Communication Design.
The Basis of Every Identity is Made up of Letters

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Communication Design, a title that when read carefully may appear a contradiction in terms; we can unequivocally interpret design as a unilateral and arbitrary gesture, rarely objective, if not in the intentions of those who devote themselves to the design of systems (but even in that case, objectivity is all to be verified), an act that is often authorial, apodictic, affirmative, bearer of discrimination and not easily capable of gathering unanimous approval, except in cases where history or criticism have brought attention to the most recognized authors. If we speak instead of communication, we are speaking of the dialogic process par excellence: there must be a sender and a receiver, as well as a common acceptance of that pact by which the information transmitted is equally important for both parties involved. Therefore, what possible conciliation of such an opposition [can be introduced] as the basis of our brief discussion?

We start by noting that the Italian phrase "*disegno della comunicazione*" is semantically more valid than a possible usage of the more widely adopted English expression "communication design." For one thing, as Vilém Flusser reminds us in his *Filosofia del Design* (Philosophy of Design) [Flusser 2003], in English the word "design" has lost its ancestral meaning of action that did not distinguish between drawing and writing, becoming, in fact, both a noun and a verb whose use is often self-referential (a phenomenon typical of design). And this shift of meaning is confirmed, in the same essay, by Flusser himself, specifying that in the contemporary use of the word "design" we must glimpse that implication, in its facilitating of functions and actions, of a real deception. A door-knob is a deception, a tool that facilitates the opening of a door that would otherwise present itself to us in all its hostile entirety, difficult to "de-
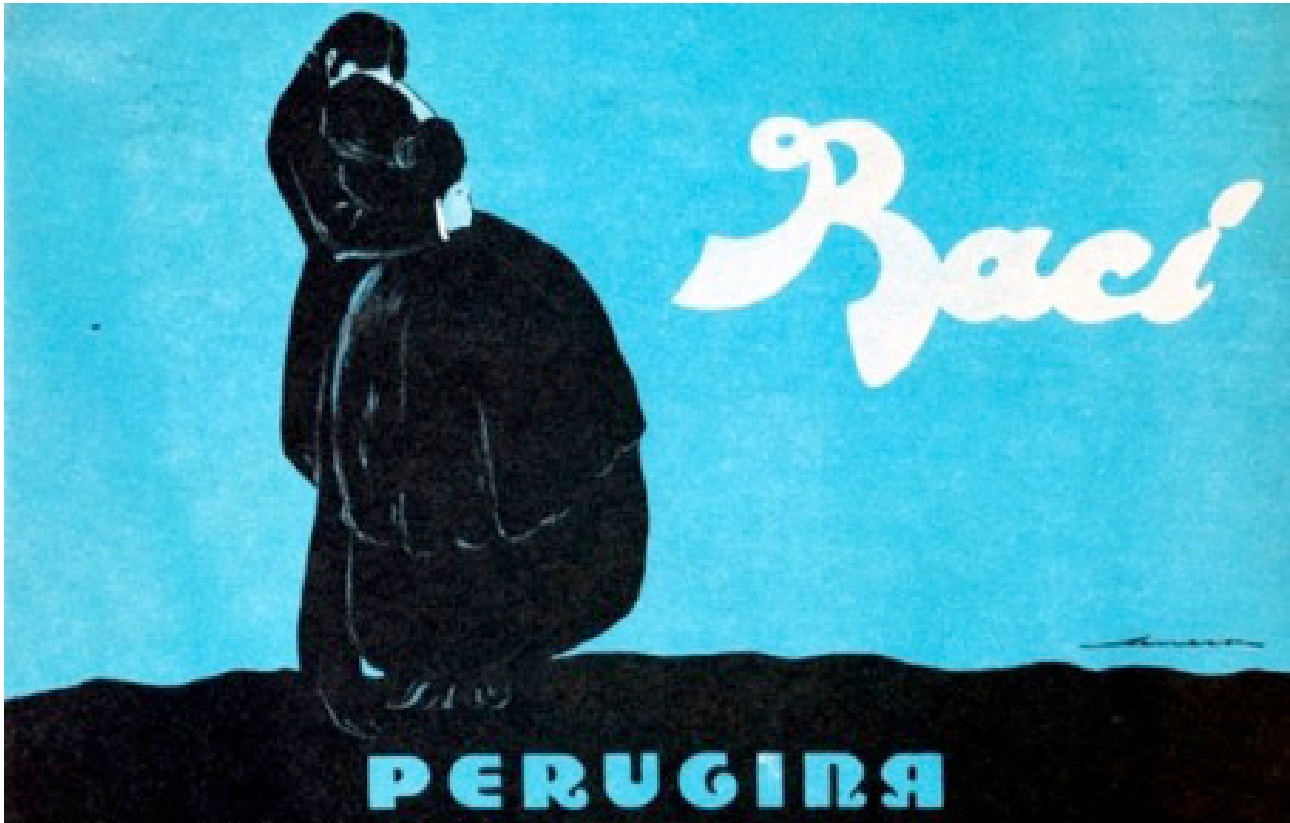
Fig. 1. Federico Seneca, Baci Perugina, 1930 ca.

