

6. Do Everything, Do It Artfully

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6.1 Designing Works, Sculpting Spaces, Suggesting Trajectories

If there is an evidently exceptional trait that unites the most significant creatives on the Italian scene over the last hundred years, it is that they were often transdisciplinary authors, active along trajectories that are hard to map, following lines of action that were always displacing and surprising. Outliers able to move among multiple professional domains, shifting with ease from architecture to design, from exhibition-making to stage design, from graphics to fashion, from painting to sculpture to photography, pushing into editorial and outreach work, into curating, criticism, and teaching.

Figures for this very reason hard to classify, proudly eccentric and consistently off-key: such as Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero, Gio Ponti and Marcello Nizzoli, Carlo Mollino and Bruno Munari, Ettore Sottsass and Angelo Mangiarotti, A G Fronzoni and Giancarlo Iliprandi, Leonardo Mosso and Roberto Sambonet, Enzo Mari and Alessandro

Mellini, Nanda Vigo and Getulio Alviani, and many more besides. And like Alberto Seassaro, an architect and artist whom, at our latitudes and among the pages of this book, we remember above all for the seminal, foundational, and immense work carried out to establish the School of Design at Politecnico di Milano.

For after an effervescent start between the visual arts and architecture, sustained by an explosive energy that fueled an indomitable action, Alberto Seassaro would increasingly turn his gaze (scientifically open, sensitively curious) toward the world of university education.

Having also lived, with totalizing involvement, through the season of the 1968 protests, and perhaps realizing that the political *commitment* breathed in assemblies and occupied classrooms could no longer go arm in arm with the world of galleries, nor with house projects for a bourgeois clientele, he would first abandon the art world and, over time, also that of architecture and interior architecture (domains in which he had achieved some striking, highly original firsts, always coherent with one another despite the differing disciplinary specificities of the visual arts and furnishing) to focus exclusively on teaching. In that world he immersed himself entirely, to the point of coming to dream, design, and then build a new School, the Faculty of Design precisely, which for twenty-five years now has been a cornerstone, internationally, of university education: an absolute project, one that none of the great protagonists who moved between university teaching and the world of Italian design (from Zanuso to the Castiglioni brothers, to recall a few giants who brought their indisputable charisma and talent into the classrooms at Politecnico di Milano) had previously managed to achieve, but which Seassaro succeeded in making concrete through a veritable *mission* that, day after day, found room and hearing, support and collaboration.

Probably because Alberto Seassaro experienced the foundation of the School of Design as *the* project par excellence to which he would devote himself, evidently, for him, a *life project*, following the path (before him) of other transversal authors, professionals of creativity who, at a certain point in their careers and personal histories, felt the need to commit themselves above all to teaching, to education and training: like A G Fronzoni, a master of communication who, while setting records in graphics, never ceased to teach also through his original

formula of a *workshop-school*, where he raised more than one generation of *progettatori* [designers]; or earlier still Bruno Munari, who at a certain point in his path (as artist, graphic designer, illustrator, and designer) stepped away from the design of *things* to arrive at the design of *people*; or Tomás Maldonado himself, already an artist and designer but above all a protagonist of design culture, through the theorization of that *projectual hope* (Maldonado, 1970) which he proposed in his teaching at the Faculty of Architecture in Milan, in his Chair of *Progettazione Ambientale* [Environmental Design], where he filtered the legacy of his years as lecturer and later rector at the *Hochschule für Gestaltung* in Ulm.

