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FUNCTION WITHOUT FUNCTIONALITY
BRUNO MUNARI'S USELESS AND USEFUL MACHINES by Marco Meneguzzo

When, in May, 1934, Luigi Pralavorio published the first written testimony on Munari's *Macchine inutili*, his playful tone masked the slight uneasiness he felt when writing about something absolutely new and, at the same time, he intelligently discerned one of the matrixes of those objects: Futurism.

But it wasn't only Futurism: if there was anything lacking in Marinetti – and of which he absolutely wanted to deprive the members of his group, including Munari, seeing as he had joined and exhibited with the Futurists as early as 1929 – was a sense of irony, and those "machines", whose forerunner had a *Macchina aerea* in 1930, from the very outset were the quintessence of irony. If you then add the fact that the "myth of machines" – one of the conceptual and emotional pillars of Futurism – was subjected to discussion by their clear and openly declared uselessness, you can understand how Munari chose at once to place himself to one side.

This choice – which is not a matter of marginality nor of isolation, nor of refusal – was a choice that accompanied the entire span of Munari's work, and is well exemplified by the matter of all his "machines", be they aerial, useless or arhythmic. And for this reason it is hard to place entirely in one historical movement or another (you could oppose Futurism with Dadaism, to which Munari was not, in any case, entirely extraneous), and, on the other hand, it is difficult to describe it as something historically defined: it is an approach determined by his personality, an innate curiosity which turned into a method for analyzing the world, and that Munari would never renounce. Instead, he was to conyinually perfect it over the years and to proceed from his early irony to a conscious "playfulness" in his behavior.

So, let's talk about being lateral: we are more inclined, these days, to appreciate its vitues, both because we are living in post-modern eras which are "against methods" – just to cite Paul K. Feyerabend – and because, in this case in point, we are concerned with Munari also – or more – as an artist than a designer. At the same time, we must not forget that almost all his work – from the mid-Forties to late Seventies – took place under the influence of industrial design and the cultural aspect of his project, whose idea of method, of process and product, the more it was specialized, the more it precipitated toward the latent dangers of "good design", undoubtedly of good quality and correct, but certainly less stimulating. So Munari, from his "lateral" position vis-à-vis this kind of design as well – which didn't stop him from working as a consultant at Olivetti where he "produced" nothing but ideas... – acted not so much out of a desire for plyful avoidance, for allowing himself and us a tiny oasis of irony in the wasteland of the serious nature of "good projects" (as his activities were considered at least throught the Seventies), but for indicating a possible way out, for expanding the territory of design possibilities and for exploring other methods without rejecting the modern concept of design.

In this sense the matter of is "useless machines" shows Munari's transversal – not nonconformist – mature with regard to the tradition of novelty. In fact, they do not disobey the concept, but cross it from one edge to the other, tricking its limits and its limitations: Munari never goes beyond that limit, but continuously shifts it "a bit further away", experimenting with the extent to which a definition may be pushed. That is exactly what he did with topology – "how far the deformation of a tiangle can be pushed and still remain a triangle?"... – and did it with "machines", in pursuit of the extreme point at which they would still be machines. So, the virtue of these works isn't so much the introduction of movement – one of the characteristics of machines, of every machine: certain parts are not only mobile but actually in motion – despite an indisputable precocity of the idea (contemporary to that of Calder's mobiles), but the meaning of that movement. "They are nothing", he wrote in 1937, "but colored moving objects, deliberately studied and built to obtain that

particular variety of matching, of movement, of shape and color. Objects to be observed just as one observes a moving complex of clouds after having spent seven hours inside a useful machine shop": letting oneself go emotionally would be a sort of refreshment for the soul, of repose from the fatigue of daily life, but these are also object for which "... every part of a useless machine must have a logical function". Munari goes on to say, essentially, that in the impossibility of a avoiding machines – no followed of Ludd is he, and well aware that the modern world is made of machines – the matter, if necessary, will be how cohabitation with machines will manage to fill the voids of an otherwise one-dimensional existence, determined by a banal concept of "utility" as the production of material wealth by the use of objects.

The key word is "function". As usual, and in this case too, Munari shifts the point of view those few degree necessary to grasp the problem from another perspective. What is sought in a machine is its "functionality", that is, its efficiency as a mere tool, the way it responds to particular standards of production established in mechanical linguistics – how to produce faster, better, cheaper, constantly improving machines, not those tending them... – and therefore always more self-referential, more independent that the human beings whose job it is to run them: if, instead, we were to think more directly about their "function" – a concept etymologically close to "functionality" or to "functioning", but ideally much broader – the perspective would change radically and upset that sort of subtle slavery of man with respect to machines. Thus "useless machines" are machines with symbolic functions and ways of functioning: we might say that Munari stages a machine for the sake of a machine the same way that art existed for the sake of art, thereby upsetting the usual view of a machine itself, in this case reduced – or exalted – to having lost its functionality and, at the same time, thrust toward a lofty maieutic function by its atypical way of functioning. A demystified machine exalts mankind, not only because it ridicules it – few things are more amusing than the triumph and the idiotic movement of the spring-mechanism "arhythmic machines" from the Fifties... – but because showing its limitations – without going too far since it is always a question of machines and nothing else – forced who use and live near it, that is us, to reconsider our own relationship with the world so extremely conditioned by machines. This is paradoxical, but it happens more often than with the useless machines, at that precise place where Munari transforms useful machines into useless machines. You commit an error if you refer to the functionality for which they were intended instead of focusing on machines of thought which expand the horizons of the mind. When Munari exploits the mistaken starting mechanism of the machines for dyeing textiles, he turns that error into new decoration or, better yet, when he transforms the early photocopy machines from machines which reproduce identical examples into creative machines which make unique works, "unique pieces" – *Xerografie originali* – by simply moving the sheet with the image to be reproduced under the light, he is exploring the limits of the machine, touching its most extreme borders which often coincide with a strong contradiction within the intende functionality, and continually proposing new approaches to methods for the production of thought. To paraphrase the affability and sort of ironical inderstatement with which Munari clothed his convictions, we could say that his is not s position "contrary to a method", but a position "contrary to the usual method"...