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MUNARI: I QUADRI QUADRATI di Flaminio Gualdoni

One needs a preliminary reflection, to be able to correctly understand the work that, mainly in the fifties, made Bruno Munari both a crucial and anomalous figure in the panorama of the avant-garde artistic research.

Munari, from the thirties, is the unusual child of the futuristic culture. However, of a futurism, it needs to be specified, that should not be intended as the survival of the stylistics already divested of necessity, rhetorically vitalistic and that in a certain manner can be formalized, but, as meant by Marinetti (in spite of his already official position), as germinal prodrome of the new, of a visual thought able to spread its own intellectual energy, conceptually well trained, within the conventional depth of meaning, and of communicating: beyond a cogent gauging of tonnage, as purified fact of thought, of attitude towards the “doing”, towards the techniques of vision and space. Not therefore, as in Boccioni the *dynamis* as the constructive reason of pictorial, nor the sovereignly decorative references of Balla. But rather Depero and the neurotically modern declination of the “futuristic reconstruction of the universe”, the utopic and palingenetic accents having been already discoloured – still unexpected contingency of the primary fideistic and testimonial avant-garde – and on the other hand perceived in their fullness the laical methodologic elements and of a critical approach to the method, of a much more circularly oriented culture of the “modern”.

Futurism, in the mid-thirties, for pioneers such as Munari, Max Bill, and a few others, was also Weimar, and happy ambiguous links such as Abstraction-Création: and Schiitters, Arp, Vantongerloo, in other words the syncretistic and intellectualizing beyond the orthodoxy.

Experience as practice and as methodological and disenchanting invention: a doing not modal or enunciative, but of a questioning rigour, and of a transparent ingenious levity.

Munari derived an easily perceptible humour of “constructive”, Dadaism that in his personality finds a natural possibility of triggering in the playful vocation, of a noncynical indifference to the totalising programs and to the intellectual mysticism, which too was an inheritance of the earlier avant-garde – so to refer to the protofuturistic family, I am thinking of Cangiullo, and of Palazzeschi, and the debut of Licini – but (decreasing) under the siege of purisms and of the substantially homogeneous return to the “order”, and a debate on art often flattened by strategic choices, of etheronomous politics.

Munari's figure becomes related from the beginning to the literary of Perelà, “man of smoke”, of Palazzeschi. He chooses to be a nomad of rigours, of adopting the changing flow not as a form for showing, but as a way of being, of “doing” avant-garde, of experimenting. His is a radical *understatement*, mobile, incoercible: that attempts the quality in the electric peak of the insubordinate intellect, and not in the stable of being explicit. It does not believe in the exemplary depth, in the intensity of the work, of the artefact. It is a continuous moment-pause, with swarming tension: that is its life, within the thought of vision.

It is in the fifties that Munari's work arrives in “Negativi-positivi”. The exhibition which published them were the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, in Paris, and the following year, a personal exhibition at Bergamini gallery in Milan, 1952.

Opportunately the news is reported in the journal “Art d'aujourd'hui” with a cover, in January of the same years: as proof of, if there is any need, that in the immediate post war the anomalous figure of Munari is among those used as reference, in the excited venture of the “modern”, by all in the search of the signs of an authentic push of a new that is not epidermic.

It is not a matter, and this need to be immediately specified, of the pictorial character of the operation in a classical sense, notwithstanding the evident reference to the historical paradigms of constructivism and their circulation within the artistic situation, the Movimento Arte Concreta, flanked by artists of measured abstract vocation like Soldati and Reggiani, and animated by figures

like Nigro, Monnet, Dorfles. They are, to be more precise, operations on the pittoric, on the code and the apparatus of rules and regulation which withstands even the “doing” of the avant-garde: whose conceptuality is enlightened, but whose accomplishment deliberately places itself in a “how if”, mediated, indifferent, which by concentrating itself with orthodoxy that is totally external to the norm of the painting (and “square paintings” is the definition, explicitly deviant and dissolving, that the artist indicates for them), uproots rather abruptly its crucial node of sense, of reason to be.

The perceptive principle on which these series of works are based is obvious, and not new to the epoch in which Munari adopts it as problematic subjects. The expectation of the figure/background, the different assertiveness of the coloured areas, the visual rhythm. A communicative code, turning itself into painting, with nothing to lose by itself assumes the vest of an aesthetic code. Its geometric silhouettes – but wittily Munari equally exemplifies the operation with figural elements – become structure, the constructive principle of the image, “high” form.

Inadvertently, moving from a mechanism solely of a perceptive expectation, Munari penetrates an environment of a thicker spacer, that of the expectation turned to the pittoric form itself, to present/represent the square, to both its metaphoric and objective nature. That which is derived, is a reading in an abstract-constructivist key, like pittoric forms guaranteed by a noble tradition, of images which are not conveyers of any formalistic intentions, of any completed configuration of sense. The scheme is purely optical, communicative. If it was the cover of a book (and these are years of intensive activity of Munari, in this field, from the cover of “Poema del vestito di latte” of Marinetti, 1937, to the clamorous series of the “Libri illeggibili”, coeval with these paintings), it would be a pure motive. The epiphany in deputed form of painting inflicts other spacers, and level.