An evolution that enabled Seassaro to imagine, outline, and promote an educational path capable of avoiding «rigid models and instead fostering the growth of designers able to adapt to the great diversity of the contemporary world» (Branzi, 2020). He did so by mixing disciplines, as he had already done in his years of training and at the start of his professional activity, and then throughout his life, uniting architecture and science with the visual arts, and weaving and sustaining everything with a consolidated humanistic knowledge: for

there are some architects who act as builders, others as urbanists, others as technologists, as compositional designers, theorists (few), historians; those who do everything and the opposite of everything, or, as Malaparte said, are *good-for-nothings capable of everything*. There are designers, interior decorators, exhibition designers, window dressers, and then those who devote themselves to teaching. (Branzi, 2020)

Evidently, founding a *school* was for Seassaro the most important professional adventure, the one to which he devoted the season of his maturity. And among the fundamental things to recall, further, and from this perspective, there is also the foundation of INDACO, a name (beautiful! the name of a color, between blue and violet) cast as an acronym for a new institute, the *Dipartimento di Industrial Design, Arti e Comunicazione* [Department of Industrial Design, Arts and Communication], to underscore yet again, and through a precise denomination, an opening to different yet complementary worlds, necessary to one

another: yes, a transdisciplinary department by denomination! But beyond the project of the Faculty of Design, it is worth recalling that Alberto Seassaro, trained as an architect, initially undertook – as a very young man – a path that led him to work as a true artist (a 1968 biography read: «Since 1963 he has researched and worked jointly in the fields of the Visual Arts and Architecture»).

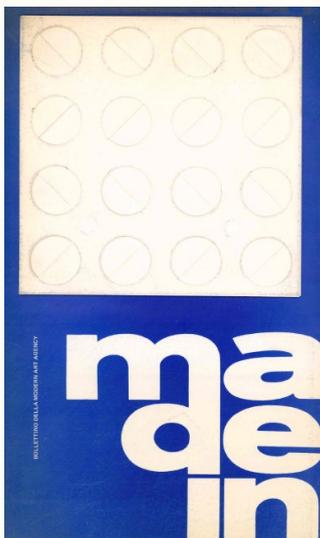
And today, on the occasion of this important publication, the research he had begun to present when he was barely over twenty, in the early 1960s, and then distilled and elaborated with scientific imagination for a little over a lustrum, up to 1968-1969, an epochal moment when everything was being called into question (with young people around the world taking to the streets to say *NO*), resurfaces; a two-year stretch during which his activity as a *pure* artist reached evidently original results, obtaining significant recognitions: an honorable mention at the *Prima Rassegna Internazionale d'Arte Contemporanea d'Avanguardia – Premio Piero Manzoni* [First International Review of Avant-Garde Contemporary Art – Piero Manzoni Prize]; participation in one of the legendary meetings of the *Centro Pio Manzù* (the *17° Convegno Internazionale Artisti Critici Studiosi d'Arte* [17th International Conference of Artists Critics Scholars of Art], where he stood alongside, among others, Enrico Castellani and Gianni Colombo); a work donated to the *Comitato per la promozione dell'attività antimilitarista e per l'obiezione di coscienza* [Committee for the promotion of anti-militarist activity and conscientious objection] and acquired by Count Alberico Barbiano di Belgiojoso [↗](#); and a critical presentation by Gillo Dorfles in *Made In*, the bulletin of the Modern Art Agency in the orbit of the great gallerist Lucio Amelio.



1. Invito alla mostra del Comitato per la promozione dell'attività antimilitarista e l'obiezione di coscienza, Libreria Feltrinelli Milano. [Document →](#)

Above all, he came to elaborate and propose his most erudite and in some respects enigmatic works: the *Morfemi* [Morphemes], works that occupy an eccentric position within the *system of the arts* and that demonstrate the extreme originality of his *poli-tecnico* [poly-technical] thinking, presenting themselves somewhere between works of art and meta-projects, *morphological spatial models, born of an urban-design research begun in 1966*, modules and elements of ideal constructions that seem to draw lifeblood from certain architectural reflections by Enrico Prampolini and from certain abstract drawings by Bruno Munari of the mid-1930s (such as the paintings in the series

2. *Made In*. Bollettino della Modern Art Agency, gennaio-febbraio 1969. [Document](#) →



3. Manifesto della mostra *Alberto Seassaro*. Presentato da Gillo Dorfles alla Modern Art Agency. [Document](#) →



Anche la cornice [Even the Frame]), and that, in filigree, retain traces of one of his important mentors, Ettore Sottsass (those sketches for rugs for Redan in the early 1950s, later exploding three-dimensionally ten years on in the tower cabinet for *Casa Tchou*, siblings of those that invaded the atrium of the XII Triennale di Milano in 1960) [2](#) [3](#).