ceive" if not thanks to the problem-solving tool that design makes available to us. Design, therefore, through its mission of problem-solving, goes so far as to deny the objective nature of things, often difficult to deal with if not made easy by, precisely, some design tool.

But the Italian word "*disegno*," while the literal translation of the English "design" should signify "project" or "plan," alludes instead to a difficult and precise gesture, that is, to tracing and giving shape to an idea thanks to signs that are a direct representation between the abstract world (idea) and reality (artifact). There is a precise moment when this correspondence is more visible: I am referring to a precise season in our history of visual communication design in

which the visual design of any message required a holistic action that could not have distinguished between the composition of figures and of letters.

I have many young graphic designers as students and the hardest thing to ask them is to make a drawing of what they would like to include in a layout. It has become instinctive to use keyboard and mouse, to compose the different notation systems that our computers make available to us without that ancient mediation that is the "sketch." It would sound strange today to any young designer that composing a title or the written message of a poster could be conceived as a single design gesture. At that precise moment in the history of graphic design in Italy that we

identify as the season of the great poster designers, a peri-od that irreverently unites Toulouse-Lautrec and Armando Testa, designing included figures and letters, a single "picto-rial" action, no text input tools and a posteriori keyboard typing, just as no compulsive choice of fonts pursuing a successful combination found by chance. The composition of figures and letters came from a single compositional ac-tion where often the expressive design of the typography responded to the need for an incessant stylistic and formal dialogue with the world of images, to which it served as a counterpoint and a narrating voice. It may seem paradoxi-cal, but it is that moment in which the dimension of a new urban tribality, a consequence of the flight from the coun-tryside and the World Wars, restored to the visual me-dium that identifying and narrating function that must have greatly resembled those drawings drawn on the stone of caves at the dawn of our human and social history.
I have thought to approach the subject of letters as the center of every identity project, or "branding" project if you prefer, starting from the design of those letters, so full of imaginative flair, still boasting that eclecticism that permeated the passage between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, which Federico Seneca designed to compose the word "*Baci*" on the box of the famous "Pe-rugina" chocolates (Fig. 1). It may seem strange to many, since the orthodoxy that studies the so-called "corporate image" phenomenon, as it was defined until the 1970s, would certainly not start from a figure like Seneca, nor from any of the exponents of that period: Boccasile, Du-dovich, Cappiello, Cambellotti or the French Cassandre. Instead, that study starts with figures like Peter Behrens, to whom we will come later, because the theme of the coor-dinated image is linked to a need for the systematization of visual communication, in its progressively accompanying the growth of industry and infrastructures. But what I am interested in pointing out is, rather, how visual commu-nication design had matured in those "roaring" years, in a culture that was still not yet specialistic and specialized, according to genuinely intuited, expressive forms, without letters, backgrounds and figures being the outcome of dif-ferent compositional moments, but belonging instead to a common semantic field, where the need was pursued of giving visual form to thought and to the novelty that in that period was taking shape and that borrowed from avant-garde artistic movements such as Futurism.
On the famous box, Seneca actually reinvented the famous painting by Francesco Hayez, "*Il Bacio*" (The Kiss) (1859),

