

BOOK REVIEW

The Italian Avant-Garde, 1968–1976, EP Vol. 1 edited by Catharine Rossi and Alex Coles

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If you think Italian design is overexposed, and should be ignored, at least for a while, while design historians attend to the vast number of other national design histories which have yet to be told, then I sympathize. At the same time, however, I urge you to regard Italian design as hidden in plain sight, the victim of its own celebrity. It is often written about, and rarely critically analysed. Yet, Italy has produced one of the richest, most poetic and most challenging bodies of design practice. This work deserves, and demands, scrutiny. While Italian design has attracted a disproportionate number of column inches in magazines and newspapers, and online, books on Italian design are either in need of a new edition (e.g. Sparke, 1990) or are museological in focus (e.g. Bosoni, 2008).

So, we can welcome the publication of two books answering the need for a thoroughgoing analysis of Italian design: *The Italian Avant-Garde, 1968–1976*, edited by Alex Coles and Catharine Rossi, and *Made in Italy: Rethinking a Century of Italian Design*, which I co-edited with Kjetil Fallan (2014). Though they respond to the same lacuna, the books differ in scope and format. *Made in Italy* takes an entire century, from c.1910 to 2010, as its subject. It adopts a standard academic format: 125,000 words including an introductory essay of 12,000 words, a historiographic chapter of 10,000 words, five thematic parts mixing of broad surveys and case studies in chapters of 5,500 words each, and the customary academic apparatus: a list of illustrations, bibliography and index.

The Italian Avant-Garde, 1968–1976, on the other hand, eschews an introduction, a bibliography, an index and a list of illustrations in pursuance of an innovative format which series editor, and volume co-editor, Alex Coles has termed the 'EP', denoting the 'extended play' music recording, between a single track and an LP (long play) album in duration. The book also refers to Alison and Peter Smithson's Economist Plaza, with its raised plateau providing a 'pre-entry space in which there is time to rearrange sensibilities'. Sternberg Press' website describes EP as 'the first critically underpinned series of publications that fluidly move between art, design, and architecture' suggesting inter- or multi-disciplinarity as the distinguishing feature of the series. Yet, the book's brevity is much more notable than its interdisciplinarity, which is a much-vaunted and increasingly expected characteristic of contemporary arts scholarship. Although I have worked extensively as an editor of books and journals, I doubt I am alone in wanting answers, explanations, justifications even, for the editorial decisions embedded in a collection of writings, through which to understand why a given anthology looks, and reads, the way that it does. But, without an introduction, the reader must infer the editors' motives for producing the volume, or rather discover them online, where a filmed panel discussion provides answers in a one-hour format (ICA, 2013).

Instead, the book begins with a conversation between editors of *Domus*, Alessandro Mendini, Joseph Grima and Vera Sacchetti, in which the generation gap is clearly seen in their views on online publication. In emphasizing the role of 'enlightened industrialists' to the survival of the magazines for which he has worked, Mendini laments 'I don't know if industrialists are still so enlightened'. This point goes unexplored, yet it is an indictment not only of industry and its actors, but also of the very design press under discussion, which should enlighten ignorant industrialists. Instead Grima and Mendini pursue a fascinating discussion about *Domus* as a platform for postmodernism and Mendini's role in the personality cults of architects.

Generational differences re-emerge in gallerist Libby Seller's discussion with Studio Formafantasma, where issues of legacy and unemployment explain the designers' emigration. Simone Farresin

and Andrea Trimarchi found 'more elements of the attitude of radical Italian design in the education system in the Netherlands than in Italy'. Farresin raises one of the most interesting methodological problems in the book, that: 'Italian radical design can't be pulled out from the historical moment in which it was developed.' The 'miscommunication between generations' they identify is 'bound up with the difficulty of adequately contextualizing their work [that of the Italian radicals] in the contemporary moment'. For Farresin and Trimarchi, Eindhoven was a 'physical white space', 'a place with almost no history': 'When you talk with designers in the Netherlands, their perception of Dutch design is from the 1990s onwards'. Yet, my own experience of working with student designers in the Netherlands has revealed great pride in the legacy of Dutch design, from De Stijl and the work of Willem Hendrik Gispen to that of Hella Jongerius, Marcel Wanders and Viktor & Rolf. We need to read the Dutch design history told by Mienke Simon Thomas (2008) as well as that of Aaron Betsky and Adam Eeuwens (2004). Returning to Italy, the conversation between Libby Sellers and Studio Formafantasma reads, in addition, as an interesting case study of the relationship between curatorial discourse and designers' own accounts of their work.

This theme, of a tense dance between design creativity and commerce, runs through the book, from Cavart's intangible, ephemeral design practice via repeated references to Arte Povera, to Ettore Sottsass's design work as ethnology. Alison Clarke provides a sensitive account of the latter's 'existential crisis as a designer', capturing 'the dilemma of a contemporary design profession made redundant by the nature of its own critique of the material world'. Paola Nicolin explores the occupations of the Milan Triennale in May 1968 and the Venice Biennale the following month as exemplary of 'the relation between the production of a work of art and its mediation on the exhibition circuit'. Next, in one of the book's deeper analyses, Pier Vittorio Aureli draws attention to the impact of Manfredo Tafuri's 1969 essay 'Towards a Critique of Architectural Ideology' as 'the first important attempt to link a Marxist perspective with a critical analysis of modern architecture' and looks particularly at its influence on Archizoom. Aureli shows that Archizoom 'celebrated the crass vulgarity of the new rude *razza pagana* and its uncontrolled consumerism, aiming to violently collapse the concept of "good design" introduced in Italy by Scandinavian modernism, whose sobriety and functionality embodied the spirit of welfare capitalism', before realizing that pop references led to a critical dead end.