Morfemi as works in the form of sculptures that nonetheless seem like models of architectures. It is Seassaro himself who, writing a highly learned presentation in a scientific tone, speaks of «the relationship between the structural model and the model-object, the one as an instrument for knowing the structure of real phenomena, the other expressing itself and its relationship with reality» (Seassaro, 1968). He underscores and clarifies that he intends

to allow the viewer to carry out the greatest possible number of *interpretations*, leaving free to perceive the semantic area of the *model as object* and to undergo its pragmatic effects, enabling an original, conscious or unconscious, construction of the decoding code. It is like assigning to the model a semantic code in which all valences are free and saturable with any value: that is, a code *open* to all meanings. (Seassaro, 1968)

And here, with the choice of the term *aperto* [open] (highlighted by quotation marks), it is inevitable and perhaps dutiful to connect these *Morfemi* to the climate (and perhaps also the concepts) of *Opera aperta* [Open Work] (Eco, 1962), which a few years earlier Umberto Eco had theorized in his celebrated essay, a text that would accompany (and legitimize) much of the artistic research of those years [4](#). The great Gillo Dorfles, always attentive to new experimentations and ever generous in supporting the work of young artists, introduced Seassaro's research starting precisely from the chosen title:

If – as is known – the morpheme is *the smallest significant unit of a linguistic complex*, and thus the matrix of every

conceptual value in a language, it will be easy to understand why Seassaro baptized – not only metaphorically – some of his plastic-architectural constructions with this term. (Dorfles, 1969)

Thus, from the very first words, he declared how these models were simultaneously sculptural and architectural. Yet he did not avoid questioning the essence of those very objects, presented as «models, in the sense usually given to this term; that is, of constructive schemes at reduced scale? Or rather as works in their own right whose plastic-architectural value suffices to justify their presence?» (Dorfles, 1969).

To respond, to understand, and to propose the most logical and honest reading of these works, Dorfles does not digress; on the contrary, he goes in depth, analyzing and further unpick-

ing the author's statements, who «confesses that (for example) the fine-tuning of his morphemes is subject to all those norms – to those precautions – to which customary architectural design is subject (design drawing and execution drawing, study of the plan, of the single modular elements, etc.)» (Dorfles, 1969).

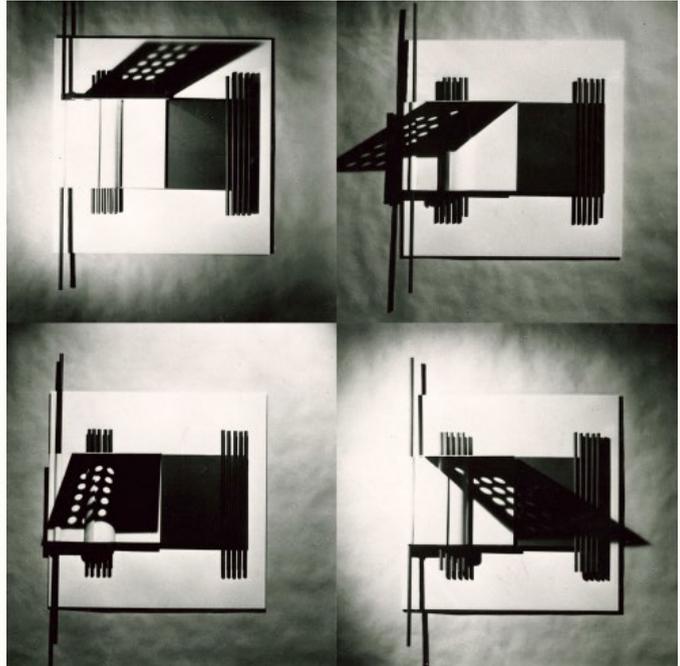
Thus he underscores how, in design and realization terms, these works are ascribable to the world of architecture.