purifying it of every contextual element and painting the couple in front of an intense blue background, a night sky where the letters of the word "*Baci*" are there as the moon would have been, and have the same luminescence and roundness. Thus the letters give up part of their no-tational function, but are enriched with a capacity for dia-logue, within the scene, with the protagonists themselves; they become a substantial part of that landscape which we, spectators, would like to be part of. In this way that identity transference is activated for which only by buying the chocolate, which Seneca himself would think to enrich with the famous love notes, romantic messages written on slips of paper placed directly inside each silver wrapping, can we ourselves become part of the same scene. The letters were then drawn by hand by Seneca himself, with a unique compositional gesture through which the lovers would be represented together with the Perugina logo itself, whose typographical design in Art Nouveau style would remain unchanged up to the present day.
A similar case, in many aspects, is that which tells us about the vital and seminal collaboration between Fortunato De-pero and the industrialist Davide Campari, a *liaison* which, among the first in the history of visual arts, elevated adver-tising for a commercial brand to the status of art. A figure, that of the tireless artist from Rovereto, who soon realized how the contribution of art to the world of industry would have constituted an explosive unicum capable, more than any other form of expression, of embodying the transition from the rural to the industrial and urban nation of the early 1900s in forms, colors and new rituals. In the early 1920s, he gave life to what he would call the *Casa d'Arte Futurista Depero* (Depero House of Futurist Art), in fact, a prodrome of modern advertising agencies. As in the case already mentioned for Seneca, his way of working was all-encompassing: author of an expressive poetics, with geo-metrical and dynamic lines, his compositions feature color, figure, background and typography combined through a unique compositional act. But in this case, in the work of the artist from Trentino, the letters, the main code of the shouting voice of advertising as well as of Futurist rhetoric, were used as the space of an immersive dialectic with the spectator-user; no longer just notation of words, they ex-tended to plastic and architectural space, the first example of the transactional use of brands. The cases that enlighten us in this sense are represented by the 1927 project of the Book Pavilion for the Treves publishing house, defined delib-erately as "typographic architecture," as well as the project
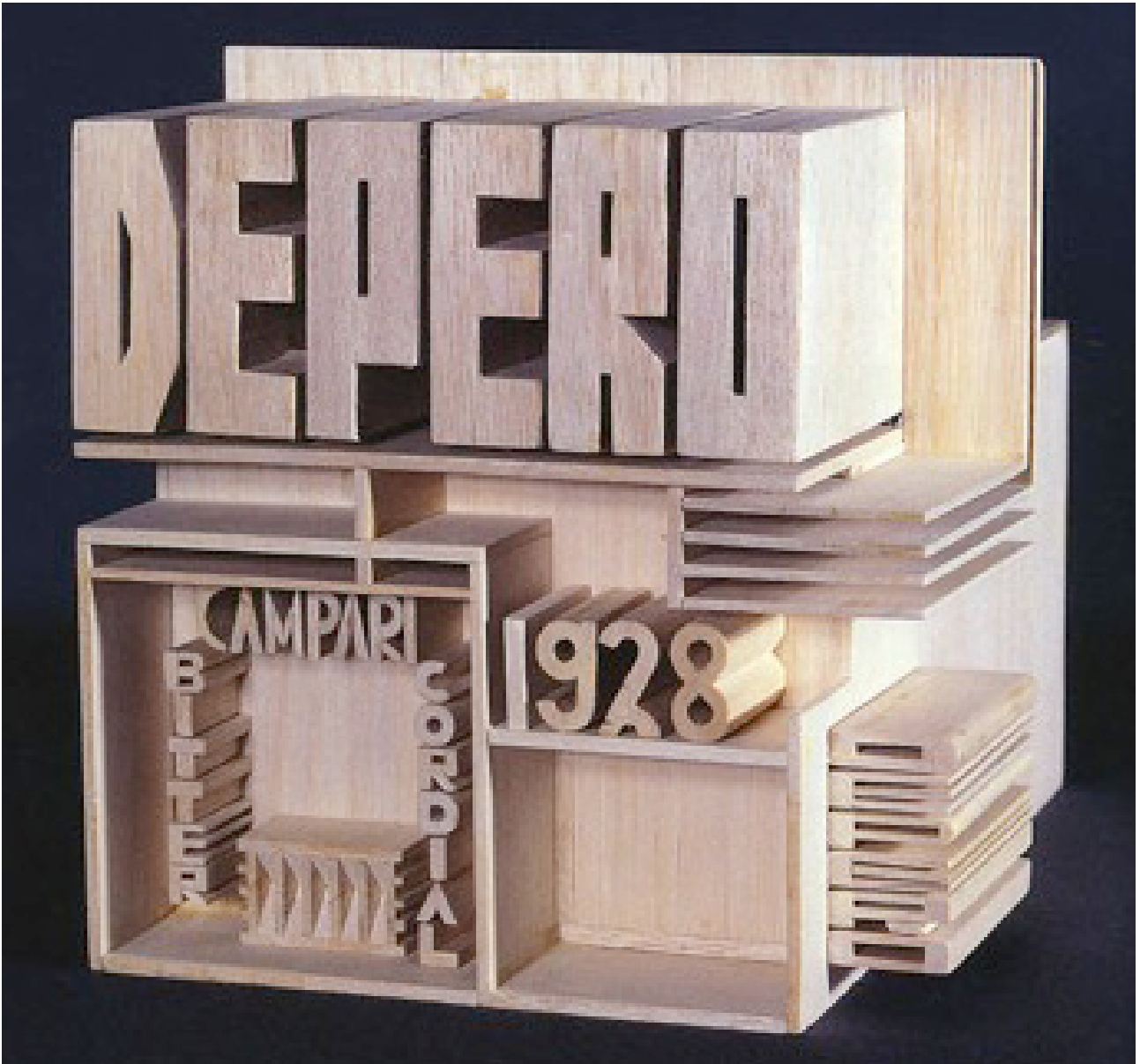
Fig. 2. Fortunato Depero, *Campari Pavilion*, wooden model, 1928, MART Museo d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento.

