



25 Ways to Hammer a Nail. “Postcrocian” Aesthetics and Everyday Life’s Poetics in Enzo Mari

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Abstract. The essay analyzes the poetics of Enzo Mari in the light of postcrocian aesthetics, in particular Umberto Eco and Luciano Anceschi’ contributes.

The field of reflection of the essay, conducted on several levels (both meta-artistic and intra-artistic) is polarized around some expressions and some key words, explications of issues perceived as urgent.

First, a rethinking of aesthetic experience on the basis of the results of psychology and the phenomenology of perception.

Secondly, a rethinking of the status of the work of art, which becomes “open work” or work “with multiple outcomes”; to characterize the work is a semantic stratification, a multiplicity of meanings that requires an active user, able to enter the work and trace an interpretative path. Thirdly, a rethinking of the aesthetic-social impact of art capable of activating an “aesthetic education”, a new and more conscious experience of the “environment”, be it natural or cultural: artistic objects, as well as those of design, have a transformative power of ordinary space-time, and consequently of the habits that mark it. This creates a very close link between aisthesis, poiein and praxis, between aesthetics, artistic operation and life, in its ethical and social aspect.

Keywords: Process · Enzo Mari · Postcrocian aesthetic · Every-day life’s poetics

1 Beyond Croce. Towards a Revaluation of the Operating and Fruitive Processes

“Within the framework of the current sensitivity, this progressive tendency to the opening of the work is accompanied by a similar evolution of logic and science, which have replaced the unique modules with plurivalent modules. The multi-value logics, the plurality of geometric explanations, the relativity of spatio-temporal measurements, the same psycho-phenomenological research of perceptual ambiguities as a positive moment of knowledge, all these phenomena serve as a clarifying background to the desire for ‘works with multiple outcomes’ that replace, even in the field of artistic communication, the tendency to uniqueness with that tendency to possibility that is typical of contemporary culture. Secondly, while certain experiments of work open to a vague fruition

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still expressed a feeling of decadent type and a desire to make art an instrument of communication theoretically privileged, the latest examples of works open to a productive complement express a radical evolution of aesthetic sensitivity. Examples of architecture in motion manifest a new sense of the relationship between work and user, an active integration between production and consumption, an overcoming of the purely theoretical relationship of presentation-contemplation in an active process in which intellectual and emotional, theoretical and practical motives converge. Furnishing phenomena now in series (lamps and armchairs able to take different shapes and angles, bookcases variously recomposed, etc.) offer the example of an industrial design that is a continuous invitation to the training and the progressive adaptation of the environment to our needs of utility and aesthetics. In this context, phenomena such as music, which have long been linked to the presentation-contemplation relationship typical of the concert hall, now require an active fruition, a co-formation, which at the same time results in an education of taste, a renewal of perceptive sensibility. [...] It should be allowed that the new type of open work can also be, in sociologically favourable circumstances, a contribution to the aesthetic education of the common public" [1, 169–170] [2].

With these words Umberto Eco, in a famous speech of 1958 *Il problema dell'opera aperta*, published after ten years in *La Definizione dell'arte*, indicated at the same time the end of a season of Italian philosophical aesthetics, strongly marked by the neo-hegelian thought of Benedetto Croce, and the opening of an entirely new season, whose resources of meaning are still not entirely drawn. *Gestalt* psychology, phenomenology, philosophy of form on the theory side, and artistic research prone to experimentation and encroachment on the practice side, lead to a real breakthrough; turning point that we could call "aesthetic-artistic" for the close dialogue that develops between philosophers, theorists and art critics, artists; dialogue in which abstraction was wisely balanced by the description of the particular phenomenal.

The field of reflection, conducted on several levels (both meta-artistic and intra-artistic) is polarized around some expressions and some key words, explications of issues perceived as urgent. Expressions and key words on which Umberto Eco builds his speech.

First, a rethinking of aesthetic experience on the basis of the results of psychology and the phenomenology of perception, therefore beyond both an empirical conception and a positivistic conception: the "perceptive ambiguities" (related to the ambiguities of the communication, essentially not univocal) emphasize the plurality and variety of possible experiences and consequently the active and not merely passive role of the subject of experience.

