

DESIGN WEEK

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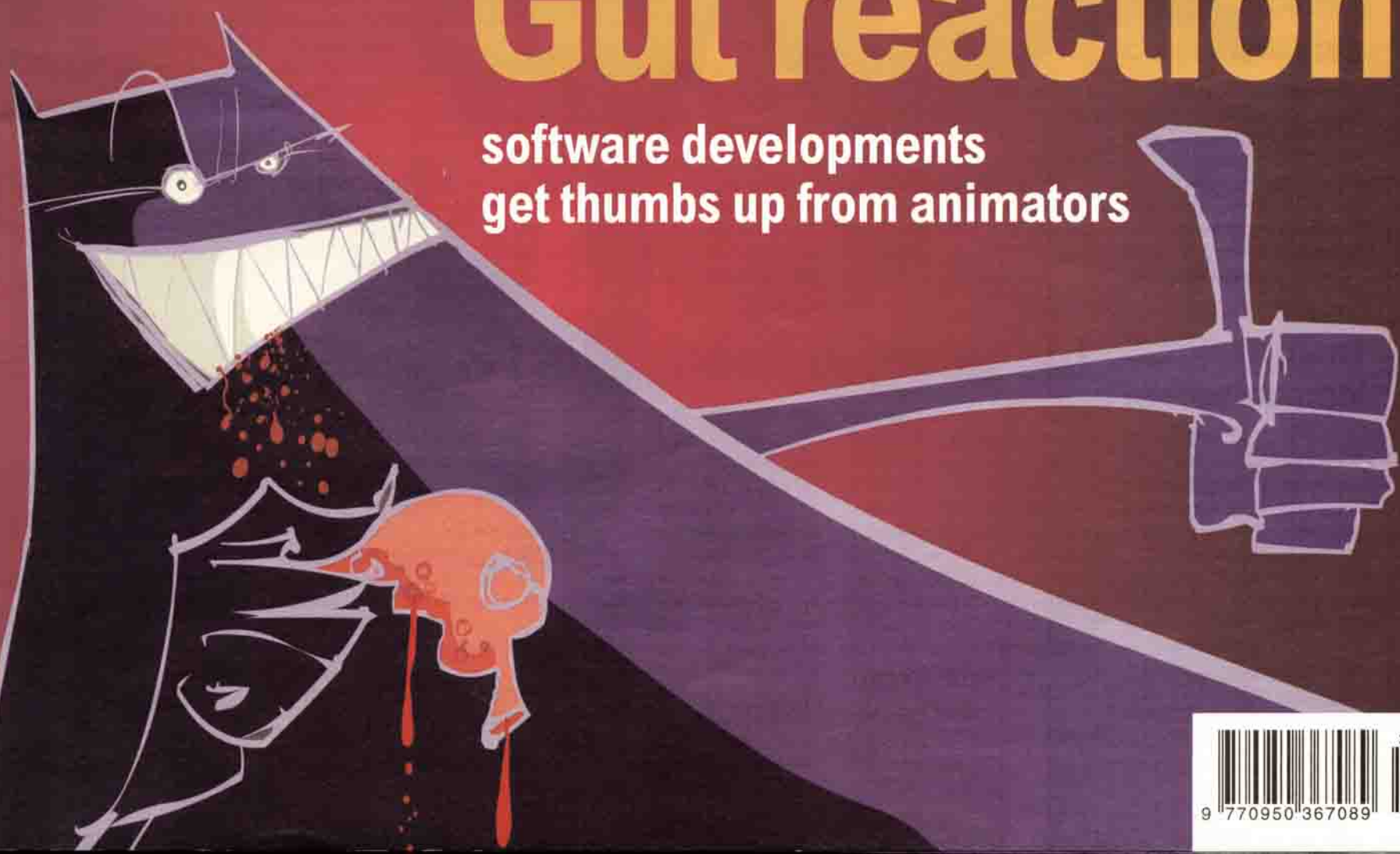
GNER on track to revamp interiors of its electric train fleet

Transport for London trawls industry to build a design roster

Groups vie to create retail branding for Compass café chain

Gut reaction

software developments get thumbs up from animators



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Everyday master

Virginio Briatore is illuminated by Italian designer Achille Castiglioni whose life and works have been chronicled in a new and comprehensive book

'If you're not curious, forget about it. If you're not interested in others, in what they do and how they act, then design isn't the job for you. Don't imagine you're going to be reinventing the world. That's not how it is, or how it should be. Start by working on self-criticism and self-irony. Free yourself of the obsession of wanting to define everything. The street, the movies, TV: this is where you learn to critically observe obvious gestures, conformist attitudes and banal forms. A good design isn't born from the ambition to leave [your] mark, but from the desire to create an exchange, however small, with that unknown person who is going to use the object you have designed'.

