

... THE FIRE OF DREAMS / IS SPREADING LIKE A FLOOD / ACROSS A WORLD GLUED TOGETHER WITH BITS OF NEWSPAPER¹

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Elegant fashion models stand out against backdrops cluttered with raw materials and graffiti reading 'X LUISA,' 'LAN,' 'M LAZIO,' or 'FORZA ROMA.' Or else they're shown posing in front of neutral curtains crisscrossed by haphazard black lines and informal art's paint drippings. In other photographs, the same perfect silhouettes are paired with typographical fragments, newspaper clippings, Nembo Kid comic strips, sketched or cut-out figures of suns, moons and planets, or else cogs or pictures of primitive flying machines or futuristic spaceships.

The layout designed by artists Gastone Novelli and Achille Perilli for the catalogues of the fashion house Luisa Spagnoli between 1956 and 1965, and immortalized in the shots taken by Johnny Moncada, seems to be based on the idea of alienation and the intentionally jarring contrast between the polished, total beauty of the female figures in their gorgeous outfits and the space surrounding them. In this empty, monochrome environment, with no horizon visible, fragments of images and forms appear, the associations they stir as evocative as their sudden, inexplicable appearance is disquieting. Thus the perfect, smiling models seem to be beautiful mannequins suspended in space – a space from which, paradoxically, the idea of harmony and beauty appears to have been banned for eternity.

The backgrounds in these photographs contain many of the figures and themes that appear in the works of the two artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These grids and cross-hatchings, at times enclosed in amoeba-like figures; along with writings, collages, images of mountains, planets and moons, hints of uncharted topographies, bachelor machines and comic strips, make up the earliest formulations of that dawning attraction to figurative art that would entice Novelli and Perilli away from the season of informal art.

In his introduction to the first issue of the art magazine *L'Esperienza Moderna* co-founded with Novelli in those same years, Perilli declared, "To come out with a magazine and perhaps some artworks [...] is above all a sign of confidence in what one has achieved over the years and still stubbornly attempts to achieve, looking beyond any conceivable national tradition for one's inspiration and drawing on the experience of the modern avant-garde, which, despite constant efforts to sabotage it, is ongoing."

The two artists brought this same interest in avant-garde experiments to their artistic collaboration with the designer Luisa Spagnoli, to the point that the pages of these catalogues reveal the changes then taking place in much of the Italian art scene, as well as the radical transformation of

the artist's role in the society emerging from the ruins of the Second World War.

Those smoking ruins had definitively dispelled the ideal, so dear to one part of the historical avant-garde, of being in a position to intervene in the surrounding reality constructively, improving it, making it both functional and aesthetically pleasing at the same time. Having lost faith in Leopardi's "magnificent and progressive destiny" of mankind, and of art itself, in the mid-1950s many of the younger artists were strongly attracted to the efforts of those avant-garde movements that had themselves sprung up with another war: movements which championed 'chance' over 'design,' non-sense over rationality, and forays into the psyche and the unconscious over the practical, constructive attitude to reality. Hence the post-war rediscovery of themes and creative approaches from the Dada and Surrealist movements, on display in the pages of magazines such as *L'Esperienza Moderna*.

"Mankind moves forward under the influence of the irrational," Perilli claimed, "and this constant probing of the depths, to the deepest of the deep and down to the most secret self, is an important aspect of contemporary art as it seeks new forms and new images in order to recreate the mythology of our world."

Alongside Paul Klee, one of Novelli and Perilli's long-time favourite artists, others whose works and writings frequently appeared in the Roman magazine included Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters, Tristan Tzara and Raoul Hausmann. The aim was to show how the irrational impulse can become "a sentiment to be cultivated," as Novelli wrote, adding, "a source of passion, a spur to action not inferior to reasoning and scientific curiosity," and "a necessary equalizer of mechanization."

"Faced with novelties in art," Novelli further observed, "people blindfold themselves, fearful that their world made of comforting and edifying ideas about beauty could simply fall apart."

These were the same years when Luisa Spagnoli was herself actively contributing to the construction of an ideal beauty through her own work, committed, in her case, to establishing a lively interaction between art and fashion. The results can be seen in these pictures, which exemplify the growing potential of fashion and design to offer us an image of real life that is beautiful and pleasing – hence, ideally, a better image (and these images still hold sway over our imaginations today for this very reason), while art, at the same time, by now fully aware that the idea of the avant-garde itself was losing its force, stirred our deepest primeval fears up from the shadows.

¹ A. M. Ripellino, *Epistola al signor Perilli*, in *L'Esperienza Moderna*, Rome, no. 3-4, December 1957, p. 19.