for the Campari Pavilion, an authentic compositional hyper-bole in which the letters, condensed, extended, developed in length, were extruded to completely adorn the three-dimensional space of the pavilion (Fig. 2). Thanks to this extreme extension of the typographic forms into planes, the play of light and shadow due to the inextinguishable intersecting of volumes was multiplied, thus realizing a plas-tic painting in continuous mutation, capable of giving value to the viewpoint of the observer, who thus found himself at the center of the compositional dynamics. It is the value of the design gesture that in Depero's work overcomes its traditional limits and anticipates the polysemanticality, if not the "*sinsemie*" of the transmedia communication systems that we are used to analyzing in contemporary projects. A real flight forward in time. The Campari identity project, the first complex identity system, therefore, originated from an artist's expressive drawing, but ended with the first true example of total design, passing from two-dimensionality to three-dimensionality, to become the most long-lived prod-uct design, that we still admire today, that is, the Campari Soda bottle, whose design derives directly from Depero's work, "Puppet drinking Campari Soda," of 1926.

It is impossible in this rapid survey on the subject of communication design, as mentioned above, not to men-tion the case of Peter Behrens, a versatile architect who worked as a teacher in the so-called Darmstadt Artists' Colony (1889-1903) and from 1901 on, while continuing his work as an artist and draftsman, also practiced as an architect. It was this versatility, capable of moving between typographic and architectural design, that caused him to be commissioned by Paul Jordan, managing director of AEG (Allgemeine Elektricitäts-Gesellschaft) to design the com-plex system of corporate communication.