Secondly, a rethinking of the status of the work of art, which becomes "open work" or work "with multiple outcomes"; to characterize the work is a semantic stratification, a multiplicity of meanings that requires an active user, able to enter the work and trace an interpretative path. To be taken up is the original meaning of the term "work": it is basically a material operation, an act according to rules, a form. The work is not the ultimate outcome of this activity, it is not a closed form, a mere product, because it continues to act as a trainer and producer, even when it is apparently "finished", released from the action of the producer (or of all the subjects who contributed to the production, as in design). The function of the artist (and the designer) is to activate a training process

open to the action of multiple subjects co-founders, co-operators. In this sense, Eco speaks of “active integration between production and consumption”, which appears as “active fruition”, “co-formation”.

Thirdly, a rethinking of the aesthetic-social impact of art capable of activating an “aesthetic education”, a new and more conscious experience of the “environment”, be it natural or cultural: artistic objects, as well as those of design, have a transformative power of ordinary space-time, and consequently of the habits that mark it. This creates a very close link between *aisthesis*, *poiein* and *praxis*, between aesthetics, artistic operation and life, in its ethical and social aspect. New living practices are born from the daily encounter between subjects of experience and objects that reveal themselves bearers of possibilities of use always new. In *The open work*, Eco contrasts the negative relationship of “alienation” between subject and object, typical of capitalist consumerism, with the positive one of “harmonious integration”, to which the designer must aim. This integration, in the wake of Dewey’s philosophy, is to be understood in the sense of a dynamic relationship between the parts that go to compose a constantly evolving whole, whose law of formation and transformation is that of nature itself. One of the most significant effects is the acquisition of an “ecological” look.

To emerge are real programmatic lines, which unite Eco to another great protagonist of post-Crocian Aesthetics, Luciano Anceschi. Anceschi has insisted on the necessity to consider “the doing”, the “operating process” as an original and intrinsic aspect of the same statute of the art. This implies a renewed relationship between aesthetics and poetics, in which the choice of operational strategies by the artist are always closely linked to a theory, a reflection on doing; hence the close dialogue between many of the greatest artists of the time, particularly in an era strongly marked by the study of language, and philosophical aesthetics is no exception. Both Eco and Anceschi devoted much of their research to the arts of the word (the novel for the first and poetry for the second). This priority accorded to language has a decisive role within the three main axes of reflection mentioned above: the aesthetic and fruitive experience, the work as a process, the relationship between art and life. If, for example, for Anceschi, poetry is primarily the study of poetic “doing”, of the operative strategies of poetic composition, for Eco the model of fruition is the reading, according to the well-known formula: we are actually “*lector in fabula*”.

Quoting at the beginning of his speech examples token primarily from architecture and design and only later from the figurative arts and literature, Eco recognizes the transversality of some reflections and the impossibility of differentiating or classifying in a rigid way the different artistic forms. At the same time, by giving the linguistic “text” the role of an epistemological model, Eco (like Anceschi) risks not fully grasping the contribution of the theoretical-practical research carried out in the field of design to the three issues immediately highlighted. It was in fact a matter of completing a series of steps: beyond the primacy of the arts of the word and, on the basis of the tradition of *Ut pictura poesis*, of those of the image; beyond the differentiation, closely connected to this primacy, between the artistic product, destined to the contemplative pleasure, to the increase of the knowledge or to the opening of a world, and the non-artistic product destined to the use and the satisfaction of a need; type of product within which two levels must be differentiated: the artisanal and the industrial, manufactured in large scale.

With the exhaustion of the *Linguistic turn* (at least in a continental context) and the advent of the *Iconic turn*, the *Performativ turn*, and the recent emergence of the *Everyday Aesthetics*, we can not only say that design is impossible to apply *sic et simpliciter* the model of the text – and that it must be included in the scope of non-verbal even when we do not want to analyze the communicative aspects – but also that in design the axes of reflection come to unprecedented developments, and at the same time anticipators of subsequent theoretical breakthroughs, linked to the image and performativity [3].