These are the wise words of Achille Castiglioni, one of the main definers of 20th century Italian industrial design, taken from a recent interview in Italian magazine L'Espresso. Until May, the task of summing up his 63 years of work into a single article would have been a daunting feat for anybody. Endless books, articles in magazines and periodicals, catalogues and monographs just can't do justice to the prolific output of Castiglioni (or indeed that of the Castiglioni brothers).

This gap has now been filled by the publication *Achille Castiglioni: tutte le opere 1938-2000*, written by Sergio Polano and published

by Electa. Polano is director of the industrial design degree course at the Architecture Institute in Venice. With the assistance of Fiorella Bulegato, Polano has spent three years cataloguing, in 480 pages and 500 illustrations, not only the works, but also various texts by the Castiglioni. The plural is in this case needed, because the activity of Castiglioni is inextricably linked to his brothers. He began in the late 1930s in the studio of his elder brothers Livio and Pier Giacomo. His collaboration with Livio was sporadic, but the work with Pier Giacomo was a symbiotic relationship that spanned 30 years, dividing Achille's career into two parts.

The 'maestro' is now 83. Although tired, he continues to work intensely. He is reticent in talking about himself once again. In one hand, he holds the book that summarises his life, while in the other, an omnipresent cigarette. I pestered him about the exhibition in Edinburgh which is due to open this week at Inhouse, and he kindly consented, almost in a whisper, to answer a couple of questions.

Asked about his relationship with the UK, he underlines a feeling of 'gratitude, in particular for the honorary degree granted to me by the Royal College of Art in 1987, not to mention the prize I received in 1993 from the Chartered Society of Designers'.

From left to right: **Toio** floor lamp designed for Flos with Pier Giacomo; **Arco** floor lamp designed for Flos with Pier Giacomo; Achille Castiglioni with **Dry** cutlery range for Alessi; **Fucsia** for Flos; **Brera S** for Flos



Bill Potter, the director of Inhouse and instigator of the exhibition, says Castiglioni is his favourite designer. 'His designs look as fresh and relevant as on day one,' he says. To understand his relevance in today's design landscape, you just have to look at the ubiquitous presence of his 1962 Arco lamp, featured in lifestyle magazines shoots as well as the Slug and Lettuce pub chains.

Castiglioni started in Italy, when optimism after World War II provided a fertile climate for design creativity and manufacture. 'Not much has changed in Italy since the 1960s,' he says. 'The codes remain the same: that special relationship that exists between designers and manufacturing. But beyond all the spectacle and the theories, we have to remember that design is a service. It means doing something that serves people.'

Observing his work as a whole, you are immediately struck by the strength of the icon, the capacity of certain objects to leave a permanent trace in the memory. The most widespread perception of the Castiglioni brothers is that of product designers, who have created unmistakable signs: the Luminator, the Arco and Parentesi lamps, the Sanluca armchair, the Mezzadro stool, the Cumano table and the

'Servo muto' series.

Yet, their studio has worked in many areas of exhibition design, interior design and architecture, a fact emphasised in the book by the 300 entries of interiors and architectural projects against the 250 works of product design. A huge process of experimentation and research that began when the word 'design' didn't even exist in Italy. Not that things have changed today. 'The profession of "industrial designer" practically doesn't exist in Italy, and therefore in this sector we do not have the kind of professional bodies you find in the US or the UK. The most important works in this field are done by architects or painters, all the rest are spontaneous results obtained through the rational studies of industrial technicians,' says Castiglioni.

Castiglioni's career began when he was still a student. A strong influence was his father, Giannino Castiglioni, a sculptor of 'monumental' forms with a solid traditional approach. 'There's a lot of modelmaking in my work, mainly because I am the son of a sculptor, and I always saw my father working with his hands, shaping material to gradually give it the desired form.' This is a decisive 'footnote', because Castiglioni's works constantly generates a >

