ITALIAN AND NORDIC DESIGN CULTURES
IDENTITIES IN TRANSITION 1925–2025

EDITED BY
MADDALENA DALLA MURA
ANDERS V. MUNCH



EDIZIONI QUASAR

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Graphic Design in the Middle of Communication, 1960s–80s: Gianni Sassi's Dilettantism and the Public Utility Movement

Maddalena Dalla Mura

Abstract

This chapter examines Italian graphic design culture in the second half of the 20th century, when it underwent a phase of transformation and identity crisis shaped by consumer society and an increasingly competitive communication market. From the late 1960s, efforts at professional consolidation fostered a discourse defined by opposition to advertising and by an emphasis on design as civic and cultural practice. Between the late 1970s and mid-1980s, the notion of *pubblica utilità* (public utility) became a catalyst for this orientation, prompting debates and initiatives that soon exposed its contradictions. The discussion foregrounds the dissonant role of Gianni Sassi—graphic designer, art director and cultural entrepreneur—whose contribution remains overlooked in critical literature. Active since the 1960s across advertising, neo-avant-garde and countercultural networks, Sassi advanced a conception of communication rooted in a critique of the cultural industry and in a "dilettantist" stance that transgressed professional boundaries. His position underscores the difficulty of graphic design culture in confronting its entanglement with capitalism and mass communication—an issue still highly relevant today.

In May 1984, the cultural magazine *Alfabeta*—then one of the leading platforms for critical debate in Italy—gave visibility to a question animating the graphic design community: *pubblica utilità* or the public utility of design, understood as a civic, political and cultural practice, opposed to commercial communication and oriented toward serving public institutions, social organisations and cultural enterprises. Alongside articles on anti-terrorism legislation, the struggles of the publishing industry, nuclear disarmament and postmodern philosophy, the issue featured an essay by designer and theorist Giovanni Anceschi who framed debates on *pubblica utilità* as both the manifestation of a foundational "crisis" of graphic design and a stage in its maturation as visual communication design.[1] The same issue also announced the First Biennial of Graphic Design, to be held the following summer in Cattolica—a main initiative aimed at promoting and documenting graphic design of public utility—and was illustrated with graphics by the Biennial's promoters (Anceschi 1984a, 1984b). By placing the issue of "public utility" within the broader intellectual debate, *Alfabeta* provided an important platform for the graphic design community, which, under that banner, sought not only to assert its civic and cultural mission but also to gain greater public recognition.

Behind this positioning was art director and cultural entrepreneur Gianni Sassi (1938–1993), a member of the Biennial's organising committee and head of its press office through the cooperative Intrapresa, which also published *Alfabeta*. Thanks to his work in cultural and editorial production and his collaborations with social organisations, Sassi was then regarded as a representative figure of public utility design (Anceschi 1984a, 1984b; De Robertis 1984; Dolcini 1988).[2]

1. In Italian, graphic design, as a field and practice, is often rendered with the noun *grafica*, and graphic designer with the term *grafico*, from the Latin *graphĭcus*, ultimately derived from the Greek *gráphein*. These terms retain an association with drawing and writing, as well as with graphic arts, paper-based media and print. The emphasis in the 1970s–80s—and specifically within the debate on *pubblica utilità*—on the terms *design* and *visual communication* expressed the intention to establish a disciplinary and professional foundation more explicitly centred on the communicative function and on contemporary requirements of the communication and media systems.
2. See also subsequent accounts of those events by some of their protagonists, such as Morpurgo (2006), Pieraccini (2017) and Torri (2020).



Fig. 1. *Alfabeta*, 60, 1984, spreads, art direction Gianni Sassi

Yet his conception of communication diverged markedly from that framework—a difference he openly manifested. A self-taught designer active in advertising and art direction since the 1960s and connected to neo-avant-garde and countercultural networks, Sassi had developed a practice that transgressed professional boundaries and questioned any form of specialism as well as dichotomies such as public/private and cultural/commercial.

The promotion and debates around design's public utility between the 1970s and mid-1980s have often been depicted as a moment when values and aspirations emerged that later became central to Italian graphic design culture (Piscitelli 2019). However, as Sassi's involvement and stance made clear, that period was also marked by profound contradictions. In line with recent historiography seeking a more nuanced reading of its legacies (Pierini 2020), this chapter retraces the origins of the *pubblica utilità* discourse and examines Sassi's role within it. The aim is to add a neglected piece to that history and to contribute to a discussion of design practice attentive to its porous boundaries and cultural resonance beyond professional affirmation—where both *pubblica utilità* and Sassi's own *dilettantism* can be seen as challenges to narrower notions of designer culture.

