

Catalogue of the exhibition “Ricostruzione teorica di un artista; Bruno Munari nelle collezioni Vodoz – Danese, Milano, 1996

FOSSIL OF THE DAY AFTER by Manolo De Giorgi

With four years to go till 2000, an attempt could by now be made to sum up the contents of certain transparent brick-like objects, called “fossils” in 1959, and again re-christened “fossils” in other groups dated '79 and in '85. Were they an exact prophecy? Were they right? Is that how things turned out?

As the deadline approaches, the composition of those materials, with a long gaze into the future/present conceived forty-one years ago and buried in the density of acrylic resin, speak volumes about our end-of-the-century goods and chattels.

Set in those transparent bricks is a sample of what our most typically industrial civilisation produced, and of what might today have been lost; of what almost invisibly accompanied our daily material culture; and of what we perhaps too lightly regarded as a heritage within constant easy reach, always available. Which was not always to be the case.

When Munari first thought of putting all this into the hibernation of acrylic resin, many such concerns had not even been skimmed over, because such materials and products were in effect available. This is all the more significant considering the date: 1959! With Italy growing in 1959 at the rate of 7% a year and riding its exhilarating boom, who on earth would have felt like preparing a sort of pre-funeral industrial aesthetic? Who ever would have bothered to collect and put into an interrogative position a product that was being produced everywhere and daily overflowing in massive quantities like an interminable manna for the world of reproducibility? Who would have noticed that that, too, was one day likewise in any case doomed to be used up?

A very precise idea about the value and its meaning was needed before it could be thought of in biological terms, while assimilating it to an organism whose growth, development and successes we observed, but the atrophy of whose parts and the inexorable decline of which could in projection also have been ascertained. Seasons of material and seasons of production: concepts that are today fairly comprehensible, were then very far removed from the sensitivity of manufacturers and designers. Munari's fossils anticipated them in the shape of a deeply tender warning: beware of the fact that every civilisation, whilst in the vitality of its impetus producing its values of use and exchange, also produces its own archeological material. Munari played and joked with and even made puns out of small metal or plastic parts, in the general composition of those small transparent bricks. But then at the same time he inoculated into those component parts of a strictly functional world the idea that they might soon afterwards become symbolic remnants of our civilisation. A civilisation that already bore the sings of decadence?

No, not at all. the civilisation in question was that of a then triumphant, omnipresent and ruling mechanical and chemical production. But the material by its nature was at all events bound to have grown liable to a vital cycle, against which Munari took precautions to secure himself by somehow anticipating its historicization.

A “season of materials” would appear to have occurred for this civilisation too; metal and plastic were to witness the advance of other leaders, and would in part have to curb their ambitions of ecumenical control over the universe of goods, eventually having to reintroduce themselves as materials “on a par” with others. As Munari had frequently pointed out, “every object and every function has its proper material”; and since in antropological terms, “object” and “function” are two variables, their related material would also be so in consequence.

Munari examined all these repercussions in relation to design; and with the magnifying glass of a man about to hand a probable truth to History, namely: that large numbers of fine metal details would vanish and be ousted by leds and miniature electronic components, whilst many of the semifinished products treated at the time with scant attention would rise to the rank of powerful expressive vectors of a new “less is more”. The alternating variable substances of a single material

would usher a fresh aesthetic into the principles of articulation; unusual connections between materials would pave the way for a different polymaterial sensibility. Scrap and waste would also manage to cloak themselves in a certain degree of rarity.

All these developments to come were “halted”, so to speak, and consigned to the 3 centimeter thickness of transparent bricks, as if these were to become the contemporary equivalent of a silex stone with most of our available information on the Stone Age condensed on it.

With a really long look ahead (it takes total surrealist-dada irrationalism to see certain things), Munari had grasped that even the all-engulfing industrial culture of the Fifties and Sixties could be dismantled, put together again and stripped bare, to see just how long its components would “last”. With the lightness of a game, once again, Munari undertook to perform an extremely serious operation on material. In any case the game served to dismantle and reassemble those parts – until their organizational principles and structuring motives could be understood. Materials and production were to be subject to cycles, hence the necessity to comprehend their genealogy, conditions of opportunity, strategies and physiology, as happens with any living organism. The material adopted for the paste used to capture the fossils was yet another confirmation of this biological principle. Since the neutral acrylic resin would in time have veered towards an alteration of its initial colour, why not design it directly in relation to its decay, i.e. yellowish? By remaining anchored to this naturalism, Munari's foresight was right: even the logic of mechanical and chemical production in the long term were to prove neither eternal nor infallible. While everyone was feasting at the table of reproducibility for a mass production that would bring permanent freedom of large numbers to design, Munari launched his archeological pre-alarm signal for a textural project that was neither strong nor evasive, where material would be the most intense link between us and evolution, between an ever changing culture of behaviour and a world of machines with wide margins of imperfection.