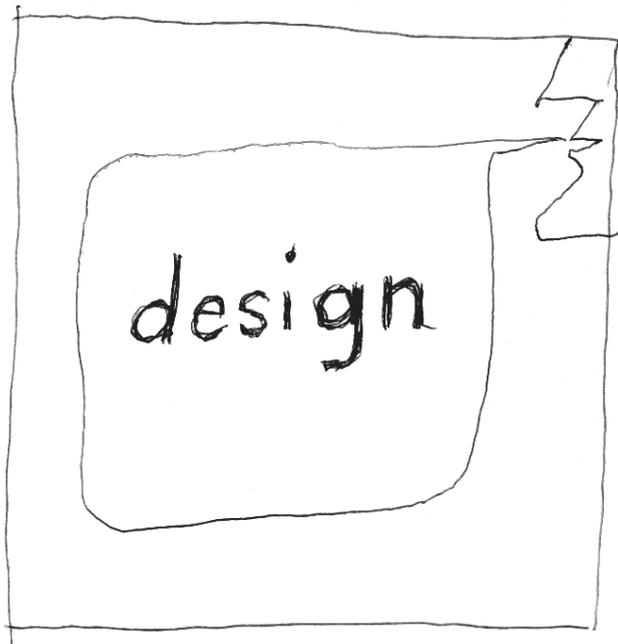


Arte



Munari

Drawings by Giovanni Anceschi

MADDALENA DALLA MURA *The “undisciplined Anceschi”:* you really liked this definition coined by art critic Angela Vettese. In fact it fits you, and your relationship with design, like a glove: you became involved in this field at a time when design was still seeking to establish itself as a discipline, and to distinguish itself from art; and you still are to this day, when the talk is all about post- or transdisciplinary design. So, before discussing specific aspects of your pedagogical approach, such as *Basic Design*, we would like to start with your path towards design and your education in design: how deeply your personal experience influenced your vision of design and design pedagogy.

UNDISCIPLINED

INTERVIEW WITH

Giovanni Anceschi

BY

Giorgio Camuffo,
Maddalena Dalla Mura
and Alvisè Mattozzi

Milan - Bolzano, 10 July 2013

via Skype

GIOVANNI ANCESCHI Orthodoxy is always boring. I particularly recognize myself in what was once said by Shuntaro Mukai – now a professor emeritus of Musashino University – who trained at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm like me, and as a result, like me, is both orthodox and heretic at the same time. He once said that design “has a special character that cannot be limited to one special area, in other words it entails undisciplined discipline”. As far as I am concerned, I could say that I am super-disciplined in an Ulmian way, because I insist rather stubbornly in carrying on the discourse of Basic Design; at the same time, and for the same reason, I am an undisciplined maverick: apart from a group of my own students, I believe I am the only person left still focusing on Basic Design, at least in Italy.

That having been said, the story of how I became involved in design and interested in the pedagogy of design is a rather long one. My background is in art: I was a founding member of the Gruppo T – kinetic and programmed art. I first heard the word “design” from Bruno Munari, at a meeting to organize the first exhibition of the Gruppo T, *Miriorama I*, in 1960. So Munari is partly responsible for the fact that I later chose to study design. In the meantime I had enrolled in the Università Statale in Milan to study philosophy, and here I had the great fortune to attend the classes of two extraordinarily brilliant minds: the philosopher Enzo Paci – specifically, I attended his course on Edmund Husserl’s *Meditations on Descartes* – and the psychologist Cesare Musatti – who brought both Psychoanalysis and Gestalt psychology to Italy. This was a decisive encounter for me. But it would be wrong to say that I approached design, so to speak, from the pinnacles of theory, climbing down the branches of philosophy. That is not the case: throughout my adolescence I was close to my father’s painter friends, and in particular to a painter from the Gruppo dei Sei in Turin, Enrico Paulucci: he used to let me watch him as he painted and practised the sophisticated art of chromatic glazes. I believe that is the source of my unbridled passion for colour, in art and in design. So in fact, at the beginning, it was by witnessing the rich and savoury experience of Enrichetto Paulucci’s life that I also imagined living the life of an artist. In short my beginnings were purely artistic. I think this is the first time I have ever said, or confessed this all so explicitly!