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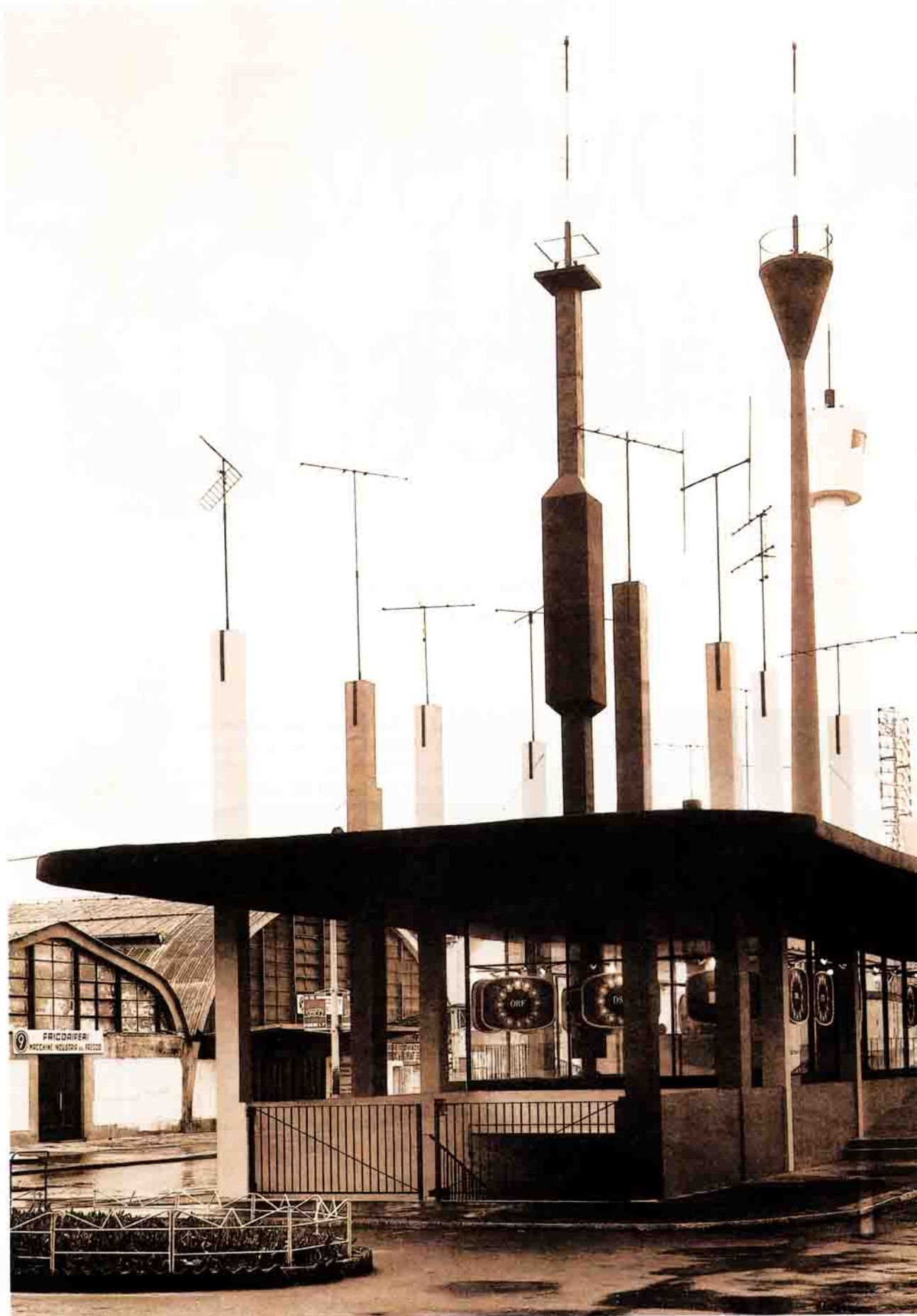


Electa

▷ sense of surprise, there is no separation between the mind and the object, the idea flows and dances through the fingertips.

In 1947 an exhibition on the radio at the Milan Triennale marked the beginning of an extraordinary career in the field of exhibition design, and the start of a long, fertile collaboration with the RAI, Italy's national TV-radio network. But it is no coincidence that the 1940s coincided with the design of a lamp, the Tubino in 1949: a small 6W fluorescent tube with a little roof that reflects the light, grafted on to a continuous metal tube that bends to form the base and the arm. It was produced by Arredoluce, redesigned in 1974 to adapt to new regulations, and since 1999, it has been produced by Habitat. This was the first in a successful series of ingenious lamps, designed from the point of view of the light source itself. An idea that has been taken up from other designers: just look at the projects by Ingo Maurer and Droog Design, Harri Koskinen or even the young Italian Lorenzo Damiani, who makes a lamp out of an Osram light bulb, hung up directly in its plastic packaging.

The 1950s and 1960s were an explosion of creativity, in the design of both spaces and products. In 1949, the Castiglioni brothers were selected, from 17 invited competitors, to design the reconstruction of the headquarters of the 'Società per le belle arti ed esposizione permanente (Society for the Fine Arts and Permanent Exposure) in Milan. At the same time, another lasting working relationship was formed, with the chemical corporation Montecatini, for the design of its temporary exhibition stands and installations. Over the decades, this activity in the field of exhibition design brought on two distinct phenomena. One is the orientation towards teamwork, with the aim of excelling in all the components of visual and spatial communications. This has led to lasting collaboration with the witty genius of Bruno Munari, the renowned graphic artists Max Huber, Michele Provinciali, Albe Stainer, Gian-





Far left: Cover of the book *Achille Castiglioni: tutte le opere 1938-2000*; Left: RAI TV pavilion designed in 1958 with graphics by Heinz Waibl; Above: Record watch for Alessi with graphics by Max Huber; Below: Taccia lamp, designed for Flos with Pier Giacomo



carlo Illiprandi, Pino Tovaglia and, starting in the 1970s, with Italo Lupi, Paolo Ferrari and, above all, Gianfranco Cavaglià. The second phenomenon is the solidity of the relationships themselves, both with collaborators and clients, an ability to develop long-term productive ties with public agencies, large corporations, furniture manufacturers. At times, as in the cases of Gavina, Flos, Zanotta, Cassina, De Padova, this designer-client relationship ranged from products to trade fair stands, shops to showrooms to the design of private homes.