Certainly, adds Dorfles,

the fact of being presented in an art gallery sanctions – and justifies, in a certain sense – the fact that these models may be understood as *art objects*, like the many multiples currently on the market: objects executed with modern materials (plexiglass,



4. Alberto Seassaro,
Morfema n. 467.
[Document →](#)



plastics of various kinds, etc.) according to methods amenable to an industrialization process. (Dorfles, 1969)

because although

some of these objects are *unique pieces* still relying on artisanal manufacture, this does not alter the fact that their nature fully corresponds to the characteristics of industrial-type production. Such is in fact the material used; such the type of color (decidedly devoid of any *painterly* note and of any tonal indulgence); such the very composition of the individual constituent parts, almost always elementary in their stereometric configuration and, usually, rigidly symmetrical. (Dorfles, 1969)

Therefore, while reading these works as plastic models, as possible sculptural reflections, Dorfles stresses in multiple passages that their primary horizon of reference must be sought in architecture and in design (industrial design as well). He even goes so far as to envisage, and to hope, that these works by Seassaro might become, in art and architecture schools (*so lacking!*),

most useful testimonies of how one may stimulate and increase the sense of form and of the form-structure relationship even through operations limited in size and in the use of materials; and how from the *semantics of the model* here proposed and employed, one may readily arrive at a veritable *architectural semantics, or semantics of the surrounding environment*. (Dorfles, 1969)

For, according to Dorfles,

this is perhaps the chief merit of these *morphemes*: of presenting themselves as *praeceptors* of a complex and broad operation – not merely morphemic but syntagmatic – which, after availing itself of the *metalanguage* of which these models are repositories, may lead to a global linguistic operation within the universe of the architectural discourse. (Dorfles, 1969)

Yes, it is moving to think that the far-sighted Dorflies had also discerned in those works a *didactic* potential, knowing, as we do today, the path that would lead, 30 years later, to Alberto Seassaro's founding a School of Design (and where, according to Dorflies, these *Morfemi* could have become *most useful testimonies!*). Objectively intriguing works, never banal, which also prompted a free experimenter like Ettore Sottsass to question them; in presenting the exhibition at Studio 2B he grasped the value of the research (scientific as well):

It seems to me that these white and red *things* by Seassaro are the results or perhaps only the visible and tangible moments of passage and pause of a work of *research* (as we say today), and therefore – these things – can only be placed in the category of *research* and in none of the traditional categories by which things are placed in order to get rid of them. It is no good to say they are sculptures, and it is no good to say they are architectures [...]: they are what remains clinging along the banks of research. Which, then, is a special way of facing art or architecture or these stories, meaning that one approaches art through processes and methods that should resemble or be those of science... (Sottsass, 1968)

He also underscored their formal value:

In my studio, leaning against a wall, there are these white and red plastic things made by Seassaro who has set out to search, for himself but also for others, for elementary models, for elementary groupings of simple forms, for trials of meetings and joints of rough elements with perforated elements, of tubes with surfaces, of figures with artifacts, of channels of light with reflections and so on and so forth, all these things one does to understand better what the nature of the world of forms is... 5v (Sottsass, 1968)

Morfemi thus as models of possible (highly elegant) architectures, and plastic suggestions that probe the primacy of geometry, accelerating it through plays of solids and voids, negatives and positives, emergences and slippages, in a continuous ricochet of chiaroscuro.

5. Seassaro. *I Morfemi*.
Presentati da Ettore
Sottsass Jr.
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Works which, reread today, offer further cues for reflection. The zenithal photographs, with sharp shadows that add graphic signs to the elements of the model, seem to hark back

to the abstract paintings of Bice Lazzari, a luminous author fully rediscovered only in recent years. Works which, looked at again in their rhythmic composition, seem to converse with certain carpet designs by the legendary Eileen Gray, where graphic signs and the use of color become the foundations of a truly original moment in the history of 20th century applied arts. Works that evidently probe the meaning of forms, and that hark back to a season when great sculpture explored freely, without