GIORGIO CAMUFFO *But then you switched to design, at Ulm, not just any school.*

GA Apart from Munari, the real culprit behind my move to design was Gillo Dorfles, who went to school with my father, Luciano Anceschi [philosopher]. Both of them studied with Antonio Banfi, the only philosophical antagonist in Italy of the idealist Benedetto Croce. For me Gillo became a sort of father-figure, in the field of art. He was the one who told my father about a new school in Germany – the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm – directed by a South American friend of his, Tomás Maldonado. “I think that Giovannino – even now, when he is 104 years old and I am 73, he still calls me that – would do well to enrol and study there”. Gillo probably thought that I would do product design, because programmed and kinetic art pieces may be conceived as products – not really as everyday objects but as special devices that function aesthetically. But I enrolled in Visuelle Kommunikation, in the “department” directed by Otl Aicher. Yet the fundamental encounter for me at Ulm was with Tomás Maldonado. Yes, I must say I was very lucky with my masters: Munari, Lucio Fontana, Dorfles, Paci, Mussatti as well as Abraham A. Moles and especially the man whom I consider my definitive and total master, Maldonado. The funny thing is that there couldn’t be two people in the world more profoundly different than we are, and not just “physically speaking”, as Reyner Banham used to say – Maldonado is over two metres tall and I am barely one meter seventy. He has a prodigious memory, whereas everyone knows that for me, it is in one ear and out the other. I also am particularly inclined to dress informally, whereas he is the most well-groomed and elegant man I know. But we have had a curiously parallel career, because we both began as avant-garde artists, then we entered the world of design and design education. Since our artistic periods, we have both concentrated on theory and on writing theory. Then, after Ulm, we both ended up teaching in Italy, both at Dams [a course of study in arts, music, and the performing arts] in Bologna, then in Milan at the Politecnico. And in the end, art, so to speak, came looking for us and we both ended up returning to it, in a way.

MDM *A major affront! From design to art?*

GA We might as well say so: some people feel it is an offence, a betrayal. The *damnatio* of art has its own history. It was very typical and very virulent at Ulm – for the Ulmian fundamentalists such as Aicher or Zeischegg, working simultaneously in the fields of art and design was literally a sin that had to be atoned for. But in fact this *damnatio* descends from De Stijl – from the idea that art melts into life – and even earlier from Hegel – with “the death of art”. On the other hand it must be said that Basic Design – which I stumbled across thanks to Maldonado – is an area that, whether you like it or not, does in fact overlap with art. And it could be said that in Italy, the kinetic and programmed art movement – Munari, Gruppo T, Gruppo N, Enzo Mari and others who worked beside Munari in this operation – was to some degree an experience in Basic Design, in a country that substantially lacked design schools.

GC *So Basic Design represents the original area of tangency between art and design at the pedagogical level?*

GA As you know the English expression “Basic Design” is a translation of the Ger-

man term *Grundkurs*, which at the Bauhaus was the name of the introductory course that all students had to take their first year, before choosing one of the ateliers. Over time, Basic Design developed into a significant branch of design, the objective of which was to both introduce and teach the foundations of the discipline; it has become the central educational area of design. The course basically consists in exercises that promise to teach students the key skills required for a designer, to train them in *Gestaltung*, in giving form, or better yet, attributing a specific configuration to artefacts and objects of communication. I like to use the word “configuration” as a more exact translation of the German word *Gestaltung*. The term “design”, which has been generally accepted as its translation until now, is too ample from this point of view, because it embraces everything, including the performance requirements of technical and technological projects, while “configuration” refers specifically to the aesthetic and formal responsibility. *Gestalt* is the appearance of something.

