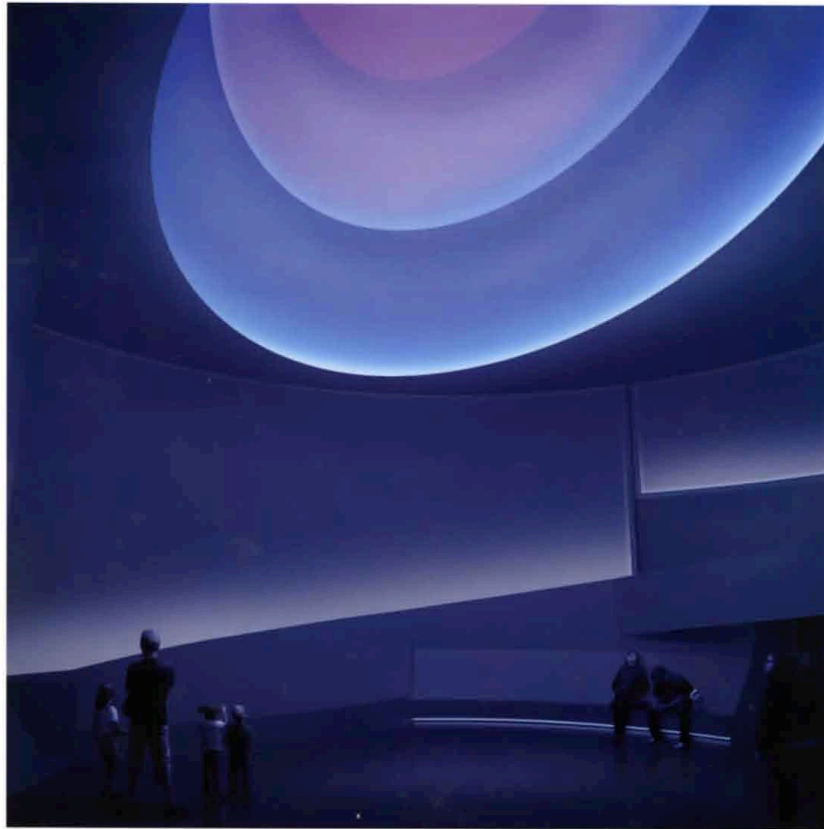


whitewall

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SUMMER 2013



THE DESIGN ISSUE

BJARKE INGELS - LORIS GRÉAUD - JAMES TURRELL - BHARTI KHER

Donoghue, Katy. "Andrea Branzi" *Whitewall Magazine*. Summer 2013.

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ANDREA BRANZI

BY KATY DONOGHUE
PORTRAIT AND STUDIO VISIT BY RYH



"I HAVE NEVER DEFINED DESIGN, AND I DON'T TRY TO UNDERSTAND IT; I PREFER TO SEARCH ABOUT IT, PASS AROUND IT, AND CONSIDER IT A PART OF THE MYSTERY THAT SURROUNDS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN AND THE WORLD OF OBJECTS"

Andrea Branzi is one of the greats in design and architecture still working today. Born in Italy, he was a cofounder of the Domus Academy, the first international postgraduate school for design. The objects he creates, such as his recent "Trees & Stone" series, are best described as poetic. Not only is what he makes beautiful, it's incredibly thoughtful. As he told us from his studio in Milan, his choice to become a designer "was not a simple professional choice, but rather a philosophical one." That became increasingly evident as our conversation moved from ikebana to modernity, and from Joseph Brodsky to his refusal to define design in order to keep the mystery between man and object.

WHITEWALL: *Your work references Japanese space, culture, and tradition — comparing it to ikebana. How did you first become interested in Japanese hospitality and culture?*

ANDREA BRANZI: During the eighties and nineties I had the chance to visit Japan and to understand its sophisticated civilization, so different from our concept of modernity — exhibitionist, triumphal, self-promoting.

In the Japanese culture, the interior space is the central nucleus of a poetic, delicate environment, whose quality is not defined by the shape of the building, but by that of ikebana, tokonoma, ceramics, lacquers; an interiorized architecture that incorporates ancient traditions as well as new technologies.

WW: *A lot of your work deals with the fact that architecture is inflexible, opaque, and rigid — as opposed to other forms like art, design, and music. Why do you think architecture has been so resistant to change?*

AB: The main reason is in the reality of the present city, which is no longer a whole of architectural boxes, stiff and specialized, but a fluid territory, constituted

by the circulation of goods, news, facilities of seven billion people. This changing and immaterial plankton is always changing, while architecture has become an inexpressive container that has unforeseen functions, no longer corresponding to the old building categories.

