

mas prerrogativas: la de ser un «creador de objetos», que es una de las capacidades que más lo diferencian de los animales. Bienvenidas sean, pues, las innovaciones tecnológicas que permitan al hombre mejorar su *modus vivendi*, pero a condición de que no oscurezcan su capacidad ancestral de crear objetos *ex-novo*, al igual que la Divinidad o el Azar han creado siempre «objetos naturales».

Design: between the natural and the artificial object

Without the need of referring to known psychological «perceptivist» theories, there is a phenomenon which should be evident to anyone: the fact that we are driven to distinguish —within the undifferentiated web of infinite visual calls that hammer us— determined configurations —let's call them pure *Gestalten*— which prevail over many others.

Anyone who has ever paid a minimum of attention to the modes of their visual perception will have noticed that they are pushed to select some objects in the panorama that surrounds them, be it a room, an office, or a rural or displaced metropolitan landscape.

When we say «object», we naturally mean: pencil, watch, chair, telephone; but also a polished stone, a termite, a nest, etc. In other words, there is a world of objects (quite different from that «*Système des objets*» of which Baudrillard spoke in his time), constituted of that set of natural and artificial, industrial and artisan elements without which our own existence would lack meaning because it would not have a «point of reference», and even —individually— the satisfaction of considering ourselves in our turn a «creator of objects», like the Divinity or Chance.

The fact that, afterwards, the identification of these «perceptive groupings» to which we attribute the dignity of objects depends on an exclusively utilitarian reason or a personal esthetic preference, is not something I mean to investigate in this work. That which I need to express is that, on first examination, the distinction between a human-created object and one which nature has put at their disposal is not clear: for which reason we could say —adopting Goethe's celebrated phrase «*auch das Unnatürlichste ist Natur*» even what is most unnatural is nature. That is to say, we are forced to make many artificial products enter a natural context; in the same measure, I would add, that we are willing to consider artificial, that is to say, as if they were created by us, many formations which are totally natural: termites, nests, crystals, water-polished stones... in a word, everything that in a certain sense is differentiated from the «chaotic» element, and in some way nears a principle of «formal coherence».

Looked at this way, it is exactly the coherence that

induces us to select formations we consider «objects»; and it is possibly just the incoherence that which occasionally characterizes some «artistic objects» that can be non-functional, «superfluous», but intrinsically delicate configurations.

Consequently, we live among objects, we feel esthetically —and sentimentally— attracted by them, and above all, we often transform them into symbolic elements —memory receptacles, vehicles of passions, or even, oftener than we think, endow them with «magical» potential: propitiatory or apotropaic.

I believe that for any up-to-date analysis of the object universe that surrounds us and which is obviously made up above all of objects serially and industrially produced, and which has also involved —from Duchamp on, passing through pop art, *arte povera*, conceptualism— a good part of the artistic panorama, it is imperative to return somehow to the origins of this world of objects, without drawing a chrono-history (which would be completely impossible in this context), but at least indicating its essential points of departure and arrival.

The fact that many primitive implements created (or found) by humanity —silex, obsidian arrow-heads, etc.— should have, apart from the specific function of cutting, boring, killing, a function that we cannot but define as esthetic and symbolic, brings about that this double or triple function of the object, as natural as, in a second term, «artificial», becomes indispensable and must be considered with great attention. This also explains why, even nowadays, a superstitious sacralization of certain familiar objects (perhaps inherited from parents or grandparents) takes place, perhaps for affective reasons or from a kind of ancestral collectionism. Many of these domestic objects can thus be invested with a particular power —constituted by the set of traditions and ceremonies hallowed by use— and thus avoid the loss by those who possess them of the capacity to use them in the best way as did those who long ago possessed the work implements, the arms, or the magical simulacra.

According to some anthropologists (for example Robert Layton in *Antropologia dell'arte*, 1984) it is necessary to recognize the artistic value of this kind of objects, as a will to «beautification» is never absent, not even in more primitive cultures (Australian aborigines, for example).

Today, in an era in which the industrial object is evidently in crisis, not only because of the esthetic and

technical obsolescence of many industrial products but also because of the peculiar situation of passage of our civilization from a «mechanical» phase to an «electronic» one (it is easy to watch the constant disappearance of many manufactured products and articles which are substituted by «signs», «signals», buttons, etc., and which, therefore lose their consistency as objects and on the contrary gain a «semantic or signalized consistency»).

Another phenomenon typical of the latest years that incides deeply on the structuring and valuation of the panorama of industrial objects is the incessant miniaturization of many of the products of industry (think of the fusion and conglomeration of objects that had been separate and are today consistent: telephones, telegraph machines, faxes, microphones, dictaphones, etc.) so that there is an increasing urgency for a rediscovery of the identity of the object which must be traced to where the fusion or miniaturization which have led it to disappear has not taken place.

