

ARMANDO TESTA

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Back in 1937 Armando Testa produced a poster for *ICI*, Industria Colori Inchiostri (Colors and Printing Inks Industry) of Milan. It was the era of the art gallery Il Milione, of Veronesi, of the discovery of Bauhaus abstraction and the time of reaction, on the part of the very few, to the work of Sironi, to the official culture of Fascism which had in Sironi a talented and accurate interpreter, but which also had an indecent group of revolting followers. However Testa was different; he aimed at a language he would share with Soldati, though with links to Klee and a few others. If we take a look at the Carpano poster of 1949 we find the playing card gambit and subtle references to artistic cultures which evoke the primitives, Malevich, Goncharova and so many others from around the early part of the century. Here too are references to the young Kandinsky, but also to Testa's relationship to illustration and especially to Rubino, a relationship which has to be stressed since without it the ironic key that animates most of Testa's work could never be understood. Testa, however, possesses the sensitivity of a member of the avant-garde, as witness two of his 1954 productions, the *Pirelli Elephant* and *Borsalino*. With the former, the cultural context is clearly that of Cassandre, the very great poster-maker who taught an entire generation of poster artists in France, but one senses therein, too, the influences of Lupot and of the Italian Sepo, who spent twenty-five years in Paris. But Testa wanted at the same time to construct a new discourse in which the dialogue with the viewer would become instantaneous thanks to a metaphor that might even be violent: thus *Pirelli Tires*, as strong and everlasting as an elephant...which, however, reminds us, too, that there is a new component – Magrittean, I shall call it – which is also the backbone of many other posters by Testa. And we can prove this immediately. The *Borsalino* poster seems to me an obvious homage to Magritte. The large hat at the top is, I believe, a reference by analogy to "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" ("This is not a pipe") and all the similar pictures by the French influenced Belgian painter which proclaim an image but explain that the word is not the image: irony here lurks in the lettering and, of course, in the little fellow who so graphically disappears beneath the enormous hat which reduplicates the one that he, in halftone, is putting on. By ironic lettering I mean, specifically, the "English" cursive, or Spenserian hand, understood as an imposing signature. But Testa has the ability to invent new spaces through the medium of the poster, as when, in 1959, he deliberately paid homage to Sironi in his Olympic Games billboard. On inspecting this most remarkable item closely, however, we find within it reminders of Sironi, to be sure, but also of Alberto Martini – a great deal, I repeat, of Martini – and then, too, of Giacometti, especially in the choices of plastic-pictorial grain and in the absolute forms, which are, more than anyone else's, Henry Moore's. Testa's knowing how to fuse the new verbal languages to make a poster seems to

me one of the most important aspects of his work. What can one say about *Punt e Mes* that hasn't already been said? To have successfully launched a poster of such pure and perfect absoluteness in 1960, when the informal was all the rage, was an incredible achievement, one that can only be explained in the context of Italian culture's particular attention to design, a cause which, as many people know, then had, in Nizzoli, a very great leader, a figure who made it possible for some creative people to impose on their work a degree of linguistic elaboration that would otherwise have been unthinkable. But Testa's exploration isn't limited to lavishing attention on neocubist abstraction; it is much more complex. Another of his posters, the one for the *Digestivo Antonetto*, strikes me as particularly effective, obviously referring back to Jean Arp and through him to certain paper cut-outs by Matisse – the final, glorious, most exalted Matisse. Knowing how to appropriate for his own use the highest achievements of avant-gardes or individual artists and how to integrate the latest novelties of painting into a discourse on posters – these are constantly factors in determining Testa's choices. Not a small thing, then. And not a small thing when he invented a narration, that of *Café Paulista*, which taught many people to smile by means of the *Carosello* (a now-discontinued skit on Italian public television), and which taught a manner of narrating by inventing "constructivist" puppets through complex methods which will one day have to be carefully analyzed. But the stories of these "Caroselli", like those of other characters such as Pippo, the hippopotamus which has enchanted millions of Italian children, are only one side of Testa's continuous search, which, within just a few years, shifted direction markedly. One thinks of *Stilla*, an incredible poster which, solely for the sake of being new, incorporated surrealism and at the same time a certain hyperrealistic style of painting – or at least a certain English pop art then in vogue. Testa, however, remained in his search tied to a dominant neocubist language, and being inside this language enabled him to make highly auspicious returns to it, as in the poster, done in 1969 but published in 1972 for *Plast*, while the poster for the *Concorso Ippico*, 1968 (Horse Show) recalls abstract origins dating from the late nineteen-thirties. In that same year of 1968, or, more precisely, at the beginning of that year, Testa's researches on Magritte, which went back to the time of Borsalino, became at once more precise and more suggestive: stories of fingers aflame, fingers being born of other fingers, of phallic fingers emerging from the water and so on. Meanwhile, the forays in pop art, which interested Testa for its links with advertising, became ironic and critical, as in the prosciutto-upholstered armchair of 1978 or the table covered with mortadella with women's shoes to one side (1980). But let us turn to the most recent posters, to the one for *Amnesty International* (1979), in which the cut-out figure seems to belong to the time of Antonetto, or to the *Kafka* poster, which, by contrast, is allied to expressionism and dates from 1983. A couple of years saw Testa's poster work further transformed: *Pecunia* and *Magia*, the posters for *Humor Graphic*, were both conceived on the same plan: a form like a shadow and a detail (a hand, teeth) clear and also in the negative, acquiring, thereby, great prominence. These items were done, respectively, in 1983 and 1984. If, however, we move on to the *Expo Arte* poster (1980), we begin to find the same graphic symbol, à la Kline, noted before. Again for *Spoleto '84* we see a figure suggested by a pair of broad-brush intersecting slashes.

Thus we begin to understand something about Testa and why he paints: not just to be an "artist" but to express what has never been expressed, perhaps not even to himself. There are those who speak and those who paint and, for some, to paint is also to speak.