

# Italy: the new domestic landscape achievements and problems of Italian design

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index of participating artists.

# Italy: The New Domestic Landscape

Achievements and Problems of Italian Design

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Enzo Mari was born in 1932 and works in Milan. Beside his extensive activity as a designer, since 1952 he has devoted himself intensively to theoretical research, especially on the psychology of vision, systems of perception, and the methodology of design. He has taught design both at the Umanitaria School in Milan and the Experimental Film Center in Rome. His research has centered especially on two aspects of perception, which he has defined respectively as 'the ambiguity of interior tridimensional space' and 'the analogy between serial systems of natural phenomena and the programming of the phenomena of perception.' He has recently summarized his research, theories on design, and work as a designer in a monograph, *Funzione della ricerca estetica* ('Function of Aesthetic Research'; Milan: Comunità, 1970). In recent years, he has been especially concerned with the role of the designer in relation to contemporary society.

Knowing Mr. Mari's position, the Museum extended him a formal invitation *not* to design an environment. He consented and produced the following essay, in which he attempts to reconcile the fact that, although he is the designer of many beautiful objects, including a number presented in this exhibition, he nevertheless does not believe that the task of designing objects, as physical articles to be executed and sold, has any significance today. He proposes, instead, that the only valid sphere of action for the designer is that of communications, and that the only honorable strategy open to him is that of renewing language — the alphabet included. — E. A.

## Foreword

All human activity is, first and foremost, communication. We must clarify whether the 'communications' inherent in the two parts into which the exhibition 'Italy: The New Domestic Landscape' is divided are the same, or different. The Museum has used two different criteria in organizing these sections. In one, it has made a critical selection of objects produced by Italian designers in the past ten years. For the other, it has invited individual designers or groups to present their 'philosophies' in the form of environments.

But, if these 'philosophies' are identical with those implicit in the other section of the exhibition, their *mise-en-scène* is redundant. If, on the other hand, they differ, it is illusory to think that the differences concerning the socioeconomic aspects of design (since this is all that can be in question) can be communicated scenographically. In fact, within the context of an exhibition of this kind, this scenography can find backing for its execution only within the limits of communicating superstructural aspects to the visitor, or at any rate by using an experimental, and hence obscure, language.

That is why I have refused to participate directly in this section. (I have, however, allowed some objects designed by me, and chosen by the Museum, to be included in the second part of the exhibition; for, in today's competitive climate, the profession to which I belong must rely solely on formal quality for its patronage, and hence for its survival.)

My 'philosophy,' however, can be more clearly and usefully explained in the following

Proposal for Behavior  
directed to my colleagues:

Producing art, and the philosophy related to it, are aspects of communication among mankind. More specifically, they concern research into the appropriateness of modes of language in their historical development. The usefulness of this research lies in the fact that, by means of new models, it proclaims (or should proclaim) the sclerosis of current communications.

Communication is the most important factor in social relations and their evolution. Social evolution today can be determined solely by the class struggle. Communication is the determining element in the class struggle. (If there is a ruling class and a subordinate class, it is not only because the former has more guns than the latter, but because a large part of the subordinate class is still not clearly aware of the implications of its own conditioning; in short, there has been no communication.) Any revolutionary activity, therefore, is above all a matter of communication. But while, on the one hand, it is clear in what direction the collective force is moving to achieve a new order, it is less clear what strategic choices are required if truly revolutionary results are to be brought about quickly.

It is just this lack of clarity that accounts for the diversification of current ideological and political research, and hence of related communications.

Political research must inevitably be recognized as being far and away more urgent than any other kind of investigation, precisely because it serves to determine the conditions under which it might be possible — for everyone — to achieve everything else.

But, inasmuch as collective political maturity is itself closely associated with a refusal to delegate, the priority of political research does not entail a refusal to acknowledge other branches of research. It does mean, however, that while such researches (including communications research) must be free to define their own scope

(since this cannot be evaluated by researchers in other fields, including the political), they must nevertheless recognize that their rationale can be found only within the political framework.

