

For a creativity of de-growth

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"They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers... They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven".

(Anonymous, *Epistle to Diognetus*)

In certain eighteenth-century illustrations a scientist is portrayed on his knees as his body ecstatically passes through the celestial hemisphere to look at the planets in the cosmos: leaving behind the vision of the ancient world in the new light of Galileian science. I sometimes think we ought to travel the opposite way, not going back to ancient times, of course, but reversing the way we look at things, from modern abstraction to the empirical experience of the earth, of that which we see, touch and breathe. It sometimes seems to me that in this figure we can see one of the ever-elusive metaphors for the artist. When we attempt to look at the real space in which we live, outside of the abstract light of the modern and postmodern utopia, but within concrete experience, in solitude and with others, we can attempt to disconnect ourselves from the embrace of the dead who dance in our place in our lives.

Toward a design of degrowth

Among the professions that support today's service economy, postmodern design sanctions the nearly complete implosion of all modern distinctions among various disciplines, genres and forms of knowledge, in that they have become subsystems of the global economy as a single system presiding over global imagery. Designers "design" the liturgy of this world. They are the perfect counsellors in this system. They do not preside over the liturgy, but they suggest it. They do not descend from craftsmen, but are creatures of the Renaissance. They have "the plan". They are "experts in intentional, meditated integration of different manufactures"; they orient their hypotheses and principles in an attempt to make the liturgy of the modern irresistible. The designer's world is born in the intangible *space* of white paper, and is applied to the world like a map, superimposed over that which exists. And yet the artist-designer does not impose, but proposes, suggests. It is up to the individual to decide – although within a system, a person doesn't even realise he or she is part of the system, and is therefore unable to decide whether to stay in it or not.

When a dominant system such as the for-profit economy becomes a global spectacle, when it takes over every biopolitical aspect of the world, even the artist and the designer become a part of it, whether they want to or not. And then they more urgently feel the need for radically alternative design, for a reconfiguration of art which is convivial, environmental, community-oriented – if the etymological root of community comes from *cum-numus*, that is, gift: the gift of being together with other people without any mercantile interests.

This is why I would like to start with the image of a sculpture by Michelangelo Consani: a solar cooker as beautiful as a peacock that opens up to the light to heat up a pot which is warming as the meal is being prepared.

Having abandoned those mental impediments that once prevented a vision of artistic activity which extended beyond the boundaries of the discipline, Michelangelo conducts a wide-ranging environmental study based on strict analysis of concepts such as energy, process, reality, full and empty, negative and positive, contradiction and ambiguity, banality and repetition...

This rejection of the spectacular does not lead to obscuring or annulment of form, but to the search for a process, just as Tom Thumb left breadcrumbs along the trail, in which form only appears as the final and temporary result, which then disappears. This form can still be thought of as a sculpture, but the process that directs it is rather a reference to the genetics of a sculpture.

Reflecting on how things originate means going back to the initial choice from which alternative routes branched out which were for some reason rejected. And so it means imagining his motivations, in which the final result, which the spectator sees first, the form, appears unessential. But we need to go back to the genetics of this form, like an hourglass to be turned over.

Two examples

A little sculpture "shows" the forms of white plastic cups. Be careful: they look like cups, but they are actually only moulds of cups. They look like plastic, but they're not. They're banal plastic forms which are not even made of marble, but of marble dust: a material that brings to mind the exploitation of the quarries in the Apuan Alps, which are public property, to benefit the private enterprises which have been transforming the landscape for decades, emptying it out from the inside without any control, destroying water tables and polluting without even redistributing the huge profits they are making in the local area. Marble from the Apuan Alps, which at one time brought to mind the great history of Italian sculpture, is now ground into dust and sold as such to the consumer goods industry.

The sculpture is created by the short circuit between cup and marble dust, associated with the modernist memory of Brancusi's infinite column and with the concept of unlimited economic growth. But if its visible form tends to eclipse its reasons in favour of its immediate presence, and therefore that which is absent, it attempts to refer to its meaning anyway. The banality of the chosen object and the process shift attention onto that which we can still know. And so exploitation of the marble used to make dust is associated with the plastic cup as a post-consumption waste material, with the destruction of ancient springs by the marble industry, with the consumption of privately owned water in plastic containers. And so that which is visible is that which is missing (the real cup used as a model, the water, or the emptiness of the cup) and that which was invisible becomes full, so that the content and its genetic process are almost surprised by this spectral appearance whose presence seems to cancel their history.

But as if in a flash, constellations of meaning are formed among objects, inviting us to trace our steps backwards, to look for the traces.

Another example. Dead leaves. They seem to be linked with autumn, with the precariousness of life (like an iceberg on a toothpick, or a snow boot with a stiletto heel), with uncertainty, but also with the language of poetry, which hands them down in the collective imagination. But after all, as the seasons go round, they will grow again out of the branches. And so why did he not collect real leaves directly from a street or a garden? Then I understood why: to make leaf sculptures with a friend. For he made them out of ceramic, ultra-light, delicate, spending long days in

the studio with Roberto C. learning the technique and reproducing real leaves with artificial details somehow alluding to replacement of nature with its simulacrum. And so the sculpture became an occasion for dialogue and friendship. And then it is not put away in a private place, but becomes a sort of public "monument", a message devoid of all monumentality. This is why this sculpture has no pedestal.

The objects presented in the gallery and outside are not separate entities, forms of language with a special statute different from other things, from the chair in the room, from the windows, from the paper in the wastebasket, from the fly, from the floor, from the woman at the window, from the threshold of the house to the park and out into the city. The white space in the exhibition, which he considers nonsense, has already started when the visitor is still at home and then crosses the road to go to the exhibition. In other words, what Michelangelo is interested in is, as he has always said, real life. There is no longer any separation between art and reality. But what seems to interest him is the movements, the flows of attention, the more or less secret processes that flow through it, that act all over.

Perhaps for the same reasons, Michelangelo's work ranges all over, from informal economies (as in his *Barter* project) to technology, attracted by the surprising relationship between empirical experience and science.

And like entropy

I couldn't say how much Michelangelo has worked on the concept of "entropy", but it does seem to recur. Energy's transition from one state to another (along with discontinuity, with proceeding in dark flashes, paradoxes, ambiguities) brings us back, by means of a few abstractions, to the essential core of *arte povera*. In both we can feel the need to overturn the object and make it into experience in the same way as we perceive a sort of ghastliness. But Michelangelo does not seem to have this obscure compulsion to repeat which we saw glimpses of in certain mechanisms of the seventies, energy systems which break the object in a struggle to occupy space anywhere, in the affirmation of individual artistic spaces which may contrast with a linear concept of progress but also see it as unavoidable. And in Michelangelo, the mechanism attracts energy but is then emptied out. There is awareness of an entropy but also a search for a positive sign. For the process goes not conclude in a takeover of power, but rather in absencing oneself, neutralising any beginnings of negativity, as if diving into the sea.