

FOLON  
by Aldo Grasso

For years the first image to greet visitors who landed at Milan Linate's airport as they travelled into the city was a large and luminous design by Jean-Michel Folon on the side of a building; a delicate pastel visiting card to enter a world made of dreams rather than the more mundane world of business to which Milan traditionally devotes its energies. The mural has gone now and on the journey into the city you feel that there's something missing. It's all a little sad. Folon's images, whether of rainbows or flames, always give the impression of coming into contact with something vital, but light as a dream, fragile as a fairy tale.

At the end of the sixties Folon was asked by writer Giorgio Soavi to illustrate Kafka's *Metamorphosis* for the Olivetti edition. Since then, Folon's language has moved out of the narrow world of art galleries to communicate through papers, street murals, and museum walls around the world.

Folon's environmental sensibilities led him to collaborate with Snam and he produced a startlingly beautiful campaign for natural gas using TV animations, large mural in the main Italian cities and original drawings. His simple, mysterious and surprising images thus reached out to a wider audience, beguiled by this new urban voice.

The decision to employ large wall posters as an advertising medium proved successful because they best embodied the essential nature and poetry of the Belgian artist. Theatrical urban canvases which can draw the public, unconsciously, into accepting the advertising message. Urban poetry unique in its impact. "The real museum" says Folon "is found in the walls of the city. You don't have to queue, nor pay to get in. All that people have to do is look around them – the beauty is there, waiting. Art becomes part of everyday life. I paint my dreams in the hope that others can anchor theirs to them."

And how can you anchor a dream? The Folon dream image is stripped to the essentials, simple, graceful but with emotional impact. And it is in this essentiality that it achieves its symbolic nature, the only means of weaving together emotions in which the subject is recreated and sublimated. It is not the "outside" which invades the home, as the television does for its army of armchair voyeurs, but rather the opposite, with the city now the stage, the manifesto, communicating surprise, desire, repulsion, disorientation, identity.

In industrial society our need for human relations derives first from necessity, but evolves gradually into something more akin to a mechanical social response. The more this mechanism rules, the less meaningful our relations become.

Social automatism as indifference. Reality is buried under noise and technological innovation: to get noticed, to attract attention it is necessary to resort to shock. And it's in this ground that Folon plants his poetic flag: light as gas, poking fun in the nicest possible way, playfully intelligent.

We are normally pretty oblivious to much of what goes on around us; to capture and keep our attention it is necessary to distort things. That's the aim of artistic and, more generally, communicative conventions, namely to defeat habit. But even accepted conventions end up fostering automatism rather than eliminating it. Every communicator knows the fundamental law that the amount of information gained from a message falls as its predictability increases. It is for this reason that art and advertising should stupefy. Stupefy derives from the latin stupere which means to amaze, impress, surprise. It is poets who have the task of making us marvel. As Tolstoy said "If most of our complex lives pass unnoticed, it's as if we never were." On this precious fragment, Viktor Sklovksy has constructed his theorem of alienation. "And it is here, to restore a sense of life, to feel "objects", to ensure that stone is made of stone, that art exists. The aim of art is to transmit the impression of an object as a vision and not as recognition. The procedure of art is the procedure of the alienation of objects and the procedure of the obscure form which makes it more difficult to see." Daily life – especially as

today we live in a condition of visual and televisual overflow – renders every message more opaque and muddies every proposition. Perception needs to be removed from automatism, de-contextualising the image.

The artistic message which is contained in the space which normally carries advertising tries not to shrivel up in the usual distribution channels. In the face of artworks interrupted by advertising the response is interrupt the advertising with art. The aim of this parallelism is, as Sklovsky would still say, “as in general with imaginative activities, it is the transposition of the object from its normal perception to the sphere of a new perception, that is an original semantic variation.” And finally, it is necessary to convince oneself that art is not the representation of new things, but a new representation of them.

For many years Folon and Snam collaborated on the advertising campaigns to illustrate the characteristics of natural gas in a gentle and simple way using, above all, a poetic language. Through the artist’s highly personal images of the world – his mechanised and uniform universe inhabited by delicately lost people, what transpires is the magisterial use of watercolour and the meticulous allusive precision. Snam wanted to illustrate the importance of natural gas in the everyday landscape. In the institutional

TV ads or in those regarding products the aim is achieved through a strongly poetic touch, through unexpected combinations, the rainbow and the snow, the blue hand which holds up a flame and the hat, the simplicity of the design and the sophistication of the design.

Folon, with those blue skies which change colour, those serene flights of birds, those suns which become eyes which watch, those flames which meet a blue hat, create a dream but, more importantly, enter the dreams of someone else. From a floating cloud we are told that reality is a world still to explore: as something magical and as a mystery.