Munari works, then, not on the “negativo-positivo” as a formal principle. He works on the idea of square of preventive “aura” of “alterity” of the work of art as the generating convention of other conventions in a chain, a cascade. He also offers, a “what you see is what you see” – which would have quite a different fate in a decade in which the conceptual art would be credence and fashion of an estranging precocity: and a necessary *introito* to any form of art, from Vasarely onwards, in which the “responsive eye” is erected a protagonist. In the end, this operation, deliberately conducted on the painting as an element of a more traditional artistic conventionality, does not present differences except operative with respect to the others, of the same years. The “direct projection”, the slide whose image modifies depending on the temperature and the light that projects it, and the figure in polarised light, and the “concaves-convexes”, the “useless machines”: all are an assumption of norms, obsessively literal application, and the achievement of the critical point, of a break and overturning: to the agnition, ironic and smiling, of the foolishness of the code, of the method.

What differentiates a neoplastic work from the “negativo-positivo”? That that is an icon, an identical image and tending to perfection, to the plentitude, the daughter of a formation that know and pretends the universal. These instead, are fragments of an optical shiver, endowed with a secure principle, but whose function is all, laicaly, with a definite disincantation, “aisthesis”, sensation, fact of seeing. The rest, painting, gallery, museum, price, etc., is a frame, a banal code conceived in turn by another banal code. An ulterior confirmation comes from the relationship that Munari maintains, here as elsewhere, with the execution, with the operative apparatus. He acts without the religion of mastery, as a manipulator instead of an author. Everything becomes a subject of art, because nothing can be, in itself, subjects of art, except for thought, the idea, the shiver of the intellect and of invention. For him the precision and the clarity are necessary, sure, but in the same way as these are necessary for a clockmaker, not as for a demiurge. There is more Duchamp than Mondrian, in these works: and it would do no harm that this notion was clear also for those who, today, are enchanted by the onanism of Halley and Bickerton. “How to do “modern”? By doing abstract... the abstract painting makes “modern” and for this it is art...”. These could have been the words of Munari, caption of this series of images. Instead they were written by Christian Bosson, introducing (in 1986) the new apotheosis of the abstract stereotypes, in the famous exhibition in Villa Arson,

Nice. The irony is similar, with perhaps a little more *côté* of warholian taste. Munari though launched the signal of “quadri quadrati” in 1952, when realism of every type was in full swing, and the new, the fashion, are the “art autre” and the “action-painting”. To art, abstract or otherwise, one asks for a space of existence, the forceful sign of man, for an ethos. Munari replies with a checkmate. Not a strategic checkmate, nor polemic, but to reason, to the substance itself of the object of the contending, the nature and the destiny of art.

And in his style he does not launch proclamations, nor assumes prophetic attitudes. Layman, he is for sure, to the hilt. He causes a jamming of the intellectual mechanisms, and proceeds to the next: curiosity and mechanism, to seed other doubts. Even for him the abstraction, the essential visivity, is an important choice, but is not a religion, nor a paligenetic utopia, like for others. Compared to other fellow travellers, he has a further additional factor.

An integration between arts that are recognised to be diverse cannot occur, bauhausically, but only through a plurality of manifestations, in different environments and levels and ways of a singular attitude, of a preliminary and a clear attitude of thought: it is the same for a lamp as for a painting.

The trajectories of Munari's works are wandering and nomadic a little like his thoughts, and the geography of his experiences. He goes from design to experimental films, from books to the xerographs, with the same lucid critical exactness, like a leonardesque sapper. In the early seventies, he returns to the question of paintings, of the artistic image, of the dystonia between “high” image and the image of communication. In 1974 are born, from a similar impulse as that for “negativi-positivi”, the “proposte cromatiche per le curve di Peano”.

Again the trigger is the ambiguous identification between a visual sieve of scientific origin, endowed with a confirmed and strong logos, with the pictorial notion of necessitated structure, of shaped shape. It is a sweetly wicked assumption, that with a light enunciation administers justice to two decades of unbearable scientific alibi placed before the neoconstructive academicism. “My proposal, absolutely superfluous to the mathematical speculation...”.

Munari writes in the introductory note to the panels. And he concludes: “It is not necessary to think of it continuously, it is enough doing it every now and again”.

It is “ready-made”, Munari says with a witty *understatement*, the same graphic structure of the image, the purest abstraction. One can extract, with intelligence and fantasy, a series of inventions endowed with an aesthetic character that can be appreciated: and if one is careful, also a series of reflections that stab at the conceptual statute of the painting that take itself too seriously.

The indifference of “doing” is again present, total. Munari moves from the typographic works to the painting. The paintings, in this case, imply an amusing tautology, with respect to the “negativi-positivi”. The “curva di Peano” inscribes itself, by definition, in a square. The image that one draws is of course of a “quadro quadrato”, in a sort of pataphysical evidence, and a sneer to that terrorism of the method that as Sklovskij already said at a certain point started going for its own sake. Munari inscribed in it simple chromatic scansions, founded on strong bi-trichromies that reiterating become obsessive, and perceptively assume an internal movement of a kaleidoscope.

He also continues as always without programmatic statements, a further chapter of the flowing theme that unifies all his journey through the internal of vision, the development of a new decorative awareness. Iteration and variants, *all-over* and alternation, acentrism and indeterminate extensibility. Under the non-systematic and sweet use that Munari makes of the mathematical figures, and of those of the theory of perception, continuously emerges a warning of image as an incorporeal phenomenon, of pure evidence and visual substance, which though can be embodied in its elemental but not absurd aestheticism, in the events of life.

The more and more compact articulations of “negativi-positivi”, as with the chromatic inlayings in the “curva di Peano”, have the same ambiguous fertile appearance: substance of the textiles, of the carpets, of the covers of books and magazines, from the xerographies. These are the images that are born from the world, and that at the end return to the world. Always. But they come back more aware and without ostentations, more intelligent. At least, no longer stupid.