Towards Public Utility: Graphic Design's Others

Away from Advertising

The promotion and discussion of graphic design's public utility in the 1970s and 1980s was the culmination of a longer process of professional and cultural differentiation developed within the broader rise of consumer society. During Italy's postwar reconstruction and economic boom (1958–63), graphic designers emerged and saw themselves as aesthetic and cultural guides within the convergence of industrial development and social progress. By the mid-1960s, however, the growing complexity of the communication market and shifting sensibilities generated uncertainty about their role. The spread of American-style full-service advertising agencies deprived designers of many clients, while their operational model—grounded in market research and centred on the copywriter-art director duo—relegated them to executive roles and reduced their autonomy and authorship (De Iulio and Vinti 2009). In response, some strengthened links with industrial design, adopting rational methods of visual systems' coordination, especially in corporate communication. Others turned towards art direction, coordinating photographers and specialists to maintain a guiding role within editorial and commercial communication.

Beyond these intersections of professional practices, however, a critical discourse took shape that sought to distance design from commercial promotion (Galluzzo 2018). Here, aesthetic and ethical issues were conflated. On the pages of *Linea Grafica*—the main graphic design forum since 1946—as well as in art magazines, advertising was constructed as design's negative *other*: a synonym of vulgarity, pollution and manipulation. By contrast, graphic design was associated with quality, experimentation, public responsibility and civic commitment. This stance intersected with wider debates on mass media and the cultural industry, animated by figures such as art historian Carlo Arturo Quintavalle and critic Umberto Eco. Yet designers rarely acknowledged their own implication in the broader system of mass communication. Moreover, when art directors or advertisers engaged in self-criticism or promoted social campaigns, commentators often dismissed these as "dishonest" (Schenone Garavoglia 1974)—even though, as Michele Galluzzo (2018) pointedly observed, such campaigns often proved more effective than designers' sophisticated solutions.

By the 1970s, the question of design's social and cultural relevance moved to the centre of debates about the profession's future. In a series of articles in *Linea Grafica*, Albe Steiner—who had practised graphic design as a form of civic engagement since before the Second World War—put forward *pubblica utilità* (public utility), that is, the service to public, social and cultural institutions and enterprises, as a concrete alternative to advertising (Steiner 1973a-d, 1974). Steiner argued that the professional methods of visual coordination originally devised for corporate clients could be effectively applied to these new contexts. A paradigmatic example was the project of visual identity and urban signage for the historic centre of Urbino (1968–69) in the Marche region, which he developed with students of the local school of graphic arts (CSAG, Corso Superiore di Arte Grafica).

Soon after, the nearby municipality of Pesaro commissioned one of those students, Massimo Dolcini, to design its identity and communication strategy. This led to a long collaboration (1971–90) in which Dolcini developed a narrative approach to institutional communication, with extensive use of illustrated posters. His work showed that distancing oneself from commercial propaganda did not require the adoption of modernist minimalism. His pop, figurative, low-definition style resonated with what contemporary magazines and publications described as *altra grafica*: "alternative" graphics produced outside or against capitalist society and its corporate imagery. This heterogeneous category encompassed avant-gardes, Cuban and Polish posters, Chilean and Chinese popular graphics, underground comics and DIY protest productions (Cirio and Favari 1972). At the time, some commentators considered such graphics, closely tied to popular visual culture, as a way to rethink design in terms of social participation (Barrese 1976).

The work of Steiner and Dolcini became important touchstones for designers in a phase when Italy's progressive administrative decen-

tralisation expanded opportunities for professional collaboration with local institutions, although these did not always guarantee the same conditions of political affinity, dialogue and shared intent that had underpinned those pioneering cases (Pierini 2020).

Promoting "Pubblica Utilità"

At the turn of the decade, the notion of *pubblica utilità* became a catalyst for debates on the recognition of the graphic design profession and on the quality of visual communication within an increasingly stratified media landscape. Exhibitions and conferences were organised across various Italian cities to showcase designers' growing involvement with local institutions and with political, social and cultural communication addressing citizens rather than consumers. These initiatives also revealed a new geography of the practice in Italy, no longer centred solely on Milan or other major urban hubs (Torri 2020). The most significant was the First Biennial of Graphic Design, held in Cattolica, Emilia-Romagna (1984). Focused on poster exhibitions and the creation of a dedicated archive, the Biennial sought to gather Italian designers engaged in *pubblica utilità* projects and assess their methodological and linguistic convergence (Anceschi 1984c) while also opening a dialogue with comparable international practices—the French collective Grapus were invited to present their work.