An example is the theoretical-practical research of Enzo Mari.

1.1 Design, Process, Form

“I am convinced that design corresponds to a deep human drive, such as survival instinct, hunger, sex. We’re a species that wants to change its environment. Designing is an activity that involves every practice, when humanity tries to improve its norms or when, contradicting them, it finds ‘other’ solutions: from the work of a plumber or an elementary school teacher to the efforts of those who try to redefine a legislative or linguistic code, or those who would like to rationalize our way of life ‘from the spoon to the city’ to quote the famous slogan of the architect Ernesto Nathan Rogers”¹ [4–6].

Already Argan, within the First International Congress on Industrial Design organized within the Triennial in 1954, had seen the point of grafting art into design, and the place of verification of its aesthetic and social function, not in the appearance of the product but in the process [5, 21] [6, 32]. As clearly emerges from this quote taken from *25 ways to hammer a nail. Sixty years of ideas and projects to defend* (2011), according to Enzo Mari, separate clearly the project from the training process is, for a designer, almost impossible [7]. Mari here implicitly takes the distance from the Cross: the project cannot be reduced to a mental ideation which would follow a concrete realization since it immediately implies a doing, a material *poiein*, that can from time to time, remodulate or adjust the initial intuition, the imaginative momentum that animates the designer. A momentum never abstract but always rooted in a space-temporally determined situation.

It is therefore no coincidence that Mari uses the verb “to design” instead of the noun “project”. Designing is an activity that comes from practice and returns to practice. It is a matter of thinking differently and at a time of transforming the space-environment in which man desires to live better and better; the satisfaction of need is part of a perspective not so much of survival, as of good life, of a qualitative well-being understood as full realization of the possibilities inherent in human nature, in a virtuous relationship with other natural beings. Design thus corresponds to a “deep human drive”, a drive inherent in him. The project becomes a sort of all-encompassing idea of many aspects of the designer’s work, which finds its unity in the original tension (“drive”) of man, in some respects ideal and utopian, towards the improvement of living conditions.

We can now understand why Mari insists so much on the example of the bridge; an example of “product” not only emblematic but also highly symbolic. The bridge is a

¹ Enzo Mari writes in the footnote: “These words by Ernesto N. Rogers can be found in the article *Reconstruction: From the object of use to the house*, in ‘Domus’, Milan, n. 215, November 1946. The date is significant: the war is just over, Europe needs to be rebuilt. In those years (but still today) the phrase assumed the value of manifesto”.

technical invention that arises from the profound need to relate, to mediate; it is not only a matter of making near what is far, but also and above all of making accessible what seems unreachable. The bridge is ultimately the very image of the instrument whose use allows us to realize a possibility of our being in the world, starting from a perceived urgency [4, 6, 7].

The concept of use introduced by Mari, here and in other texts, is of extraordinary relevance: it is a way of “acting”, of making use of the design object freeing a way of its agency; open to new practices, new habits, new ways of living our space-environment, our world. The use of the instrument is therefore not limited to satisfying a need; At stake is the improvement of life, a natural tension that leads us to find “other solutions” to the needs that life imposes on us, even using the same objects differently.

Using an object more than once means therefore not only to repeat a certain way of acting made possible by the object itself, but also to discover new ways of acting and in general to act in situation; ways inscribed in the object, particularly in its form, at the potential level. The more the object carries within itself a power of action the more it can give rise to a plurality of uses and practices that go to transform our space-environment.

With Mari we should think about the use as the activation of an action power; action that must be understood both in relational terms (as interaction between subject, object and environment) and in formative terms (as training). Planning must therefore include a multiplicity of possible uses, that is, interactive and educational processes. In this sense, design becomes a set of material and operational processes, which must open to an indefinite multiplicity of strategies and practices of life. To use a phenomenological expression, the space-environment that Mari has in mind is a “world of life” (*Lebenswelt*) that is based on doing, on an interactive, formative and transformative action. As we said above, the same aesthetic experience is conceived, on the basis of the *Gestalt* psychology and of *phenomenology*, as a forming and relational activity.