ambitions to stand on museum pedestals, as evidenced by certain hard-to-classify works by singular artists such as Katarzyna Kobro, Georges Vantongerloo, and Naum Gabo. Something the author had shown – and would show again (and bring to the surface) in several projects of those same years, between architecture, interior architecture, and design, reaching further significant milestones, often in tandem with another designer who is hard to pigeonhole, Ugo La Pietra. As in the *MIA 2* project, developed with Benedetto Resio and Ugo La Pietra for the I.S.E.S. (*Istituto per lo Sviluppo dell'Edilizia Sociale* [Institute for the Development of Social Housing]) Competition in 1965: an urban and morphological research, a proposal of terraced buildings where modularity rhymes with economy, for a residential-housing solution that seems able to converse with the project *Libertà nell'ordine* [Freedom in Order], elaborated as *a research on prefabrication and programmed art* by Bruno Morassutti and Enzo Mari for the *Primo Concorso In/Arch Domatic* [First In/Arch Domatic Competition] (1965).

As in a small urban intervention, the *Fontana a Caiazzo* [Fountain at Caiazzo] (Caserta, 1966-1969, with Ugo La Pietra), an austere construction realized through the multiplication of a single type of prefabricated modular element (cups for cladding pillars in silicalcite) superposed in steps, with an overall profile that seems an homage to Getulio Alviani's *Cromostruttura speculare a elementi quadri* [Specular Chromostructure with Square Elements] (1964), yet configured by the two designers not like a chilly Donald Judd, but rather like a brutalist Vittorio Viganò!

As in two art galleries, again designed with partner La Pietra: the // *Cenobio* gallery (Milan, 1966), *a large unitary object* with walls, floor, and ceiling clad in aluminum sheet, a space with an industrial, almost high-tech flavor, where «the corrugation of the sheet, which perspectively deepens distances and multiplies and diffuses reflections, turns the wall into a sort of continuous luminous surface that evenly floods the whole space with light» (*Domus*, 1967) [6](#); and the private *Walter Spaggiari* gallery (Milan, 1965-1966) [7](#), once again a design of evident character, with a well-defined program – «a gallery for viewing works of art; a large *cage* to contain a store of works; a space for being» (La Pietra, 2000) – and articulated into two distinct zones: an upper one for the storage of works of art (realized with rotating and sliding vertical panels in perforated sheet metal), and the lower one where selected works were displayed to be admired in a setting ideal for conversation, with seats, support surfaces, and storage units designed using the «same unified base element» (*Domus*, 1968) – cubic – which would also distinguish certain private houses [8](#).

As in *Rizzi* house (Camogli, 1967, with La Pietra) [9](#), characterized by furnishing elements integrated into horizontal and vertical structures that seemed to seek an ideal dialogue with the works of Julio Le Parc, the very ones that Nanda Vigo would integrate in those same years into the celebrated *Casa Meneguzzo* (Malo, 1966-1969); a signature detail found again, with further and exceptional elaboration, in *Casa Paola Seassaro* (Milan, 1968) [10](#), where he set forth a proposal «among the newest and most promising of today's young architects» (*Abitare*, 1968) [11](#). Once again the ensemble conversed ideally



6. Ugo La Pietra, Alberto Seassaro, *Il Cenobio*. *Domus*, n. 451. [Document →](#)



7. Ugo La Pietra, Alberto Seassaro, *Galleria d'arte privata Walter Spaggiari*, Milano [Document →](#)



8. Ugo La Pietra e Alberto Seassaro, *Galleria privata Walter Spaggiari*, in *Domus*, n. 465. [Document →](#)



9. Alberto Seassaro, *Casa Rizzi a Camogli*, in *Interiors '70*. [Document →](#)



10. Alberto Seassaro, *Spazio abitativo a Milano*, in *Interiors '70*. [Document →](#)



11. Alberto Seassaro. *Progetto di interno domestico*. In *Abitare*, n. 71. [Document →](#)

12. Alberto Seassaro,
Addition, Tavolo
attrezzato componibile,
Acerbis.
[Document →](#)



with coeval art, in that case, Jesús Rafael Soto's *Sotomagie*, which the Venezuelan master would later develop as *penetrable* environments. And as in certain furnishing systems, such as the table *Addition* [12](#) and the desk *Leader* (Acerbis, 1969), where the various possible combinations of the upper elements, trays or lids, seem like a further reference and declination of the models presented at Studio 2B and recalled at length here.