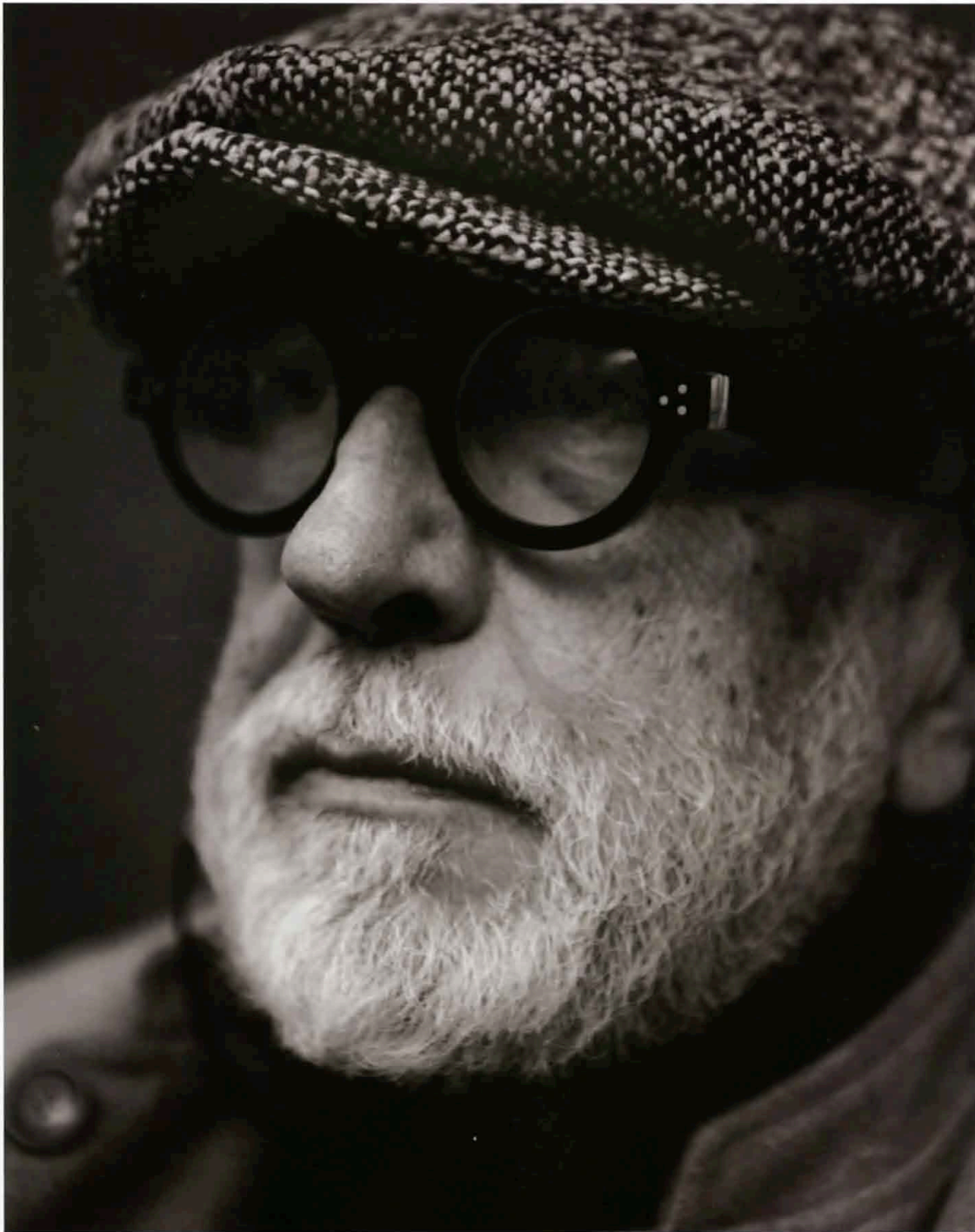
WW: *Can you explain in laymen's terms the idea behind Weak and Diffuse Modernity? What exactly would architecture at an abstract level be?*

AB: The concept of a *Weak and Diffuse Modernity* comes from the awareness that with the collapse of ideologies, the upcoming of globalization, of diffused work, of mass enterprise, of post-Fordist creative economy, the rationalist culture of the 20th century has no more reason to exist. The modernity doesn't build any more permanent cathedrals, but only media icons.

Today the difference between agriculture and architecture, city and countryside, tends to vanish: Both are only different types of production of the same economic logic. The former civilization doesn't exist anymore, and agriculture works through genetic, natural, renewable technologies, much more advanced than the ones — weary and slow — of industry.

WW: *How do we transform the world by changing small things, as you suggest? What are some of the small things we can change?*

AB: The 20th century has left us the heritage of the failing idea that the world can be changed through revolutions, mega-programs, macro-projects, which have never been able to change the quality of the daily life, of the individual space. Design, working on the micro-scale, on under-systems, on the systems of objects, can enter the interstitial spaces of the world megalopolis, in the domestic universes, the only ones really able to change the quality of our daily life.