In reading the large number of interviews and conversations in the book, I would have liked to have read, too, about the editors' input into these discussions. Without an editorial introduction, I was left wondering what were the editorial strategies which surrounded their commissioning, direction and editing? A history told through conversations has the advantage of directness, but it also risks the attempt at telling a coherent story. Just like the snippets of Andrea

Branzi's mosaic of 'Radical Notes' translated here, with sentences which are not sentences: 'The house as a gymnasium in which to experiment with one's own creative faculties, atrophied by centuries of productive work; the house as an equipped parking lot where one can act our directly the very phenomenon of living': *The Italian Avant-Garde, 1968–1976* has the intriguing character of a dossier of primary and secondary sources, an eclectic collection of information which leaves the reader to draw her own conclusions. This piecemeal sense is found, for example in MoMA Senior Curator, Paolo Antonelli's revisiting of that museum's pivotal exhibition 'Italy: The New Domestic Landscape' of 1972 through a series of objects. This initially attractive strategy results in a chapter which is no more than the sum of its parts – the experience of reading this piece is staccato (but less so than the experience of reading Branzi's 'Radical Notes') and the reader in search of a summative conclusion is left disappointed. In formal terms, then, Antonelli's chapter may be seen as a microcosm of the MoMA Design Series book, *Italian Design* (Bosoni, 2008), another text structured through objects at the expense of a more discursive historical narrative. The light touch editorial approach adopted by Rossi and Coles may not best serve the reader – an undergraduate, perhaps, or a design enthusiast – who might prefer a little more guidance than is provided here.

However, the relatively large proportion of interviews and conversations in the book pays off in two ways. First, it places designers' voices directly into many of the chapters, from Libby Seller's interview with Studio Formafantasma, to Amsterdam design group Experimental Jetset's methodical itemization of the specific techniques employed by Ettore Vitale which offer the possibility of socialist re-appropriation of the commercial form of the poster, and Vitale's account of his own work, which follows. Elsewhere, Rossi has told us that Experimental Jetset regard Vitale's 'aesthetic of transparent construction' as 'an activist graphic language' (Rossi, 2013). Designers' accounts considerably enhance the histories being told. Carlo Caldini's account of Space Electronic is a very welcome first-person narrative. When we read that 'the lower floor of the discotheque was transformed into a lake with hedges, plants and fish. On the upper floor was a real vegetable garden that represented a full-scale model of the living room of the *Garden House*' we understand something of the energy and immediacy of the period charted by this book. At the book's close, political philosopher Antonio Negri explains that because his archive disappeared when he was imprisoned, he agreed to the interview because 'it helps me remember'. This comment follows Negri's helpful observations that Arte Povera's 'negative and ironical vision of reality' was essentially non-interventionist and that '1968 in Italy was not the same as in Germany or in France: in Italy it lasted ten years'.

Second, by involving established designers who populated the Italian avant-garde during the period 1968–1976 and contemporary

designers, too, the book excels at showing how Italian design history – and, specifically, the period of radicalism which is the focus of the book, of course – continues to inform contemporary design practice. This is most clearly seen in the contributions by Experimental Jetset, Studio Formafantasma and Michelangelo Pistoletto and Martino Gamper. The latter, entitled ‘Arte in Poverata’, again recalls Arte Povera in an account of Gamper’s contemporary output and its formative influences, notably that of his teacher, Pistoletto. It informs judgements such as Rossi’s verdict that Cavart displayed a ‘built-in futility that today’s utopian-minded practitioners could do well to take into mind’.

The Italian Avant-Garde, 1968–1976 is beautifully designed by Experimental Jetset in a pastiche of the design publications from the period under analysis that also has contemporary appeal. The book’s pleasing convergence of form and content brings to mind a gaping problem in design book publishing. Polly Cantlon and Alice Lo have elsewhere examined ‘the relationship of content, form and style in the design of books’ on modernist design theory, finding ‘an increasing disjuncture between design writing’s denotation and the connotations embodied in the designed form and style’ of the books under analysis. They argue that ‘in the case of modernist theory, a strong and aesthetically valid relationship of all the attributes of a book would seem, if not axiomatic, then certainly appropriate’. However, we can demand the same aesthetic validity of contemporary design publishing, in the hope that if, as Cantlon and Lo put it: ‘the form in which design history writing is presented became more integrated and expressive, design history might better engage present design students’ (Cantlon and Lo, 2012). With *The Italian Avant-Garde, 1968–1976*, Sternberg Press has provided an exemplar of the thoughtful book design that design history deserves. Another example is Linda King and Elaine Sisson’s edited volume *Ireland, Design and Visual Culture: Negotiating Modernity, 1922–1992* published by Cork University Press and the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire (IADT) with the ‘insistence that the book should look fabulous!’ (King and Sisson, 2011: 15). Whatever the medium, design discourses such as design history need strong visual dimensions to illustrate, support and exemplify the analysis, and to attract readers from both within and without the design education and design industry communities. *The Italian Avant-Garde, 1968–1976* does well by this, and several other, yardsticks.

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Biography

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