Clearly configuration is that specific skill that lies where design overlaps with the arts. To configure means being able to give artefacts the “right” – allow me this term as a first approximation – morphemes, chromemes, or even intervals. Configuring consists in giving artefacts a qualitatively distinctive form, and in determining open and generally satisfactory uses. This is true for both art and design. The artist too must necessarily be a good *Gestalter*. But there are differences between artists and designers at other levels. Whereas the designer is a technical intellectual, a “translator” who develops intentions that are substantially conceived by someone else, artists decide not only the “how” but the “what”. Artists are not just authors: following the turning point of “art for art’s sake”, they are also the clients, dominating the objectives and the directions of their research. The artist experiences a strict correspondence between his existential destiny and his work which, in the case of art, is not a professional activity like design, or if it is, it is in the higher sense of professing a certain belief.

ALVISE MATTOZZI *You have made a long list of masters: a question that clearly involves learning – having the right masters, the right contacts, etc. Yet, in some of your lectures on Basic Design and on learning, you have in some ways opposed Basic Design to a teaching model you have defined as “Oriental”, linked to the figure of the master. Obviously, as you said, you have been fortunate. But not everyone has the opportunity to meet or have masters. There are many teachers in schools, but not all of them are masters. So: can things be taught, and is this the function of Basic, above and beyond the fact of acquiring a Master?*

GA First of all I hate the word “master” especially when it applies to me, and I am a follower of the Greek guru who said: *οἶδα ὅτι οὐκ οἶδα* [I know I do not know]. Forget the question of the master! That having been said, so far I have told you my own story, my own personal good fortune, my own lucky encounters. To answer your question, what in fact characterizes Basic Design is the fact that it is opposed to the model of knowledge transmission which we can define as “Medieval” or “Asian” – as Marx might have said – in which knowing is first and foremost “knowing how”, and is transmitted from the exemplary gesture of the master to the practice of the student. This model, which I called

“Oriental” in one of my lectures, was then borrowed most enthusiastically by the post-modern movement, which placed the accent on the idea of talent. Now, talent most certainly does exist, we all know it does; but for someone like me who believes that there exists a discipline of configuration/*Gestaltung* and that it can be taught, talent is simply a “plus”. There is a foundation for the gamut of morphological and poietic sciences, and it is possible to circumscribe what needs to be known in order to work. A writer with a talent for narration would always do well to explore the potential of the alphabet, or more precisely, of syntax. Similarly, design has its own toolbox of special “sciences” that concern configuration/*Gestaltung*, as I was saying; these sciences do not concern the performance of the final artefact – as they would for an engineer, or a technical project – but focus on the aesthetic and formal qualities, the way in which the object qualitatively appears to the body that perceives and enjoys it. The challenge of Basic Design as a discipline consists in aiming for a conception of knowledge that is not mystical but enlightening, and even democratic. It is also true that, at the origins of Modernism, as early as the Bauhaus, with De Stijl for example, the idea was to advance elementary constituent educational principles, scientific and absolutely objective: a sort of universal law that regulated the world of forms. Universal and objective elements, that is how the thinking went, with a certain dose of rash expectation. Following the model of formal sciences and mathematics, they were convinced that they could put together a gamut of foundations considered to be objective. Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee were among the first teachers of the Grundkurs at the Bauhaus: reading *Point Line Surface* by Kandinsky, or studying Klee’s *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, means witnessing the actual transformation of what were once artists’ poetics – which may well have been expressed as a theory but remained a matter of personal authorship – into a science “for” many that could be “shared by” many. The very fact of addressing an audience of learners forced the two artists to try and produce an objective science. Today, more prudently, we no longer seek universal knowledge but rather knowledge subjected to an effort to make it objective. Or better yet: rather than objective knowledge, the point is shared knowledge, “inter-subjective” as it was described by Josef Albers and phenomenology.