Therefore, if consumerist capitalism is based on instrumentalization, reification, objectification, it is precisely on the “being-instrument” of the instrument that we must reflect. Countering alienation, fighting it, does not mean denying the object-tool produced in series, nor returning to the object-tool produced by hand, as something that fits only one person (such as the hammer and sickle). Countering alienation means, instead, rethinking being the instrument of the object, in poetic terms, of process, of operational training, of intersubjective universality, of plurivocità of use, understood as action, oriented and solicited by the object itself. The design object must not be unique but plural. The object has an orientation role; It is a necessary medium through which human nature is realized as essentially interactive.

Design does not tend to humanize the machine, but tends to make the object a fundamentally “ambiguous” tool. The ambiguity of the sensitive-perceptive experience of the object is related to the semantic-praxic ambiguity; the aesthetics of the object coincides with this “ambiguity”. In front of a design object we can also feel lost and disoriented; we do not know how to use it because it causes us to go beyond a routine and repetitive use. It is not a matter of using it in the sense of reiterating a determined, univocal action, in the sense of repeating it in an always equal or unique way in the sense that the action exhausts or cancels the object. The object then escapes us, forcing us to reset a sequence of movements, to assume different body structures. Think of the series

of photographs that depict different ways of using the same chair. The design object that Mari has in mind provokes us in its essentiality, in its being potentially usable and reusable in many ways.

1.2 Design and The Poetics Of Everyday Life

The question of use must therefore be inserted into a poetic, that is, the study of a series of operational strategies through which the form is concretized, without ever closing. The aim is to produce an object that, once used, can keep alive the training activity, opening to a multiplicity of practices. If the object-product opens an infinite number of possible uses, this means that it escapes any unique or unique grip. The grip cannot be reduced to a mere objectification, expression of a will of control, and of domination strictly linked to alienation. Discarding things, in the sense of disposable, is the reduction of man and objects to a single meaning, indefinite the negation of the symbolic sphere. Use is not consumption, in the sense of exhaustion of an object to a single meaning.

This means that the experience of the object within a daily context of life, or its fruition, cannot fail to take into account the poetics, we could say “the daily” that is, the training process to which the aesthetic and social quality of the product is closely linked. A product becomes a real object of experience, more or less pleasant, only if it is traced back to the relational and formative actions of producing, ultimately to its process. This is why Mari brings the consumer into the process, makes it active, as active is the object itself, because it is form in formation (as *Gestaltung*) [8].

“What is meant by ‘poetic’?” asks Echo in *The Open Work*.

“The line that goes from the Russian formalists to the current descendants of the Prague structuralists means by ‘poetics’ the study of the linguistic structures of a literary work. Valéry in the *Première Leçon du Cours de Poétique*, broadening the meaning of the term to all artistic genres, spoke of a study of artistic making, that *poiein* ‘qui s’achève en quelque oeuvre’, ‘l’action qui fait’, the modalities of that ‘act of production’ which aims to constitute an object with a view to an ‘act of consumption’. We mean ‘poetic’ in a sense more tied to the classical meaning: not as a system of constrictive rules (the *Ars Poetica* as absolute norm), but as the operating program that the artist proposes time and time again, the work project to make itself as the artist explicitly or implicitly intends it. Explicitly or implicitly: in fact a research on poetics (and a stria of poetics) is based both on the statements expressed by the artists (an example: The *Art poétique* of Verlaine or the preface to Pierre et Jean Maupassant), both an analysis of the structures of the work, so that, from the work in which it is made you can deduce how it wanted to be made” [2, 17–18].

In defining about the role that the operating process has within art, both Luciano Anceschi and Umberto Eco see in Paul Valéry an essential point of reference. In spite of the explicit openness towards architecture and design, Eco, like Anceschi, prefers to focus mainly on the analysis of the operating practices of the arts of language and on the theories of the artists closely tied to their practices. This does not contribute to a full fulfillment of Valéry’s poetics (or “poietics”), who thought rather of a poetic “extended” to all the arts, and not “restricted” to some of them. An enlargement to design, for example, would have made it possible to introduce key concepts such as the importance of the body, the environmental and the collective (and not only intersubjective) dimension. Consequent

would have been the putting in crisis of that “intentionality” of the subject-author of which the poetics would have to characterize the traces inside of the work.