Promoted by a committee established in 1981 within AIAP—the association of visual communication designers[3]—the Biennial brought together practitioners from diverse backgrounds, active in both institutional and corporate contexts. Alongside early promoters like Gianfranco Torri, Roberto Pieraccini, Paolo De Robertis and Massimo Dolcini—by then recognised as the leading figure of *pubblica utilità*—was Gianni Sassi, most likely involved through his friendship with Dolcini. The committee also included the designer and theorist Giovanni Anceschi, who acted as critical interpreter of the movement, seeking to guide its evolution,[4] and Gaddo Morpurgo, lecturer at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia (IUAV), whose interest in the role of communication in urban planning and transformation led him, in preparation for the Biennial, to organise a seminar on profession and professionalism in graphic design (1984).

As that meeting and the Biennial itself soon revealed, however, the label of *pubblica utilità* masked fragmentation rather than cohesion. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Anceschi noted that the only elements uniting designers were a certain ethical tension and an "oppositional" stance toward modernist language, favouring approaches closer to *altra grafica* (Anceschi 1984c). Divergences, however, ran deeper. Some grounded their identity in graphic culture, sophistication and print expertise while also asserting an authorial attitude; others feared this trajectory would prove a dead end, isolating designers from the evolving communication landscape. In the end, the very premises of *pubblica utilità*—and the effectiveness of its framework for advancing the profession—were called into question.

Remix: In the Middle of Communication

The critical reconsideration of *pubblica utilità* continued after the Biennial through exhibitions, conferences, and articles published especially in *Linea Grafica* and in *Grafica: Rivista di Teoria Storia e Metodologia*, founded by AIAP in 1985 as a forum for disciplinary debate. The main stages of this discussion have been traced by other scholars (Piscitelli 2019; Pierini 2020). Here the focus is on key issues raised by Giovanni Anceschi, Massimo Dolcini and Gaddo Morpurgo, central figures in that debate. Keeping distance from the more ideological positions, these authors dismantled much of the rhetoric surrounding *pubblica utilità* and redirected attention towards the evolving horizon of visual communication. Within their contributions, Gianni Sassi's work—developed independently

3. The acronym AIAP derives from the association's original name and composition as the Italian Association of Advertising Artists (Associazione Italiana Artisti Pubblicitari, 1945).
4. A former member of the programmed art movement and graduate in visual communication from the HfG Ulm (1966), Anceschi played a significant role in the development of visual communication design as a discipline in Italy, particularly from the 1980s onwards.

of concerns with professional identity or canonical standards of good design—was cited, alongside that of others, as an example.

One of the original pillars of *pubblica utilità* was the distinction between public and private patronage and between civic communication and commercial advertising. In practice, however, such boundaries proved untenable: in mass society, languages and practices constantly overlapped. After all, as Anceschi had already noted in the Biennial catalogue, all messages reached audiences "on equal terms" (1984c, p. 14).[5] The economic and social dynamism of 1980s Italy made these conditions even more evident. It was Anceschi (1987a, 1987b) who offered a way out of the impasse. Speaking at a conference in Ravenna and in a related article in *Linea Grafica*, he described, as if new, a double movement: public institutions increasingly drew on the services and codes of advertising, while private companies invested in cultural initiatives of public utility, opening opportunities for quality graphic work and even adopting the languages of *altra grafica*. He labelled this situation a "remix" (*rimescolamento*), celebrating it as an expansion and a victory for *pubblica utilità*. Designers, he argued, had become "people in the middle of communication": abandoning defensive and self-referential stances while maintaining graphic quality, they had developed flexibility and eclecticism to respond to diverse clients and contexts. In this perspective, public utility no longer depended on the commissioner but on the ability to reach the public with accessible, "popular" languages. Among the designers operating in this expanded field, Sassi was mentioned not for his cultural projects shown at the Biennial, but for an advertising campaign for Tenax, a sanitary ware producer.