GC *Allow me to reverse Alwise’s question. How important is it to have masters, during the learning process? And how important is physical presence in the transmission of knowledge?*

GA Do you mean Masters with a capital M? A great deal, I don’t deny it. In this sense – I repeat – I was very lucky and I absorbed a great deal from my masters at the somatic and empathetic level. But there is always the skin-to-skin sort of pedagogy, which remains important. Still, the challenge of teaching Basic Design is the idea of developing knowledge that is not transmitted solely in the way we have defined as “Oriental” – from guru to disciple, in an immediate and somatic manner – but the other way, the more reflective and constructive – though still experiential – way of the western tradition. As I said, this is a cultural project that began in the Modern age, and that has developed through time into a more flexible and perhaps more realistic attitude. But there is still

the intention of producing something that can be shared: the desire to generate widespread knowledge, a truth that is completely different from the “craft” secret that the master passes on surreptitiously.

AM *I would like to delve deeper into the issue of Basic Design. You have always sustained that “you can tell” students who have studied Basic Design, that in some way, Basic Design introduces a different set of skills, develops a particular attitude in the students. How does Basic Design offer students the skills that make them more adept at practising design?*

GA I formulated this statement when I was at the Politecnico in Milan: over a certain period, Maldonado’s group and I personally had a certain influence there, so I was able to considerably expand the Basic Design courses within a university that offered a great many different courses of study – perhaps too many. What I observed during this experience was that the students who had attended the Basic Design classes stood out quite strongly when they moved on to the design studios thanks to their increased formal awareness or better yet “confidence”. The final show of the hands-on work done by the students “affected by Basic Design” demonstrated an advanced sensitivity to specifically configurative or syntactic problems: unexpected morphological choices, well-considered combinations, efficient hierarchies. With a touch of raw humour, we might say that there was a radical difference between the designers and the coarser draftsmen. I repeat, the designer is primarily a specialist of the “how”, of the configurative quality, and not of the “what”, like the artist, or of performance, like the engineer or technician. And with Basic Design, the future designer learns the actual skill of configuration. For a designer, performance is a necessary but insufficient parameter, and as far as the “what” is concerned, the designer can deal with that at a secondary level, in the sense that he can discover new potential for use – which is like new “hows”, new choreographies. But first and foremost the design must evoke a powerful sense of synthesis and produce a certain grace in the effusions exchanged between the artefact and the user during their dialogue and their interactive “wrestling”. And this is just as true today as it was yesterday. There are differences between those who demonstrate that they possess certain skills and others who don’t. Let me give you a simple example taken from the field of what is known as information design – an expression which in and of itself I challenge. On the pages of daily newspapers, we are currently witnessing a proliferation of visualizations based on a circular pattern: images, for example, of planetary systems or giant doughnuts, consisting in a myriad of minute signs. The question is: is there a reason why these signs are assembled in a circular pattern? Is the phenomenon they represent cyclical, or what? And above all, is it acceptable for them to contain so many items? These schemes are basically flawed in terms of communication. An old International Style graphic designer would have worked to reduce them, and rightly so... This critique strikes at the heart of the discipline, specifically at the quality of performance, in other words the configuration: these schemes do provide all the information, in a certain sense, but what doesn’t work is the sort of target board you have in front of you, which you can’t understand!

MDM You said earlier that the designer deals primarily with “how”, and only at a secondary level with “what”. In recent years, however, there is a rising debate about the designer as someone who deals with the “what”, or with its possibility, rather than or before the “how” – the design of situations, relations, experiences, conditions. Some designers, faced with a society that does not ask them to configure much or only lets them do it within certain systems and under certain conditions that they do not accept, apparently seek to formulate the “what” on their own. What is your opinion of this phenomenon?