This «return to the object», as it obviously cannot be carried out with those products that have found a different structure, will eventually invade other sectors where the possibility of an independent «formal» existence still exists. In this sense we see, and will probably continue to see in the future, a recovery of some forms of artisan work, apparently agonistic or that had not found their exact use. Therefore, the absolute pre-eminence of the industrially created object will be substituted by a new artisan phase, partly linked more to artistic factors, partly begun by the rediscovery of natural materials forgotten in the recent past but newly usable. And not only this, but we will also see a recovery of symbolic and mytho-poetic factors present in other times in many objects of the far and more recent past.

I have stated that it would be opportune to restore symbolic value to the object; this means, once more, taking one step back and one forward: if we look at the artifacts of antiquity —prehistoric but also historic— we immediately realize that many of them were invested with a potent magical charge, as I have already affirmed and as any good anthropologist (from Franz Boas to Lévy-Bruhl, from Gilbert Durand to V. Turner) has confirmed. Can we say the same of those pertaining to the object universe that surrounds us? Almost always, the answer is no. It is true that «status symbols» are often mentioned, that is to say, a value that symbolizes a socio-economic situation (referring

to powerful competition machines, high-category motor launches, jewels, horses, etc.) but it is easy to realize that this is not the symbolism to which I wish to allude. It would literally be degrading the profound value of the term «symbol» if we applied it to the vulgar exhibitionism of riches and power. However, an authentic symbolic-mythic value still lurks in many objects that we use every day, even though we are not conscious of it. Let us look at some foods —converted into objects— such as bread, wine, honey; at fruit such as apples, figs, bananas; furniture such as chairs, lights, pantries; object-architecture such as towers, pyramids, etc. In all these cases the metaphoric value is as strong as the real and everyday value.

But an analogous principle also acts on many products of recent creation: how can we not recognize the symbolic value of a telephone, a PC, a Swatch watch, of many domestic machines?

It is certainly not casual that many of the best-known design products have been christened with names such as Penguin, Yeti, Turtle, Vespa (wasp), Bee, Bat, or others even more fantastic but always related to a certain formal assonance: Hypotenuse, Eclipse, Iridescence, Snail, for lamps, and Nymphaea, Lace, Comet, Asteroid, etc. for sofas.

Many of these names —invented by the designer, the marketing people, the publicists— often coincide, and not superficially, with the nature of their respective products and end up assuming an analogic and metaphoric role of which, without a doubt, no-one was conscious at the beginning.

We realize every day, watching a «flock» of planes on an airport runway, so similar to real birds; the jungle of computers at an employee's desk, like an army of imps at the service of no-one but themselves; the televisions turned on in living rooms in the evening, true magicians reciting their bewitching litanies... we realize, I was saying, that humanity has become, in good measure, a slave of the objects it has created, no less than in the time of «savage thought», totem masks, animal taboos, talismans and fetishes that surrounded it.

If, later, we pass from an extrinsic slavery to an intrinsic one, that is, to the intervention of those instruments that allow us to insert ourselves into so-called «virtual realities», we realize that the distinction between artifice and nature, between natural and artificial objects, becomes more difficult and ambiguous. As is well known, by means of certain optical, tactile,

and special auditive «prostheses» (glasses, the *data-glove*, the *data-suit*) (see the work of J. F. Foley, S. R. Ellis, R. Manzini, Tomás Maldonado) we are able to penetrate spaces, dimensions and «objectual realities» that are totally fictitious and illusory, but that have the «perceptual» aspect of authentic nature. Even though we have exaggerated valuing positively or negatively the impact of this false reality, there is no doubt that at this moment it must be taken into account, above all to clear up where the division between natural and artificial lies.

We can unreservedly aver that with the advent of new electronic means, and even from the first television artifacts (like the *mixer* or the *chroma-key*) and even the diverse types of «simulators» created in the U.S. for simulating space and cosmonaut's cabins, a new era has opened up in our way of facing the reality (or irreality) of nature. This also cannot avoid influencing object design itself and its esthetic aspects.

Obviously, I hope that this possibility of creating inexistent and fictitious realities, and also of acting on the esthetic plane through new electronic systems (video-art and computer art), will not corner effective artistic inventions («manual» production of paintings and sculpture) and those of design and architecture—even though these are only partly artistic. It would be a grave danger which would end up depriving humanity (and the child even more, for whom «manual creativity» and neokinetics are essential for the awakening of esthetic impulses) of one of its maximum prerogatives: that of being an «object creator» —one of the capacities that most distinguish it from the animal. Welcome, then, the technological innovations that permit humanity to better its *modus vivendi*, but with the condition that they not overpower its ancestral capacity to create objects *ex novo* in the same way as the Divinity and Chance have always created «natural objects».