In 1960, the Splügen Bräu beer hall/ restaurant was opened with graphics by Max Huber. It was an imaginary dining car on three levels designed specifically to take advantage of Milanese vanity, as the guests could see and be seen chatting in a 'modern', but warm atmosphere. Some of the objects designed for this place became successful products, like the Splügen Bräu hanging lamps, the Spluga stool, the Servopluvio umbrella stand and the Servofumo floor ashtray.

These were the years of sensational inventions, from the Mezzadro and Sella seats (1957), later produced by Zanotta in 1971 and 1983, to the suspended bookcase (1957), produced by Bernini in 1966 almost ten years after. In 1962, Flos produced the Arco and Toio floor lamps and the Taccia table lamp. In 1965, Castiglioni designed the Rampa movable, stepped cabinet produced by Bernini, which was inspired by the shelving system used by flower vendors in the streets of Milan.

This was also the time of the creation of an object that has become a symbol: the small switch designed for electrical supplier VLM. When asked which of his objects he is most proud of, Castiglioni invariably replies, 'The switch I designed 30 years ago with my brother Pier Giacomo. It has been produced in great numbers, it is purchased for its formal quality, yet no one

in the shops that sell electrical supplies, knows who designed it. It's pleasant to hold in your hand, and it makes a nice sound. When I enter a hotel room around the world and I reach out to find the bedside lamp, my hand encounters our switch.' Over 15 million of these switches have been made, with their rounded form to facilitate movement and designed to meet the hand that searches for them in the dark. An anonymous object that incarnates the design ideals of its creators.

The switch was one of the last objects designed with Pier Giacomo, whose premature death in 1968 split Achille's career into two parts, though the method of work remained the same. For the Flos showrooms in Milan, for exam-

ple, he used and updated, in the three projects in 1976, 1984 and 1990, a formula based on a theatrical use of light, developed with Pier Giacomo back in 1968. The continuity is even more evident in the Primate seat, an encounter between two cultures of sitting, produced by Zanotta in 1970, and in the Parentesi lamp in 1971. 'The lamp comes from an idea of the sculptor Pio Manzù – Castiglioni has often recalled – who thought of a fixed vertical stem and a cylindrical box with an opening for the light, that could move up and down, with a bolt to hold it in one position. I replaced the stem with a metal cord. By moving the cord friction is created, permitting the lamp to remain in one position without the need for a bolt.'

Over the next 20 years, his work included flatware, tableware, radiators, bathrooms, hospital beds, furniture, a wristwatch for Alessi, as well as the Taraxacum light in 1988, based on a concept developed in 1958. As Polano writes, Castiglioni is 'capable, as few others are, of managing and communicating his own image, with daring expedients and amusing exhibition assemblages, programmatically measured by self-deprecating irony and understatement'.

The works of the 1990s are the more familiar ones: the office furniture designed with Michele De Lucchi, the successful hanging lamps Brera and Fucsia, the light armchair designed for Moroso with Ferruccio Laviani, the amazing installations for the exhibitions of Bticino. Little more can be said about a man who has won nine Compasso d'Oro Prizes and ten international awards, has 14 works on display in the permanent collection of The Museum of Modern Art, and others shown in 11 museums worldwide.

The only thing to add is that he too is fully identifiable with his work: anonymous and yet world renowned, a linguistic icon and a common language. As he put it clearly in an interview for Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, 'Don't ask me where design is going, because I don't know. All I know is that design objects shouldn't be in a museum, but in everyone's home. Obviously being included in an exhibition at the Moma is gratifying. But I felt more touched when I see one of my electrical sockets in a hotel in Hong Kong. Good design must last in time, until it is fully consumed. I despise the "spectacularisation" that's happening today, I think of design only as teamwork, I don't design things to leave my mark. There is no Castiglioni style. There's a Castiglioni method.' □

Achille Castiglioni: tutte le opere (the complete works) 1938-2000 by Sergio Polano, is published by Electa and priced £180. The exhibition Design Masters: Achille Castiglioni runs from 8 August until 1 September at Inhouse, 28 Howe Street, Edinburgh EH3 6TG.

Translation of this article by Steve Piccolo