Another limit that emerged concerned the conception of graphic design as a specialised, quasi-authorial practice, centred on print culture (Dolcini 1986, 1988; Morpurgo 1986, 1988). Drawing on his experience with local institutions, Dolcini in particular stressed the need for new approaches capable of meeting demands for more articulated communication strategies and addressing the expectations of an increas-



Fig. 2. Advertisement for Tenax sanitary ware, published in *La Gola*, March 1987, art direction Gianni Sassi. This type of work is cited by Giovanni Anceschi in 1987 as an example of the expansion of public utility design, beyond collaboration with public administrations

ingly discerning citizenry. He urged colleagues not to remain tied to the label of "public utility designer" or to a craft-based vision of the trade, but to explore a more entrepreneurial attitude. His proposal was the "public utility agency": a structure centred on design yet integrating managerial and technical expertise, modelled on advertising agencies. Dolcini soon moved in this direction, merging in 1987 his Fuorischema studio with the agency M&M, which also took on commercial clients (Campana 1987). In 1988, with *Linea Grafica*, he organised a training course on communication for public institutions that promoted this entrepreneurial turn and foregrounded the profile of the "graphic designer – art director – entrepreneur" (Dolcini 1988). Among those invited to share their experience was Sassi, who for over a decade had pur-

5. All translations from Italian are by the author.

sued communication as enterprise and creative coordination.

In the end, if the new horizon of the graphic design profession could no longer be defined by client type, visual style or individual specialism, what remained of the discourse on *pubblica utilità* was chiefly the opening of new opportunities across Italy. These, in essence, were the conclusions of Gaddo Morpurgo (1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1988). A lucid participant in the debate, he noted that *pubblica utilità* had been a way for designers to reflect on their role in shifting socio-economic conditions and to build networks in a country still lacking consolidated disciplinary venues. Years later, he would pointedly describe those initiatives as "collective self-promotion", a "counting in order to count" aimed at reinforcing cultural status (Morpurgo 2006). At the time, however, he also stressed other aspects: above all, that public investment went largely to cultural rather than informational services, and that it expanded without coherent strategies. Public utility graphics, he argued, made especially visible the growth of mass cultural production and consumption and the spectacularisation of culture—an "atypical market" where civic bodies increasingly competed with private enterprises (Morpurgo 1984, 1988). It was therefore culture as a product, more than the commissioner of communication, that required closer scrutiny. This line of reflection was not pursued. Yet at the seminar organised by Morpurgo in Venice, Sassi had already gone further, rejecting the very idea that culture could emerge from public institutions (De Robertis 1985, 75).

In the following years, as the social and political tensions of previous decades waned, and as designers enthusiastically embraced the expanding demand for visual communication and the segmentation of the market, debate shifted to more technical and specialist issues. The notion of *pubblica utilità*, while continuing to serve as an ideal reference, was progressively narrowed to designate a specific domain of practice: communication for institutions and culture.[6]

Gianni Sassi, Designing Culture between Activism and Entrepreneurship

Gianni Sassi's career can be divided into two main phases. The first, until the mid-1970s, was characterised by his early experiences in advertising and his involvement with neo-avant-garde and countercultural networks, which proved formative in shaping his critical and experimental approach to communication and the cultural industry. The second, lasting until his death in 1993, saw him engaged in consolidating the conditions for cultural production as an independent enterprise—an objective that was never fully realised.

Post-Advertising

Sassi began working as a self-taught graphic designer and art director in the mid-1960s in Calvairate, a working-class neighbourhood in Milan. With his friend Sergio Albergoni, he founded al.sa, a small agency that initially offered graphic and advertising services to local studios and businesses—the first notable clients included toy manufacturers Mebetoys and Polistil. Sassi took care of the visuals while Albergoni focused on copywriting. With entrepreneurial spirit, the two also partnered with a small printshop, La Monzese, to produce their work and increase profits. Gradually, a loose network of collaborators gathered around them, some of whom gravitated around the same local branch of the Italian Communist Party as Sassi and Albergoni. A brief partnership with Till Neuburg—son of Hans Neuburg, recently arrived in Milan—most likely helped al.sa to connect with professional networks. In the late 1960s and early 1970s their work appeared in directories such as the Art Directors Club Milano annual.[7]

Meanwhile, also through La Monzese, Sassi and Albergoni came into contact with artists and intellectuals linked to neo-avantgarde movements such as visual poetry and Fluxus, Situationist practices and counter-information activities. Despite their differences, these strands shared the recognition that art and culture—and their institutions—were embedded in capitalism, a system they sought to expose and

6. As such, from 1985 onwards it was listed in the pages of *Linea Grafica*, alongside fields such as corporate identity, typography and computer graphics.