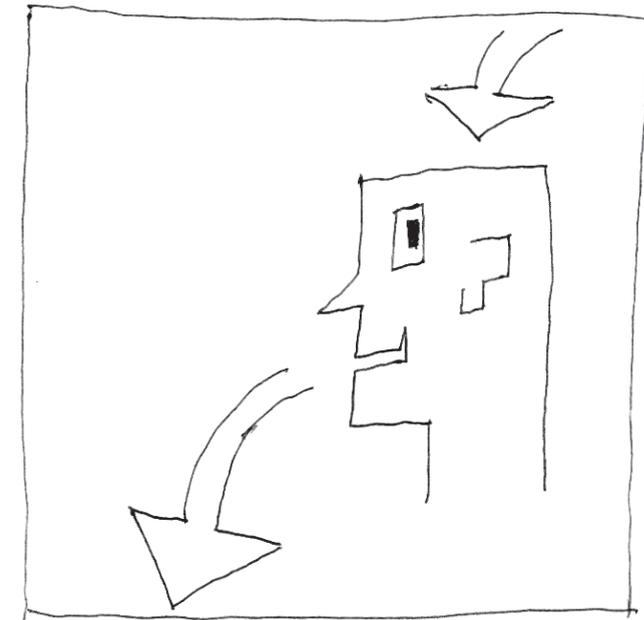
GA I would like to underscore that I enthusiastically adopt the term “configuration” as a way to avoid the word “form”. My position lies in antithesis to formalism, thousands of miles from the idea that the designer only works with shapes – be they bolidist or swooshes, little more than cartoon figures. I can’t bear the attitude of the star-designer who makes a quick sketch in the shape of a cloud he has in mind and then... then presumes that someone else, in the development department, will work it out! I believe that configuration is always determined by a series of factors and the design is always influenced by a series of constraints, which define the area of possibilities, and the margins of decision-making for which the designer must be responsible. That having been said, and looking at the new generations, design’s conceptual centre of gravity “seems” – and I emphasize this verb, “seems” – to have shifted. But in assessing what is happening, our observation point must not be too close. This phenomenon is a vast and comprehensive one, a general trend: it is increasingly evident that the boundaries between disciplines is becoming blurred. And the one that is vanishing most definitively is the boundary between design and art – especially among young people, who are interested in working on self-initiated projects and in self-production or choose more marginal strategies and paths, in areas where design overlaps with other disciplines and practices. As you say this also happens because they have been somewhat excluded from industrial production. They have by necessity become authors, editors or publishers instead of mediators. Still, I insist: the heart or, as I call it, the centre of gravity, the barycentre of the discipline remains the same. And so does the key skill: configuration.

MDM We have already discussed the barycentre and the foundations of design in an earlier conversation. At that time, you used to say that boundaries between disciplines have become blurred yet “there is still something constant and stable about each” discipline, their centre of gravity.¹ How can one learn and appreciate the discipline’s barycentre and at the same time be “undisciplined” in the sense of maintaining the necessary flexibility, having the ability to oscillate around the barycentre, to remain open, without obsessively sticking to it or reducing it to a formula?

GA This is right down my alley! Years ago, in a seminal methodological text, Bernhard E. Bürdek, described three typologies of designer. The first is the “black box” designer – the pure creator who pretends to have no knowledge, and after a period of latency while he digests the problem, comes out with

the “Eureka” moment! The second type is the “glass box” designer – who represents the opposite, the disciplined, radical methodologist, who believes that the design process

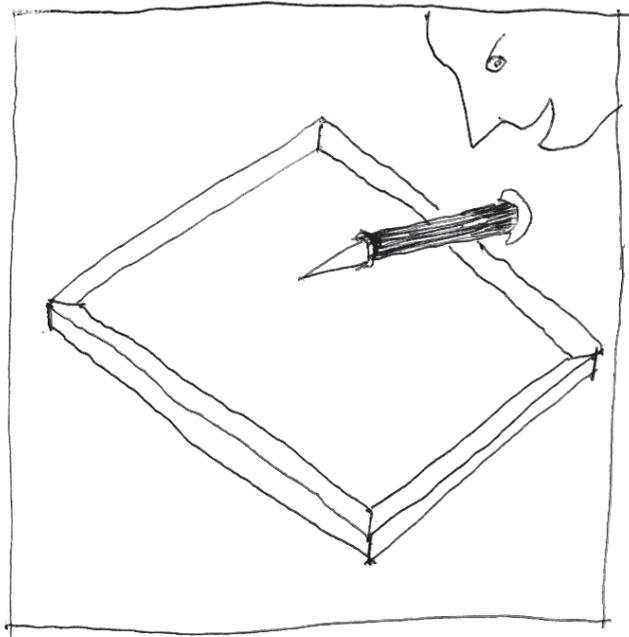
¹ “Beyond Graphics”, interview with Giovanni Anceschi, in Giorgio Camuffo and Maddalena Dalla Mura (eds.), *Graphic Design Worlds /Words* (Milan: Electa, 2011), 22-29: 27.