In fact, his work for the large German company, for which he designed the typeface that became the basis of the first redesign of the popular brand (Fig. 3), Behrens Antiqua (Fig. 4), was the first real example of modern corporate identity, tackling as never before the theme of the organic-ity of corporate identity in all its aspects, at all required levels of communication. Therefore, his work was not lim-ited to the design of the brand and its applications; Beh-rens designed the complex grid system that allowed him to give organicity to the publication of an infinite number of covers and printed materials, he dealt with advertise-ments, exhibition structures, expanding his project to the architecture that was to host the pavilions for internation-al trade fairs and some of the period's most representa-

Fig. 3. Peter Behrens, AEG, brand, 1907.

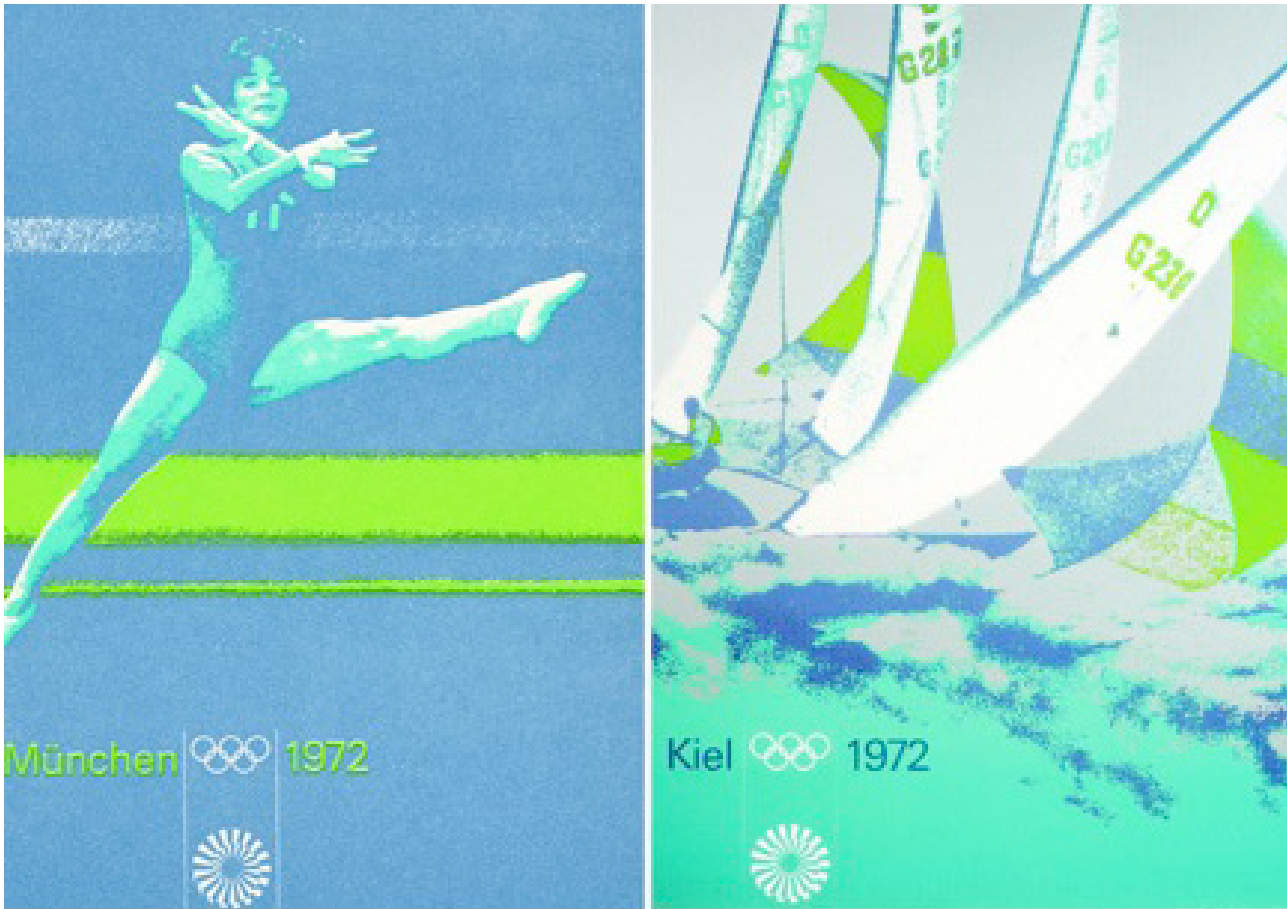*Fig. 4. Peter Behrens, Behrens Antiqua, typeface design, 1907.*
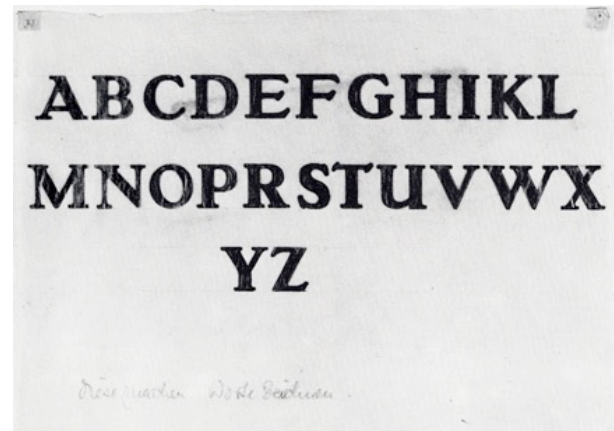
Fig. 5. Otl Aicher, Monaco 72, book covers, 1966-1972.