7. In 1969 Sassi was also invited to become a member of the Art Directors Club Milano. So far, however, it has not been possible to clarify whether he did so.



Fig. 3. *bit: Art: what's happening in Italy today*, 4, ED912, 1968. Spread showing a layout inspired by DIY countercultural graphics. On the right-hand page, a *band détournée* by Gianni-Emilio Simonetti

perform. Retaining ties to the modernist aspiration of uniting art and life, they appropriated the languages of mass communication to demystify them, experimented with printing and publishing as institutional critique and at times infiltrated the very structures of the cultural industry. Exposure to these experiences enriched not only al.sa's visual style but, more importantly, its critical stance toward communication and the industry sustaining it.

A crucial encounter was the one with Gianni-Emilio Simonetti, an artist and agitator who combined research, documentation and organisational work. Together with him, Sassi and Albergoni founded the publishing house ED912, conceived as a vehicle for a "permanent cultural revolution anywhere, anytime and by any means". Involving artists, poets, graphic designers and exponents of counterculture, ED912 produced books, posters, gadgets and magazines (Boragina 2021). Among these was *bit* (1967–68), initially launched as a contemporary art bulletin but soon transformed into a platform amplifying student and artist protests, with layouts influenced by DIY countercultural graphics.

Situationist tactics of "deculturation", *détournement* and media parasitism gradually filtered into al.sa's commercial work. The agency infiltrated clients' promotional channels with content and imagery that articulated a radical critique of the capitalist system and a discussion of the economic and political value of culture and information within it. The house organs of the furniture manufacturer Gruppo Busnelli (*Caleidoscopio*, 1969–73) and of the ceramic tile producer Iris Ceramica (*humus*, 1973–74) were both used to extend the editorial project of *bit* (Vinti n.d.). In 1972, together with Situationist sympathiser Marco Maria Sigiani, Albergoni and Sassi gave shape and a name to this strategy: *dopo-pubblicità* (post-advertising). Rejecting the specialism and technical focus of market-driven agencies, their "global" approach promised clients communication embedded in


"pollution": per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento

Fig. 4. Gianni Sassi, "Pollution, Per una nuova Estetica dell'Inquinamento", article featured in the first issue of *humus*, house organ of Iris Ceramica, April 1973. The article illustrates the rationale of the events organised by al.sa to promote Iris Ceramica during the 1972 SAIE Building Fair in Bologna

a wider cultural discourse and capable of having a real impact on society. Post-advertising relied on engaging non-specialists—such as artists, musicians or scientists—and on producing communicative "situations" beyond print media (Albergoni, Sassi and Sigiani 1972). One example was the promotion of Iris Ceramica, centred on a provocative discourse about quality of living and on a critique of the "fashion" of environmentalism. For the 1972 SAIE Building Fair in Bologna, al.sa staged *Pollution: Per una Nuova Estetica dell'Inquinamento* (For a New Aesthetic of Pollution) in a city square, combining a tile installation by Sassi, an art exhibition and a concert by the then little-known musician Franco Battiato (Kittler 2021).

In the 1970s, Sassi ventured into the music industry. Motivated less by expertise than by the recognition that music was a powerful tool for shaping the cultural system and reaching young audiences in particular, he regarded records as mass-produced editorial products to be reinvented beyond market genres (Sassi 1978, 1979b). This recognition drew on Adorno's analyses of the culture industry, but it was sustained by the avant-garde aspiration and confidence that contemporary culture could still be produced "in the interstices between modernism and mass culture" (Huyssen 1986, 43). After occasional collaborations with some artists, he co-founded the independent label CRAMPS (Company Records Advertising Management Promotion Service) in 1972.[8] Operating in areas neglected by the mainstream music industry and drawing on al.sa's network, CRAMPS produced progressive rock artists such as Area, as well as collections of experimental and avant-garde music by figures including John Cage and Demetrio Stratos. The label's identity—marked by the iconic face of Frankenstein, reportedly, an alter ego for

8. CRAMPS was founded by Sassi, Albergoni and the music manager Franco Mamone. Both Albergoni and Mamone, however, soon left the project.



