

Miuccia Prada

“The latest challenge is art studying the brain”

by **Aldo Cazzullo**

INTERVIEW: MIUCCIA PRADA

“It’s a hard challenge but the lockdown can actually add impetus to creativity”

The designer: the great thing today is studying the brain

by **Aldo Cazzullo**

“I increasingly see the Fondazione as a place for ideas, and not dedicated merely to the visual arts. My cultural training is based more on literature, the cinema and theatre than on contemporary art. Then the meeting with the artists encouraged us to organise exhibitions, and we have learned as we have moved forward. Now with this neuroscience project we are further expanding our field of interest. Starting with the most relevant topic: the human brain. Or rather, brains, in the plural”.

Miuccia Prada tells us that she discovered digital technology with the first lockdown. Now she is preparing for the second one. Tomorrow sees the start of the online conference launching the project called “Human Brains”, in which some leading centres in the world studying the subject have been involved. “For years I have been thinking about a project focused on science. The difficulty is illustrating the story of scientific thinking in an institution created for the visual arts. I turned to Massimo Cacciari, who helped me understand how to start. He indicated neuroscience as being a crucial theme of the present and the future. I knew it would be a very difficult challenge. So we began to put together a group of researchers and experts in various disciplines, who make up a scientific committee chaired by neurologist Giancarlo Comi. We are trying something that no visual arts institution has done so far; even if it will succeed only in part, the intent is so ambitious that it will be worth it, because the Fondazione must somehow be useful and connected to today’s world. Culture is not a feather in one’s cap; it is something that must serve one’s life. Today culture is being questioned, and the cultural elites are being pointed out as enemies of the people. But we want to help the public get closer to science, and not in a superficial way”.

“I fear artificial intelligence”

Miuccia Prada describes the enthusiasm of the scientists for the proposal. “I have been present at many meetings with members of the scientific committee. It immediately emerged that the most interesting aspect was the brain: how it is made, how it works. The researchers and doctors we involved are really happy finally to be able to illustrate what happens within the human mind. There was a lot of discussion about the title: it had to be concise, but it must tell the truth. In the

end the idea of using a plural prevailed: "Human Brains". Because every brain is unique and unrepeatable. There is a desire to create a centre where experts can meet; an independent cultural foundation is perhaps the best place for keeping these people connected".

Don't you find the scenario opened by artificial intelligence disturbing? We have entered the era of the reproducibility of the human being: we are going to make creatures that will have a computer as their brain, and the network as their memory... "This is a theme that would require an exhibition of its own, and it is one of the priorities of the scientific committee. It will be discussed at next week's conference. But first it is right to concentrate on the functioning of the brain: the secret of consciousness, of creativity, of will, of the unconscious. Fascinating too is the history of the study of the brain, knowing how man has always been interested in understanding where thinking, emotions and memory are located in the body". The localisation of thought has in fact wandered around the whole body... "Yes, back in time it was the heart that was considered the center of emotions. Having identified the brain as the center of thinking is a recent achievement; even though we commonly still speak of gut feelings... Artificial intelligence is the most interesting topic of the future. Even today the mobile phone is the extension of our hand and our mind; it is like having an encyclopedia always with us. In the future it will be enough to insert a chip in your body to know every language. It's something that scares my generation a bit. The point will be how to manage this revolution. One that is dangerous, but also useful. In a hundred years, maybe it will be so normal that we won't remember how we were before.

Technology as an extension of the body was the inspiration for Prada's latest fashion show. "Until recently I was suspicious: I didn't want to learn; now I have started to look at technology as an ally. Something snapped when my son Lorenzo, who has joined the company, pointed out to me: "Mum, you take care of everything except what people are taking care of. Especially the web". True, the Internet can be superficial; but it is up to us to fill it with interesting content, to make it a mirror of the complexity of the present. I grew up in a relatively small world: white, European, North American. I am growing old in a global world with hundreds of countries, ethnicities, cultures, religions. And everything is connected. This also explains the difficulties of traditional parties and politics: leaders struggle to make important proposals, because making sense of the complexity is much more complicated than in the last century. We grew up within the dialectic between bosses and the working class; but today power is dispersed in a thousand rivulets. We are already working on one of the next exhibitions, which starts with web contacts and arrives at the idea that every person is a portal. Arundhati Roy has written that the pandemic itself is a portal; because it has created a network of people. Groups have been set up that have connected with other groups. People, although separated, were closer".

Does the prospect of a new lockdown frighten you? "Yes. The first time I was almost prepared to take a break, to enjoy a period of peace and quiet. But this time the lockdown scares me a lot, from an economic point of view as well. One is hard; two are terrible. We are facing six long months. It's clear now that the vaccine will not be arriving before spring. Maybe we will see some new cures first. Lockdown will not be easy, but it is inevitable. Also because of the mistakes that a lot of people made during the summer.

Miuccia Prada says that she is especially worried about young people. "In one way or another we have work. Many young people risk losing it, or not finding it. We have to save the elderly; but we have to think about them too, the young people, because they are the most harmed". Will the pandemic change us? "Yes. Especially with a second lockdown. That will affect everyone, starting with the adolescents. It will leave a mark, although I cannot foresee what that might be exactly.

I'm afraid we will be sadder, more depressed. But if you manage not to become depressed, you can think more and better. And the period we are now entering can even be creative”.

“It is absurd not to download Immuni”

“In the first lockdown, between March and April, I understood the value of the web. I started from scratch. I spent the summer discussing the power of the web, how the web creates thought, perhaps it becomes thought itself. The implications are even greater than we believe. By looking only at one's smartphone, a youth forms a way of thinking that is completely different. I understand that this is the medium through which communication, politics, the results of elections are sent. Advising against it is a waste of time: better to learn to use it well. Perhaps because it is one of the most important inventions in the history of humankind, probably even more than the wheel. The idea of everyone being connected around the world is shocking. Lots of people don't want to download the Immuni App (translator's note: a digital contact tracing app for Covid-19 promoted by the Italian government) for reasons of privacy, and yet the web is within us”.

“Free thought and traditional culture should not be on a collision course with the web,” concludes, Miuccia Prada. “The intelligentsia, which tends to be negative about the web, should learn to use it better than others. It is impossible to eliminate the rubbish, but it is possible, indeed a duty, to write things that are right. Learn to use the tools that people consider are their own. Everything has been simplified and is extremely fast: the average attention span on a topic or an image has gone from thirty to three seconds. We have to learn how to say intelligent things quickly; but to do so we need to have a vision of what we imagine will be our future. A lot of work is needed to make our ideas clear and understandable. You don't govern a country with a hashtag; complexity can't be simplified more than a given amount, but in a world that is fast-moving and closely connected we will have, in contrast, a great advance in what is human and simple. A great revaluation of the simple. This is already happening in my work. This is how the global accompanies the local: everything is scary, and so people tend to surround themselves with safe things, with what they know”.

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Fondazione Prada

Our project on neurosciences is something that no visual arts institution has done so far. Culture must serve one's life.

Young and old

I'm worried that many young people risk losing their jobs. We have to save the elderly, but we have to think about young people too.

About

Miuccia Prada (*above*), 72, is a designer and proprietor of the famous fashion house. She took over the family business in 1978. In 2000, she received an honorary degree from the Royal College of Art in London, and in 2015 the title of Cavaliere di Gran Croce of the Ordine al Merito della Repubblica.