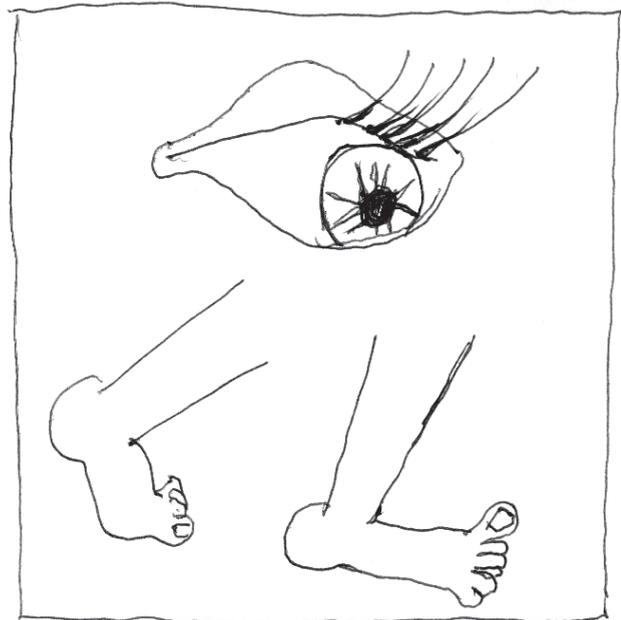
Glass Box



Black Box



Tabula rasa



Autozittessivo

is a sort of deterministic machine: you put all the information into a machine that processes it and spits out the solution. The third and last is the “self-reflective” designer – which is my case, something I believe every designer should be. This is the designer who remains flexible throughout the design process, keeping his eyes open, reflecting on every move he makes. *Odos* in Greek means “path”, “method” means “around the path” and “methodology” means “discourse around the path”. “Watch where you step!” we say. By observing what you are doing, you can guide the steps you take, control and direct the steps you are about to take. You can stop and change direction, take a few steps back and even start over.

GC In your lectures you often have proposed thinking about mapping design expertise – an articulated map that includes diverse disciplines. How important do you think it is, in learning design, to know how to orient yourself? And what is the role of disorientation and of un-learning? Do you think you need to get lost to learn?

GA I know you are interested in these topics. I remember one of our closest encounters and deepest understandings, during one of the first editions of *Teach Me*, the yearly visual communication festival that you once organized in Venice. On that occasion, I argued that there might be such a thing as a pre-Basic, meaning the cognitive process that comes to us from the philosophy of phenomenology, and consists in temporarily setting aside all previous knowledge and suspending all judgment. *Epoché* is the term used by Edmund Husserl, in the sense that true direct knowledge is almost never provided in nature.

You appreciated that lecture of mine a great deal: the idea that there is an indispensable *pars destruens*, a deconstructive part, a sort of preliminary, one might even say pre-founding phase, like the digging required to build foundations; the idea of gaining access to first-hand knowledge by doubting everything you have known or learned so far. That is what Husserl said: everything we know about the world, we mostly know “on faith”, because someone – a book, television, our parents, school, society – told us. Whereas to achieve truly authentic knowledge one must erase all of this knowledge – Husserl says to “put it in brackets” – and “pretend” to forget it; one can always return to it later if necessary... For the discipline of design, this is an extremely interesting attitude, an extraordinary concept. What I call “barycentre” is precisely what we must initially pretend to forget, and then can eventually remember, or bring back to life. If we want to achieve authentic knowledge we must erase or better yet learn to “put in brackets”. Pretend to forget everything we know. This is also true of perception: we must observe the context “with different eyes”, as the saying goes. So, in a way, our sensing organs should be delicately skinned, and prepared to be affected by new experiences, thereby achieving new knowledge, beyond prejudice, beyond faith. *Tabula rasa*. It is like an exercise we must complete so that our mind-body is willing, open, fresh and ready to receive and shape the new knowledge. In order to design, it is important to know how to lose the “self”, the incrustation of things everyone knows, the prejudices.