Fig. 5a-b. John Cage, album cover and gatefold ("Nova Musicha" series, 1), art direction Gianni Sassi, CRAMPS, 1974

Sassi—relied on a recognisable repertoire: typewriter font, ambiguous still lifes of everyday and symbolic objects and layered codes mixing found images and visual poetry. As its acronym suggested, CRAMPS sought to control all aspects, from music production to promotion. This ambition, however, exposed Sassi to the structural challenges of distribution. Efforts to ally with other independent labels and to negotiate with major distributors failed, leading to the label's closure in 1980. Its comprehensive management model nonetheless remained a reference for Sassi as he turned increasingly to publishing and cultural organisation.

The Intrapresa Ecosystem

The second half of the 1970s marked a transitional phase for independent cultural production, moving from sporadic and often amateurish initiatives towards the ambition to establish structures capable of offering a lasting alternative—in terms of both content and operating models—to the oligopolies of the cultural industry (Lo Monaco 2020; Alferj and Mazzone 1979; Sassi 1979a). *Alfabeta* (1979–88) and Intrapresa were founded within this context.

Sassi's encounter with poet and artist Nanni Balestrini (1935–2019) was pivotal. A former member of the literary group Gruppo 63 (1963–69) and politically active in the extra-parliamentary left—involved with radical groups such as Potere Operaio (1968) and Autonomia Operaia (1976)—Balestrini believed intellectuals should play a "practical" role, linking artistic research with political engagement, as exemplified in his novel *Vogliamo Tutto*, which literally gave voice to the class struggle (1971; *We Want Everything*) (Picchione 2004). With the same intent, he contributed to journals and worked with leftist publishers like Feltrinelli as well as with small independent publishing ventures and authors' cooperatives. To support the latter, he co-founded, with Sassi and a financial partner, Ar&a (1976–78), an agency providing editorial, distribution and promotional services. Though short-lived—mainly due to financial difficulties—this venture offered Sassi the opportunity to reflect once more on the challenge of sustaining and distributing independent production (Sassi 1979a).

In 1979, reacting to an increasingly repressive political climate linked to the fight against terrorism and to the widespread *riflusso*—the retreat into the private sphere—Balestrini launched *Alfabeta*, aiming to sustain the critical spirit that had fuelled political struggles and artistic experimentation in the previous decades. The project quickly drew an exceptional editorial board of Milanese left-wing intellectuals, including Umberto Eco, poet Antonio Porta and literary critic Maria Corti. Art collector and publisher Gino Di Maggio provided initial funding, and Sassi was engaged as art director and member of the editorial team. In many respects indebted

to Gruppo 63's *Quindici* (1967–69), *Alfabeta* was characterised by a non-hierarchical, collective direction, a militant, anti-ideological and transdisciplinary approach to critical debate. Rooted in literature, art, philosophy and politics, *Alfabeta* approached every topic as inherently political and social, contributing to shaping key late-20th-century discussions while also amplifying marginal voices from outside established circles (Bossaglia et al. 2012). Printed in about 20,000 copies and sold at newsstands and via subscription, *Alfabeta* also manifested through its format and layout—similar to those of a daily newspaper—its intention to offer an alternative to the glossy excesses of mass culture. The magazine featured typographic and illustrated covers and dense interior pages with long-form articles, all set in Times, by then Sassi's hallmark. Interspersed images—drawings, graphics, comics, photographs—provided an independent visual discourse. A "remarkable quantity of signs" with "a very low aesthetic level", as design critic Aldo Colonetti (1988) put it.

From 1980, Sassi took on the publishing responsibilities of *Alfabeta* by establishing the cooperative Intrapresa (its name evoking both "enterprise" and "venture"). During the 1970s, the cooperative model had regained attention in Italy as a third way between capitalist businesses and public institutions, entailing a flexible, horizontal organisation, especially suited to services and culture (Fabbri, 2011). For Sassi, it offered the chance to structure his idea of an independent cultural enterprise—and for some years it effectively embodied this vision (Lodi and Sassi 1985).

To ensure *Alfabeta*'s independence and financial sustainability, Intrapresa devised a promotional microsystem revolving around the magazine, gradually generating a cultural network and its own readership. The magazine carried ads from publishers, associations and some companies, alongside initiatives produced by Intrapresa and Sassi, who at the time was also art director for leftist non-profits and cooperatives such as ARCI, Lega Nazionale delle Cooperative and COOP.