Accordingly, in the case of language research, precisely because the ways in which political communications can be conveyed must be defined and analyzed, this research — although at liberty to prefer one angle to another — must necessarily respect its own field of study: communications (whose destination, whether we like it or not, is always useful to any political faction). Those 'artists' who profess to agree with the cause of the subjugated class must, therefore, be aware that their search for an idiom should be a valuable ingredient in the class struggle. But we know very well that nowadays their research, simply because it is conducted on the individual plane (and is therefore unavoidably conditioned by that fact) is ultimately still a useful instrument for maintaining the privileges of the ruling class. In fact, the only use which that class makes of the artistic manufactured object is for its own cultural vainglory; and it certainly does not avail itself of the implications of research in design. On the contrary, it favors the irrational, inexpressible, and sacral aspects of art, precisely because this sacral quality is the means best suited for the ostentation in question. The most serious thing about all this is that the subjugated class is so strongly conditioned by the 'mystic' aura that even those belonging to its most politically progressive fringes still look upon art and culture in general as 'places' wherein the individual finds his gratification (and alienation).

On the other hand, those 'artists' who want to make a different contribution to the moment of destruction, beyond that of their own technical ability, fail to realize not so much the willfulness of their self-gratification (the only way in which we can describe it) as the fact that the effectiveness of this different contribution is in any case irrelevant, in comparison with the political effectiveness of their day-to-day expressions as tools of the ruling class.

Ultimately, the only correct undertaking for 'artists' is that of language research — that is, critical examination of the communications systems now in use, and critical acts affecting the ways in which man's primary needs (rather than ideologies as such) are conveyed — and almost always manipulated. For this reason, 'artists,' and those connected with their work, must not confine themselves to experimenting and devising new modes of expression but must show a fundamental concern for the manner in which the substance and implications of their research are communicated and received; and especially they must question who the interlocutors are. Only a constant and diligent informational campaign can succeed in narrowing the margin of manipulation to which the researcher's work is now liable, and consequently help to destroy the cultural myth-making of the ruling class.

Since all the 'artists,' although in varying degrees, profess to share the revolutionary will of the proletariat, it would seem easy for them to operate in this way. But as they are, in fact, so badly conditioned that they actually connive with the dominant class, they end up by cloaking their connivance in a kind of formal jargon and, worse still, in arguments that are often 'justified' as Marxian.

Perhaps it may be possible to formulate a theory of behavior capable of overcoming this situation.

Those who maintain: a) that social evolution can be resolved only by the class struggle; b) that 'artistic' activity today has no alternative other than to be used as an instrument; and c) that they desire to carry out collective action — must impose on themselves a code of behavior that can liberate research dialectics from all its mystifying

superstructures. At the same time, they must consent to carrying on a dialogue with those who are not in agreement with them on points a), b), and c), only on condition that the latter are willing to 'communicate' the nature and extent of their dissent -- and in terms that are not politically ambiguous.

It is proposed, therefore, that all communication of the artist's own 'artistic' or critical activity should take place according to the following scheme:

- I. Enunciation of his own utopian vision of the development of society.
- II. Definition of the strategy deemed fitting for the attainment of this ideal.
- III. Statement of what tactical moment of this strategy he has now reached.
- IV. Synchronization of his research with that tactical moment.
- V. Communication of the work of research in question (being at pains to remember that this should be with special reference to the foregoing points).

Furthermore:

The progression proposed should always be followed, so that the different communications can be compared with one another.

The scheme must be followed long enough to allow its results to be checked. For the same reason, it should be followed regardless of the importance, scope, or frequency of the communications — that is, without examining each time the pertinence of this method of procedure.

In short, it is not a question of simply making abstract pronouncements, detached from the daily practice of one's profession, but of constantly bringing one's work (especially one's critical work) into relation with one's contingent reality, one's own will to make statements and clarify them, and one's own free, ideological choice, which alone can explain the motivations.

It might be objected:

That this attempt, too, can easily be manipulated. Quite so. But perhaps it will allow such manipulation to become more clearly apparent.

That this proposal will be ignored by many of those to whom it is directed. This may well be suspected; but precisely in the sense that what is 'suspected' is not so much their avowed adherence to the dominating class, as their feigned adherence to the class that is dominated.