tive industrial buildings. What Behrens produced was a real mutation regarding the area of design responsibilities usually assigned to the architect or designer. His work defied definition in specialized disciplinary terms and opened up to responsibility in a "directorial" and multidisciplinary key that would only become the object of ethical and professional reflection in the 1980s. Therefore, a significant anticipation of the holistic approach to which project designers should tend in considering the theme of corpo-

rate communication as a complex ecosystem rather than a simple set of hierarchically organized tools.
His work would interest major names, acknowledged fathers of the "corporate image." It is worth remembering, firstly, one of the most well-known, undisputed masters, in methodological and disciplinary terms, that is, Otl Aicher, co-founder and lecturer at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm from 1953. He inaugurated the modern application of the coordinated image manual as a tool for the
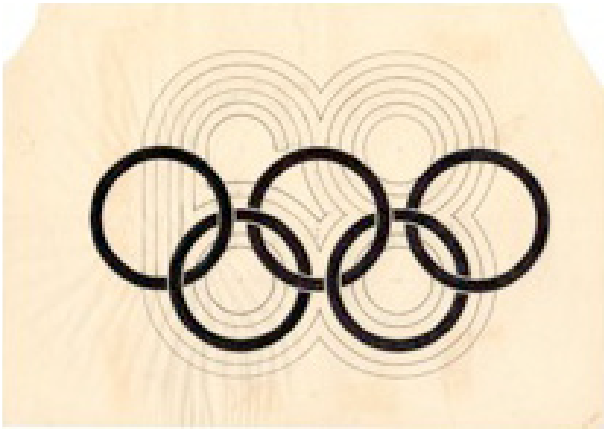
Fig. 6. Lance Wyman, Mexico 68, logotype, construction design, 1968.

Fig. 7. Lance Wyman, Mexico 68, murals, 1968.

systematic organization of numerous application plans, with the identity project in 1968 for Lufthansa for redesigning its brand and logotype, together with the students of his course. His consecration came later, from 1968 to 1972, as the author of one of the most famous, complex and articulated visual systems, namely, that for the 1972 Munich Olympic Games (Fig. 5).