In Mari’s poetics, for example, it is difficult to identify a single subject as the author of the production process, since the industrial dimension implies the intervention of several subjects at multiple levels of production, which cannot be considered “mere performers” of a project idea, already defined and therefore “closed”. Likewise, the fruition cannot be exclusively traced back to the experience of the significant and expressive intentionality of the producing subject. Plurality within production is closely linked to a plurality at the level of fruition, in this case not only aesthetic, semantic-praxic, but also social, in terms of community involved. Design instead, and for this reason it is utopian and unrealistic, would like to shorten the distances and change the generalized taste, the common sense, identifying archetypes and original gestures, even if the risk is to be initially understood only by a very small elite.

Finally, to be put out of play is the centrality of the subject itself. The poetics outlined by Mari wants to rethink the relationship between man and nature, beyond any anthropocentrism. The “methodology according to nature” that he has in mind sees in the laws of formation of nature the very norms of the productive process. Decisive will then be the use of the term-biological concept of “homeostasis”, which represents a precarious balance of the natural form. The example made by Mari both in *Funzione della ricerca estetica* (1970) and in *Progetto e passione* (2001), becomes here the metaphorical image of the design product whose internal structure (modularity) responds to external stresses “disturbing” and tends to transform while maintaining some constant characteristics.

The search for the original module of the “archimodulus” is very similar to the search for a “Ur-form” understood as a form in formation whose structure and whose autonomy is continually tested, adjusted, until finding a relative stability, a fragile equilibrium, always on the point of breaking; As a basic form, the search for the design “Ur-object” coincides with that of the “Ur-form”. The composition of the form, conceived as a natural form, endowed with its own energy, with its own forming force that is realized according to some recognizable “directives”, has a semantic and praxic scope in the name of the unity of a plurality of significant actions.

“One of the phenomena that we most easily and frequently perceive visually, in the natural landscape that surrounds us, is the disintegration of the variously related modular structures that define it. By force of gravity, this disintegration is resolved in the fall of the modular components and in their restructuring according to the possibilities of aggregation of the initial modules and the new equilibrium conditions. This phenomenon is so widespread that it ends up conditioning, to a large extent, the image we have of the natural landscape (so much to determine the common sense that we attribute to the expression ‘with naturalness’) and consequently to condition our way of perceiving the arrangement of the artificial forms of a ‘work’ of art. [...] Thus the natural modules (e.g. collapsed rocks) precipitate and reorganize conditioned by their modularity (e.g. tendency to split along stratification lines), gravity and the need to adapt to other environmental structures (e.g. wooded area). To verify and demonstrate these phenomena were made models in which modular elements, by self-timing each time by gravity, always determine an optimal image and therefore significant for this aesthetic hypothesis” [9, 39–41].

The object is given to use by changing, adjusting, and at the same time forming a certain way of use action, according to a law that is its own and that is traced gradually during the process, which continues in the grip, by the consumer or user. Its ability to “settle”, to find from time to time a homeostasis, makes the object available to multiple outlets, to multiple actions that require it to be accomplished, to become significant.

The “Ur-object” that Mari has in mind lends itself to use but is not fulfilled in it, since it opens to an indefinite series of uses and thus does not end in a single outlet. The object in which grip and action coincide is a dematerialized object, with a rigid shape, with a unique meaning. The object is disposable. Consumption ceases to be a process and becomes a mechanical and stereotyped action that does not require any reciprocal adjustment, either by the object or by man. In this way his being medium is erased in the illusion of a direct relationship with the world. What seems decisive is the structural homology between the natural form and the shape of the object-product of design. This means that production, even in its industrial aspect, follows a *nomos*, a formative law, that of nature. Beyond any opposition between nature and technique, paradoxically in the experience of the industrial object that man can find his original belonging to a *natura naturans* as a productive and formative act, inseparable from *natura naturata*, as plurality and variety of products.

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