Over time, Intrapresa expanded, fostering other publications and building a rich catalogue of cultural events. Among its most successful offshoots was *La Gola* (1982–88), a periodical that—through an approach akin to *Alfabeta*—challenged the idealism still pervasive in Italian culture by focusing on food, the body and material culture as social and political issues. Initially responsible for its design, Massimo Dolcini helped define its "opaque" identity, deliberately opposed to the glossy aesthetics of culinary magazines (Colonetti 1987). *La Gola* also incubated new projects, including support for the Slow Food movement (1989), whose early identity bore the imprint of Sassi's low-definition style.

The project that engaged Sassi most from the 1980s until his death was, however, the poetry festival *Milanopoesia* (1984–92). For nearly a decade, this event brought to Milan—then dominated by hedonism and careerism—varied groups of international artists, directly engaging audiences with experimental poetry and artistic research through readings, seminars, performances, music and dance. Partly funded by the City of Milan, the festival represented a radical challenge to the cultural industry's ongoing commodification of art (Sassi 1989). This was one of the reasons why organising it became increasingly difficult, forcing Sassi to engage in repeated negotiations to secure funding and suitable venues. In the booklet accompanying the 1990 edition, he emphasised this situation, writing that despite the "general hostility and distrust" in which the festival had had to move for years, he would not adjust his lifestyle and work to the "prevailing cultural decay" or to external actors who "systematically lower the scope of their own ambitions" (Sassi 1990).

Versus Public Utility: Dilettantism and Independence

What has been briefly outlined in the preceding paragraphs is the cultural milieu and networks within which Sassi shaped his practice and operated when he joined the organising committee of the First Biennial of Graphic Design. For this event, besides contributing to the poster selection for the main exhibition, he assumed responsibility through Intrapresa for the catalogue's publication (issued by Mondadori), the press office and financial management. Eventually, Intrapresa's handling created friction with



Fig. 6. *La Gola*, 5, March 1983, graphic design Massimo Dolcini, art direction Gianni Sassi. As the designer of the first issues (1–7), Dolcini brought to *La Gola* his flair for the narrative power of illustrations. Like *Alfabeta*, *La Gola* was set in Times and had a newspaper-like format and paper

the Cattolica administration, which then chose not to pursue a second Biennial (Torri 2020). Nevertheless, despite his anti-establishment stance, Sassi continued for some years to participate in debates on public utility as well as to provide space for design issues in *Alfabeta*.

Uninterested in professional status, graphic culture per se or authorship and equally detached from any notion of "utility" or institutional service, Sassi's main concern was producing and communicating culture and securing the conditions to do so. This stance emerges in a long article published in the same issue of *Alfabeta* that announced the Biennial (Sassi 1984). Prompted by the financial crisis of the Turin-based publisher Einaudi and written at a time when Intrapresa itself began facing problems of economic sustainability, the text reflected on the obstacles to producing and distributing original culture. Arguing that the defining quality of any genuine cultural enterprise is independence—understood as the "absence of an immediate finality", that is, freedom from external logics—he examined, and ultimately rejected as inevitably instrumental, all forms of patronage such as sponsorship or subsidies, whether bourgeois or proletarian. He concluded that only by operating in the market could independence be secured.

While it made no mention of graphic design, that article could also be read as a commentary on designers' attempts to anchor their social role to public institutions. After all, Sassi advanced similar arguments in meetings on *pubblica utilità*. As Giovanni Anceschi recalled in the Biennial catalogue—where he outlined a first chronology of the main initiatives centred on *pubblica utilità* between the 1970s and the early 1980s—Sassi had already proposed to his colleagues "a radical change of perspective" at a conference in Ravenna in 1983, urging them to focus on "the production of culture", while expressing "a very sceptical attitude towards any view of the public authority as a provider of cultural services and graphic designers as mere intermediaries—whether neutral or trusted—of such provision" (Anceschi 1984c, 15). Likewise, during the seminar organised in Venice by Morpurgo, where participants were invited to discuss the novelty of their approach—and where Dolcini put forward the model of the public utility agency—Sassi pointed rather toward the profile of an "intellectual of communication, at once experimental and critical", autonomous and inquisitive like a "great dilettante" (Anceschi 1984c, 16; De Robertis 1985, 75). He would return to this notion the following year on the occasion of *Segnopolis*, a poster exhibition and seminar held in Turin (1985). In a short text titled "Elogio del Dilettante" (In Praise of the Dilettante) and featured in a brochure, he wrote:

> Graphic design […] derives its power from the virtual monopoly of a scarce and precious resource: "dilettantism". […] There are two types of dilettantism, and graphic design knows and practises both. The first, which we could call "vertical", fuels the metabolic exchange between producers and consumers, sedimenting categories and codes common to both. […] Even more important is the second type, which we could call "horizontal". In the era of super speciali-

> sations, we all become dilettantes […]. We would do well not to forget that the chances of knowledge exchange, or simply of communication with our peers, rely on non-specialised premises and techniques (Sassi 1985a).

