, conceived as an adaptable habitat for the growing child; Joe Colombo’s *Tube Chair* (1970, Flexform), a “deconstructed” armchair, for which the user is invited to assemble four cylindrical parts of different dimensions, configuring his or her ideal seat; and Cini Boeri’s *Serpentone* [Big snake] (1971, Arflex), a “continuous” sofa sold per meter, made of polyurethane foam in order to guarantee maximum pliability. These furniture pieces did not simply suggest more flexible patterns of use and arrangements; they envisioned a more problematic understanding of the domestic landscape, extending the categories of indeterminacy, discontinuity and probability to settings of everyday life. “[These] objects are conceived as environmental ensembles and permit different modes of social interaction,” Ambasz concluded.

In the mid-60s, Eco led seminars in semiology at the Faculty of Architecture in Florence, and one can guess that many of the members of Archizoom, Superstudio and

UFO, soon to be leading exponents of Radical Design, were among his students. That the theory of “the open work” has never been addressed either in the Radicals’ manifestos or in the theoretical literature concerning their production — notwithstanding a shared vocabulary of “openness,” “user freedom,” “ambiguity of the shape,” etc. — is an historical fact that surely merits further inquiry. However, today it seems evident that, in 1960s Italy, Eco’s “open work” formed the ground from which Italian designers rid themselves of the modernist gestalt of the form/function binary and instead embraced “ambiguity.”

In the way it has been formulated, fashioned, manufactured and finally embedded into an entire country’s lifestyle, the Radical Design object is probably the most successful example of an “open work” ever born on Italian soil. In this sense, one can — as my essay sets out to do — identify further examples of works of art in Italy that, because they anticipated or inherited the language of Radical Design, can be retrospectively qualified as “open.” Along with the works of kinetic art, these examples will show that the program

of eroding the traditionally ocular understanding of art by adding to the usability of the work by way of its transformability is indeed a distinguishable direction within Italian contemporary art. Moreover, this program departs from the cross-pollination of art and design.

Piero Gilardi’s early art — bodies of works such as the “Vestiti/stati d’animo” [Clothes/feelings], the “Totem domestici” [Domestic totems] and the eponymous “Tappeti natura” [Nature carpets], all developed during the mid-60s — has been framed by the artist himself in terms of “an expressive research centered on the idea of aesthetic objects for practical use.” [*Dall’arte alla vita, dalla vita all’arte*, La Salamandra, Milan, 1981, p. 8] The “Nature carpets” immediately established a subtle dialogue with the design object: made of polyurethane foam, they borrowed from the design industry a state-of-the-art technology, thus paralleling the world of mass-produced furniture pieces. Indeed, Gilardi never conceived of his “Nature carpets” as reveries. Like design objects, their *form followed their function*. They aimed to “satisfy

rationally contemporary man’s need for nature” [p. 9], that is to say, to locate within the domestic landscape a codified natural scene. However, in order to meet the requirements of comfort and hygiene, the scene was necessarily synthetic. Initially manufactured in rolls, sold per meter (like Boeri’s *Serpentine*) and later by single square unit pieces, the carpets were meant to be hung on the wall, laid on the floor, piled one on top of the other — to be contemplated and used, indifferently. They were everyday items that boasted “transformability” — as the Radical Design object would later do, and as Eco’s model of “the open work” had already stipulated. In line with John Dewey’s theory of “art as experience,” a bedrock of both his and Eco’s thought, Gilardi offered his artworks as fields of experience and thus as platforms for what Eco highlighted as “the optimistic attitude,” according to which the user’s “commitment” to the object was the only way to dialectically defy his inexorable alienation from it. [*The Open Work*, 1989, p. 134]

In his “Nature Carpets,” Gilardi thematizes modern man’s alienation from his natural landscape at the same time that he delivers nothing less than another objectified version of it. In a sense, promoting an active viewer/user experience, he calls for man’s “integration” with his objects, instead of totally “surrendering” to them — to use Eco’s words. Even when Gilardi finds himself “alienated” from his own art, when the market success of the “Nature Carpets” engenders a demand for the systematic production of his artworks, Gilardi will respond to what he feels is a real threat to his creative freedom again by creating objects of use — a collection of everyday items (a comb, a pair of sandals, a saw, a barrow, etc.), made with recycled materials, that he will name “Oggetti poveri” [Poor objects] (1967). In a cultural context that is cultivating the seeds of Radical Design, Gilardi’s embrace of bricolage — in which he invites users to build his or her own object — is a further move toward encouraging user commitment to the object. His prototypical versions of domestic utensils will pave the way for Mari’s quintessentially “radical” proposal for the *autoprogettazione* [do-it-your-self] (formulated in a book in 1974). Gilardi, and Mari after him, do not aspire to “deconstruct” the object; rather, they search for man’s full integration with it.

Further instances of “usable” and “transformable” works of art can be located in other collections of quasi-design art objects created in 1960s Italy, from Michelangelo Pistoletto’s “Oggetti in meno” [Minus objects] (1965–66)

to Alighiero Boetti’s works presented at Galleria Christian Stein, Turin, in 1967. That said, the conceits of Radical Design continue to resonate in contemporary artworks. Consider, for example, the sculptures of Milan-based artist Alessandro Agudio, and in particular the series (again, a “collection”) titled “Sleek Like a Slum” (2011–ongoing). The series includes sculptures that look and act like furniture: dividers, plant racks, hangers, etc. They are not just usable and transformable — and thus open — works of art. In the way that they immediately elicit the thought of a domestic landscape in which to perform a dynamic interaction with everyday items, they set themselves in line with Radical Design objects. Agudio stresses even further this reference by consistently employing plastic laminates, the *material* of the most stylish offspring of Radical Design, the Memphis group above all. Memphis cherished plastic laminates because they provided new semantic possibilities; but for Agudio, in the 2010s, they simply register the diffusion, or rather the dispersion, of Radical Design objects in the Italian domestic landscape. Indeed, his art doesn’t just “openly” play with domesticity and lifestyle; it comments on the process of stylization undergone by Italian design, and by Radical Design above all. By proposing a commitment to the object of use, which in his case is the Radical Design object, Agudio’s sculptures continue the Italian program of the “open work.”

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Courtesy of the Artist
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Photography by
Alessandro Zambianchi