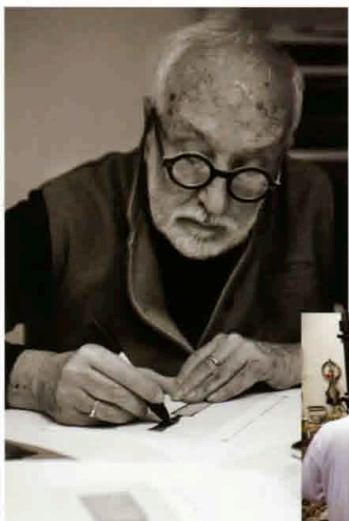


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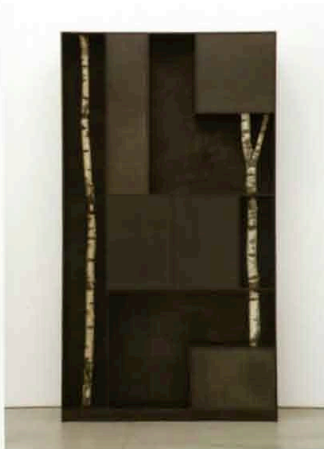
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Previous spread, left:
Andrea Branzi's *Tree 6*
(2010) and *Tree 7* (2010),
installation view.
Courtesy of Friedman Benda Gallery.

Opposite page, from left
to right:
Andrea Branzi
Tree 9
2010
Birch and patinated aluminum
99 x 55 x 13 inches
Courtesy of Friedman Benda Gallery

Andrea Branzi
Tree 2 (detail)
2010
Birch and patinated aluminum
39 x 47 x 10 inches
Courtesy of Friedman Benda Gallery
Andrea Branzi's *Tree*
(detail).



WW: *You've said that the aesthetic quality of space is a question of political nature. How so?*

AB: The aesthetic issue is the great political problem of the future. As the poet Joseph Brodsky put it, the socialist countries have collapsed because of an "aesthetic collapse" that has produced a "political refusal"; just as children identify the "ugly" with the "bad," the aesthetic issue precedes the ethical one.

If the present world wants to survive, it has to face the problem of its own ugliness, of pollution, of the inhumanity that characterizes it, or it is destined to a devastating political refusal.

WW: *At the Milan Triennale in 2007, I believe, you worked with around two hundred young designers. What do you think of design becoming a mass profession?*

AB: Design has (positively) become a new "mass profession" because in the global economy each production field — big or small — has to confront a world competition. Thus, it must be able to always renew its goods offer, its catalogue, its image, its strategy, its communication. For this reason, the number of schools, universities, and institutions teaching and promoting design has widely increased all over the world in the last years, which gives "energy of innovation" to the globalized industrial system that is indispensable to survive. Design for the first time is no longer an elite field for a sophisticated market, but has a strategic role of great importance within the world economy.

WW: *For that project you asked them to create small objects, pleasurable objects, because it is important to work on useless things. What can we learn from working on useless things? What are some things you have learned from working on useless things?*

AB: Actually, we have not asked the new generation to design useless products; it's that they sent objects of high poetic content. They were not "useless" objects, but ones that responded to apparently secondary needs. If we look at the history of the great civilizations, we realize that they have developed investing their best energies just on those activities that nobody asked: poetry, music, art. Therefore, we must be very prudent in judging according to the logic of useful/useless.

WW: *Is there anything useless you're working on now?*

AB: All the things I design may seem "useless" but absolutely "necessary": research, experimentation, innovation, that very often nobody asks me to do.

WW: *How important is hospitality in architecture? What mistakes are still often made in this regard?*

AB: The category of hospitality belongs to ancient and shared traditions that cannot be improvised. In the West, hospitality has been replaced with elegance, luxury, hedonism, which often instead of welcoming someone, make him uneasy.

WW: *How do you define design?*

AB: I have never defined design, and I don't try to understand it; I prefer to search about it, pass around it, and consider it a part of the mystery that surrounds the relationship between man and the world of objects — an anthropologic, psychological, symbolic relationship of which is useless and dangerous to find the interpretation key. There are things that cannot be understood, and it's useless to try to solve them.

WW: *What is the difference between design and architecture?*

AB: I think the fundamental difference consists in the fact that architecture has a perimeter, foundations, fences that link it permanently to a territory. The world of objects is a molecular universe, mobile, exportable, perishable: a "nonterritorial" reality that well represents our present rootless society.

WW: *Do you consider yourself a designer or architect? Are those types of distinctions important?*

AB: These are very important differences that involve different visions of the world.

WW: *In your projects like "Trees & Stone" you said that when you mix nature and technology you are not seeking to reconcile yourself with nature, but with technology. Could you explain that a bit further?*

AB: Nature is the outcome of an energy very close to that of man, while artificial technology comes from logic and in places that don't belong to us. When they are mixed, they can create richer circuits and more complete experiences.

WW: *A primary concern in your work seems to be design and architecture's role in society. So how have the changes in society over time affected and changed your practice?*

AB: They have always changed it, and they change it also today. I don't have a formal, recognizable code or a unique language. My work always starts from the intuitive analysis of the changes happening in the society, technology, and way of life. I'm not interested in design or architecture, but in what they represent within the historical mutations, many times before they are perceivable; I only trust my intuition.

WW: *Could you describe your ideal environment? What kind of spaces have you created in your studio? In your home?*

AB: Maybe, as I am of Hebraic origin, I feel at home everywhere, and a foreigner everywhere.

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