The identity system of the German games inaugurated the first icon signage system useful for orientation and facilitated reading of the games' complex program, making a vast information system accessible to audiences from all over the planet.

In the previous four years, furthermore, another great example of an identity design project, that of the Mexico Games 1968, was based on the system of organic communication as a scheme for the development of an extended communication project. The multidisciplinary design team was directed by designers Lance Wyman and, for urban design, Eduardo Terrazas. A key element in this case was the ethnographic approach of the project, whose visual system managed to reconcile two seemingly distant elements of inspiration, namely, references to the optical art typical of the time and the cyclical and rhythmic patterns of native folk art (Figs. 6, 7). The design of an extended identity and communication system was meant to constitute an instrument of national redemption and, on an international level, a true gateway to the modern world.

An element common to these two illustrious examples is again a design approach to identity which is accompanied, in an experimental form, by multidisciplinary work teams, powerful apparatus dedicated to the mapping of characteristic territorial elements and, for the first time, a careful analysis of the perceptions and possibilities for reading and fruition by interested audiences. Here project characteristics were inaugurated that would become distinctive in the years to come, namely, the pervasiveness and ubiquity of the communication project, which began to occupy not only the areas hitherto typical of information and promotion, but to extend to areas closer to environmental, industrial, fashion and costume design. For the first time, communication design, conceived as an orchestral and multiform communication system, consciously faced the responsibility that from then on it would be entrusted with as a tool necessary for defining the cultural identity of a country, as a factor of distinction and collective development.

Cultural expression as the purpose of visual communication design is precisely what we intend to deal with in presenting an example in discontinuity with the previous ones. This need is represented by the desire to complete a survey whose purpose is not disciplinary nor technical, but rather to represent the role of the "draftsman"/ designer as one who firmly occupies a distinct position in society and the community. To conclude this brief overview, it is useful to know the work of an artist - in the

Fig. 8. Joan Brossa, *Fachada ayuntament Mollet-Valles, 2002.*

Fig. 9. Joan Brossa, *Poema visual transitabile en tres temps, 1984.*

most eclectic sense of the term. We are speaking of the Catalan Joan Brossa, a great visual and concrete poet, performer and author of numerous verbal/visual installations still visible in different parts of Barcelona. He moved his first steps in the world of art in the desecrating and pervasive current of the Dadaist and Surrealist movements, then he soon made himself known as an anti-Francoist with his civil poems and finally affirmed himself definitively with the fall of the regime. All his work is dedicated to the ironic and surreal experimentation of poetic composition, to the translation of those "hypnagogic" images he considered crystallized intuitions at the origin of his poetics. A work that did not, however, stop at form in verses, but soon became visual and typographical composition: his intention to suspend meaning became pervasive. His limit was not the page and his compositions soon conquered pieces of the city, on buildings, streets and squares. His aim was to use letters to give plastic form to poetic thought and bring it into the urban reality, to take it out of the printed page and transform it into landscape, objective,

natural, as trees and buildings are. The poetic composition thus became visual, it stopped being an elitist production, dedicated to scholars, but was transformed into a permanent performance, a hypnotic space that, by transforming us into new Lilliputians, offers us a new candor, the possibility to again marvel in wonder and thus venture into a revealed dimension, to be able to traverse the text, the spaces offered by the large letters that, as though emerging from the two dimensions of Flatland, become a new landscape, allowing us to become, we ourselves, a living part of the story (Figs. 8, 9).

At the end of this short journey, we have perhaps reconciled that oxymoronic dissonance that the title offered us as a theme. We have restored to the design gesture, in various ways, its more "political" function as an activator, not as a simple work to be admired in a sort of stylistic standstill, but a new responsibility, assigned to all of us, as spectators and actors in the communication process, to be active parties in keeping that same process alive, transforming us all, in turn, into potential designers and draftsmen.

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