By emphasising dilettantism—exchange between cultural producers and audiences and cross-fertilisation across disciplines—Sassi challenged any notion of professional identity and specialised boundaries. These claims, furthermore, were embedded in a broader reflection on design's role within the cultural industry. The text opened with a quotation from *Minima Moralia* (1949), in which Theodor W. Adorno denounced mass culture's barbarism and false splendour. For Sassi, graphic design could play a role in resisting this decay and fostering an authentic cultural alternative. However, in his view, such potential could never develop through institutional or political support, nor through public subsidies. It could only arise from widespread cultural entrepreneurship, built on small independent structures able to operate in the market while critically confronting the dominant media apparatus. Once again, he shifted attention from graphic design and its practitioners to culture, and from individual practice to structural issues.

It is worth noting that "Elogio del Dilettante" was a shortened and repurposed version of a text by Sassi (1985b) previously published in *Alfabeta* and dedicated to literature, a reuse that lends itself to multiple interpretations. One possible reading is Sassi's habit—developed since his collaboration with Simonetti in the late 1960s—of reusing texts and images and of circulating ideas across different channels. Another is that he regarded graphic design and literature, like other forms of cultural production, as subject to the same dynamics and difficulties, yet also capable of contributing to a cultural revolution—one that, not without contradictions and limits, he continued to pursue into the closing years of the 20th century, as *Milanopoesia* evidenced.

In the end, Sassi's emphasis on dilettantism, independence and entrepreneurship did not amount to an alternative designer culture but to an alternative conception of culture and of communication design within it—one that rejected the ideological and ultimately illusory separation from capitalism in favour of critical engagement with its apparatuses, nourished by dialogue across diverse forms of knowledge and practice. This vision informed work spanning art, music, poetry and material culture, as he and his collaborators created infrastructures for cultural production and circulation through multiple channels and publics. The significance of this endeavour is confirmed today by the recognition of Sassi's "other way of making culture" (Pennacchio 2023) across fields such as contemporary art and literary studies.

Conclusion

As Sarah Owens (2019) has noted, graphic design is "a highly permeable" practice, marked by heterogeneous intentions, methods and perceptions, yet also shaped by repeated professional and disciplinary boundary-making processes. The Italian *pubblica utilità* initiatives can be read in this light as an attempt to consolidate professional legitimacy by promoting "good design" grounded in social and cultural values, tied to public institutions and distinct from advertising and commercial propaganda. As this chapter has shown, however, that construction proved a *cul-de-sac*, and, in fact, positions within those events were diverse from the outset.

Recent re-readings of *pubblica utilità* have reconsidered its legacy in relation to contemporary design, shifting attention from ideology and aspirations to the reorganisation of work visible in specific cases—such as Steiner's civic projects or Dolcini's "public utility agency". These studies have also stressed its potential resonance for today's practitioners who pursue social transformation not through institutions but via autonomous or collaborative platforms (Piscitelli 2019; Pierini 2020). From this perspective, reintroducing Sassi's stance appears especially valuable. His neglect in most accounts likely reflects the persistent focus on canonical figures, on designers' relations with civic administrations—especially outside Milan, the centre of his activity—and, more broadly, on affirmative models of professional identity, which he never fully embodied. Sassi's trajectory was far from linear, and his approach, suspended between radical aspirations and entrepreneurial ambition, was not without compromises. For this reason, he

attracted criticism in the 1970s, particularly from exponents of counterculture. On the other hand, his approach to communication often led to friction with his clients. Furthermore, whilst he was recognised by his colleagues as a true organisational linchpin, many personal accounts also describe him as a forceful art director. Although he consistently foregrounded the conditions of cultural production and distribution, he gave little attention to the material conditions of intellectual and creative labour—an omission that strained relations with collaborators. The intention here is not to cast him as an alternative hero of design history—something he himself would have resisted. Rather, Sassi's perspective can help sharpen our understanding of *pubblica utilità* and expose tensions that remain salient in relation to the discussion of design's social and cultural role—particularly in the recurrent claims for design's autonomy and critical agency within capitalist and neoliberal systems (Julier 2013; Brown 2019; Lorusso 2023).

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