

INTRODUCTION by Giulio Carlo Argan, from BRUNO MUNARI, exhibition catalogue, Università di Parma, Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione, Quaderni n. 45, Parma, 1979

Theoretically it should not take any more mental effort to design a chair than to sit on one.

In Munari's highly reductive methodology invention and creation coincide while remaining quite separate moments. This, in my opinion, is the most original aspect of his research, theoretical reasoning and teaching.

A *designer* does not have to be a *manager*. Munari sees *design* as a component of mass culture. Fine material, good lines and good functioning are extra factors, which come into play after the object has become part of the working of the market.

The object is an object prior to being the product: it has its own irreducible primary status and structure. An object is not defined either metaphysically or in terms of social myths. Munari's reasoning is phenomenological not idealistic: an object becomes an object at the very instant when it posits, in parallel and symmetrically, a subject (or is posited by one). At that moment perspective is reduced to plane, proportion to identity, symmetry to specularity. That is when the final diaphragm between perception and imagination falls away, perception is what is imagined and vice-versa.

So the problem of *design* is strictly visual, or rather optical. Indeed a study of the structure of perception is at the same time a study of the identity of object and subject. There can be no further reduction beyond the interpenetration of image and thing to form the object.

Assuming that the object and subject are identical but separate things, this poses the problem of how they are related: what kind of relations can exist between two entities which totally mirror each other? In Munari's simple but subtle thinking there is a bit of Magritte: *ceci n'est pas une pipe*. What saves him from the methodologies and archetypologies of *design* is the ironic attitude of object and subject towards themselves.

Without this reciprocal irony object and subject would be immobile and unchanging; and after all, is not it in fact irony which degrades and alters object in everyday life? Now irony comes from simplification and specularity, in the same way two people begin to laugh when they stir into each other's eyes. Munari has that irony associated with the complicated, mechanical and useless: or, perhaps, the irony of the object towards the subject and subject towards the object. And his sense of humour may also be part of his smart and simple teaching method.

But above all he has an ironic attitude to the artist as a genius, demiurge, inventor and Promethean. For Munari invention meant just doing something obvious but not bland, which nobody else has thought of before. His *design* is the very opposite what Freud called the psychopathology of the ordinary: nowadays is not it something to teach how to be simple without being vulgar? In Munari's Rousseau everybody is born wholesome, clean-cut and intelligent, we do not know how and through how much effort on their part, but some of them ending up being tangled, twisted and stupid. With a touch of irony, we might, in turn, say that his ideal world is a kindergarten for adults.