After those artistic milestones, which still captivate today for elegance and enigmatic charge, and those projects between interior architecture and design, original as only rarely happens, in the years that followed Seassaro's artistic and design engagement, as noted, began to wane, and his vision and energy shifted and settled entirely on teaching. Not solely on the totalizing definition of an entire degree program in design, but in his own courses, in his own syllabi, for his own students, for whom he did not forget his *scientific* reflections of previous lustrums, accelerating them, however, thanks to the open eyes that art, practiced first-hand, had left him.

Therefore, while another transdisciplinary master – Corrado Levi, his dear friend and colleague – had students work on the *compresenza di diverse logiche progettuali* [co-presence of different design logics], Alberto Seassaro proposed to his *disciples* that they design a *kaleidoscope*: yes, precisely the «device made with two or more little mirrors arranged at an angle inside a tube, where small colored objects are placed at random; the multiple reflections form often symmetrical images that change in an unpredictable and highly variable way at each movement» (Devoto, 1967-1968). A description that seems like the caption to certain works of art from those same years, between the 1960s and the 1970s, in the orbits of Yaacov Agam, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Joël Stein, and of our own Giovanni Anceschi, Davide Boriani, and Gabriele Devecchi.

An invitation to design such an exceptional, surprising object, one that demands interaction, captivated the enthusiastic students, finally invited to dream and to propose visions. As Paolo Tinelli recalls,

the kaleidoscope was for Seassaro a machine for manipulating light. Not a machine for producing light but for shaping it. Something never heard before [...]. Yet an extraordinary object for the didactics

of design, capable of spanning multiple topics and, if properly understood, of granting notable openings of mind. A *tiny object* as simple as it is complex that immediately allowed the soul and personality of the one designing it to emerge. (Tinelli, 2024)

An object that produces intriguing, astonishing images which may recall the paintings of the 2000s by Maldonado (in the period of his return to painting, such as *Centrifugo-centripeto* [Centrifugal-centripetal], 2008) and certain *rotations* from the 1970s by the inimitable Max Bill. An object which, when broken down into parts, seems to allude (yet again by elective affinity) to the *Lampada triangolare a schermi colorati intercambiabili* [Triangular lamp with interchangeable colored screens] that Poggi produced in 1966-1967 to a design by the ever-present La Pietra.

A design theme as a spur to research on color, form, and light, after Seassaro's many trials on these subjects in other professional domains, and perfectly consistent with another of the important *openings* that he would later bring into the university: the launch of the *Corso di perfezionamento in Progettazione illuminotecnica* [Advanced Course in Lighting Design] (1985), which over the years would become a *Master in Progettazione e Tecnologie della Luce* [Master's in Lighting Design and Technologies] to continue reflecting and reasoning on this perennial topic, and which would also lead to the *Laboratorio Strumentale di Luce & Colore* [Light & Color Instrumental Laboratory]. Names of educational and academic opportunities that seem like scientific contexts for defining the frame of reference of some great artists who helped renew the language of contemporary art, like the many already cited and like Bruce Nauman and Olafur Eliasson, true masters who, precisely with light, created works essential to the culture of the visual arts.

Thus, through a series of continual ricochets, from art practiced in person to architecture and design, and then stabilizing his commitment in teaching (where he never failed to bring the openness of his gaze, formed and nourished in the years lived as an artist), Seassaro never forgot his first trials with light, forms, and color, the founding elements of every work of art, which he introduced programmatically into the university world of design, to the point of turning them into domains of study and research, fully aware (from the vantage point of his

personal experience) that it is often art that points ahead to where one should go: «I do not quite know how it happened, but it has always been art, first, to change our way of thinking, of seeing, of feeling, even before, sometimes a hundred years before, one managed to understand what was needed» (Eco, 1962).

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