MDM But disorientation seems to be an everyday condition these days...

GA The problem is that this disorientation you see, is caused by prejudice! It is not a positive disorientation, the kind in which you look around feeling somewhat

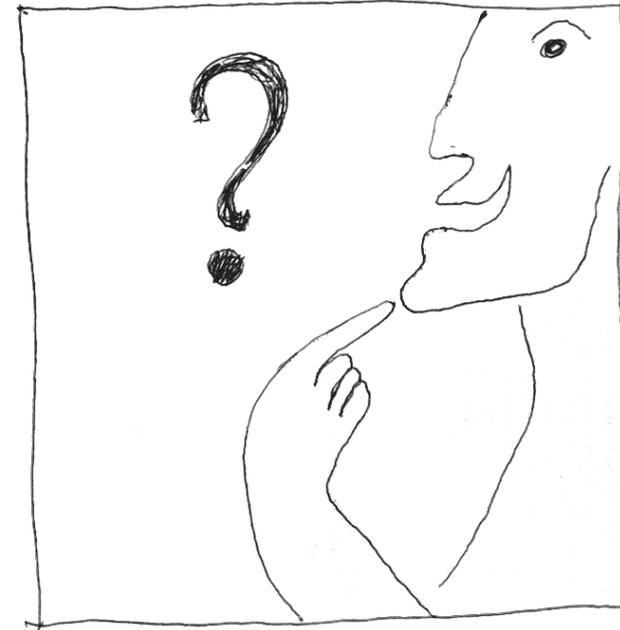
lost, which is what you feel after you go through the exercise of forgetting all past knowledge. It is not the disorientation of awakening, it is the unhealthy disorientation that comes when all the previous knowledge we have acquire “out of faith” or from an *ipse dixit* starts overlapping, cluttering and becoming entangled. Especially now that, as Otto Rank predicted, representation is beginning to work as a world. Today, as the Internet carries an avalanche of information that everyone can access, receive and manipulate without any control, we are faced with a huge, incredible breakdown of the system. I am not a Lud-dite, I consider the innovation of information technology and communication as an opportunity, but I believe that it is crucial to guide these processes and not be overwhelmed by them. A meritorious endeavour such as Wikipedia, if you have direct, personal, experience with it, reveals a number of very dangerous traps concealed in the folds of the regulations – the bureaucrat, with his obtuse run-of-the-mill cunning, triumphs over actual competence.

GC *The Jews tell a very interesting story: in the womb you know everything, then just before you are born, God touches your chin and makes you forget everything!*

GA The original *epoché* was divine in nature! And left a dimple as a reminder!

GC *Learning also means addressing the beauty of knowledge...*

GA Being born means being open to experiences, and the same idea of continuous rebirth should be applied to design. When you develop a truly new project it means you have borrowed from that source, otherwise it is no more than a remake of what has already been judged, seen, done. So: having established this indispensable battle against prejudice, this necessary drive towards discovery takes us back to the beginning: we return to the idea of being “undisciplined”. If we remember the definition of the designer’s role in society given by two of the major exponents of the Ulm school, Maldonado and Bonsiepe, we might conclude by realizing that authentic orthodoxy lies specifically in being undisciplined: “The function of the product designer should not consist in maintaining order but in generating disorder”. Maldonado and Bonsiepe were referring to industrial design, but the same holds true for designers of all kinds, and certainly for all the designers who reject the dirty work for unhindered financial capitalism that guides today’s global market. And the most undisciplined of all will be the designer who handles the tools of communication.



Fossetta/