

- En otras palabras: ¿por qué se hace de la ética un moralismo de corte casi religioso?
- ¿Por qué se llega a enjaular al hombre con reglas/instrucciones de uso que generan esterilidad?
- ¿Por qué el resultado de ciertos encuentros ecologistas (congresos u otros) es el *aburrimiento*?

Es seguramente una pretensión enorme tratar de responder a estas preguntas, aún más grande si el deseo es el de no caer en un enunciado ideológico, entendido éste como una serie de principios preconfeccionados para responder a la realidad forzándola.

En este momento sólo intuyo vagamente algunos intentos de respuesta:

- Coincido ampliamente con el arquitecto Clino Castelli en la necesidad urgente de llegar a crear un *lenguaje*; la introducción de valores fundamentalmente estéticos que representen la primacía ética y ofrezcan la posibilidad de transformar los productos (y sus tipologías) a través de una iconografía rica para el diseño.

- Concebir el diseño ecológico no como un mítico terreno aislado, sino como *parte integrante de un todo* más vasto y articulado. En estos años de vida profesional se hace más clara la evolución de los años ochenta hacia los noventa (cierto que definir los unos y los otros significaría todo un artículo) y la necesidad de operar como proyectista, no ya en el producto singular u objeto, sino en el seno de una estrategia de proyecto (¡y casi de observación de la vida!) que alguien designa como *dirección de diseño*... Y esto también es otro artículo.

Ecological design: O2 International

Every time I am asked to write about the subject of ecology there surge up sensations, ideas, images, questions... *Where are we going?* What are they really asking me for?

So one of the ways of starting to know where we are is to look back at a little history.

How was the subject born? What is O2?

In 1987 in Milan a number of designers of different nationalities, determined to face up to the environment problem of designed products, created an international association called O2, derived from the symbol that designates the oxygen molecule.

It is of some significance that O2 was born at the end of the eighties, and in Milan: it rarely happens in the history of a city that it experiences a synergic confluence of many forces. It happened in Paris at the beginning of the century (in painting, sculpture, etc.); and it happened in Milan in the nineteen eighties in design and the city took on an international «form», a tendency it had always had (it is part of the essential character of the inhabitants of the Lombardy area) but which never before had manifested itself with such vigour.

What had been sown in the years following the end of World War II produced its fruit, or rather its flowers, in the eighties... Designers from all over the world arrived by chance or intentionally, attracted by the distinct possibility of really *practising design* —design had finally ceased to be an «industrial dream» and had become a reality— and backed up by a solid base which was to create the substratum necessary for its growth: *Italian craftsmen*, their awareness of how to do things, their *know-how*; all this combined with a great improvement in production technology and the invention of new materials which were to break down the traditional production limits (creating others which would be of importance with the passage of time); there was the possibility of investigating, testing, inventing and producing for an expanding market that was hungry for novelty, stimulated by publicity and numerous exhibitions such as the Fira del Mobile Euro luce, etc.

They were, moreover, enjoyable years, full of illu-

sory optimism, when everything was permitted (...*se non sono matti non gli vogliamo!*). What is more, the eighties were a period which not only saw a significant growth in the attention paid by the industrialized world to environmental problems but also coincided with a notable change in the evolution of design. In fact, together with the birth of the post-modern movement there arose a series of explosions of almost frenzied styles and formalism. It was understandable, therefore, that some designers began to turn their attention to themes of a deeper content with the aim of contributing to changes in the society, a society which was beginning to show motives for alarm:

- The *yuppie* culture, which had extended to a wide range of levels and which had been the symbol of those years, was beginning to fill itself up with «emptiness» («the advancing nothingness»)¹
- The consumer ideal, which had reached unthinkable proportions, was becoming wearisome and unable to sustain market requirements to an unlimited degree.
- The blindness of industry (still with us) in not foreseeing and providing new oxygen for a situation of this nature.
- The capitalist-liberal delusion that the economic pressure could be assuaged by means of the Eastern block markets after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989.
- *Profit* as the only objective to be pursued by the international capitalism liberal movement.
- The invasion of the world by object/products of low cultural quality.
- Design (and designers) subdued and tamed once again in order to become one instrument more for sales or marketing or pure formal stylism.
- Etcetera, etcetera.

So from their very first meetings the O2 designers began their reflections. Each week new information would arrive, they argued and opposed each other... At the same time, the dynamics of the convergence of persons-ideas concentrated in Milan took another form: centripetal became centrifugal when various designers from the group began to emigrate, thereby rapidly giving birth to O2 in diverse European countries: Denmark, England, France, Austria, Italy and, later, Holland.

Thanks to the great help provided by the Danish government, O2 International was organized in order

to coordinate the activities of the group and succeeded in creating the international strategy needed to face situations as they arose.

In an attempt at a definition, we might say that O2 is the first European group of designers to have carried out research on the impact of industrial production on the environment.

Of all the concepts essential to the culture of ecological design: efficiency, duration, multipurpose use, interchangeability, the ready-made, quality, possibilities of disassembly, three themes have been of particular importance in O2: materials, recycling and education.

By organizing seminars, talks and exhibitions, O2 has been able to study these themes in great depth: for example, the experiment carried out with the research centre of the company Montedison (plastic materials) and the Domus Academy, which has given birth to a new material: the *neolite* that was presented at the Triennial of Milano. This research has enabled entry to be gained into one of the characteristic areas of recent years, the *design of materials*, unlike in times gone by when the properties of materials were determined naturally and could not be calculated and designed in accordance with needs; one had to adapt to them.

Thus, in the process of designing the material, a central position is given to the aspect of *recycling*, with respect to materials that have been recycled or are capable of being recycled and to the design of instruments suitable for recycling.

It is at this point in the discourse (and the experiment) that, after participation in a large number of courses, seminars, congresses —European or other— there appears a long, flexible series of questions:

- Why is it that ecological design is looked upon in a «certain» way?
- Why is it that, particularly in the countries of Central Europe, it becomes so rigid and tends to form itself into a dense mesh of rules that almost constitutes a user's manual, a kind of laboratory recipe (not even a cookery recipe where there is still room for creativity and pleasure) that in the end will bring us to the new earthly paradise where we shall all be happy and satisfied in the arms of mother Earth?
- Why this crossroads of decision: either the neoromantic-pantheistic, ecological utopia trap or the

1. Ende, M., *The Never-ending Story*.

hardening of behaviour by norms that are so rigid that they take away from man the possibility of any poetic and creative dimension?

– In other words, why is ethics made into moralizing of an almost religious nature?

– Why does man become imprisoned by rules for use that generate sterility?

– Why is the result of certain ecological gatherings (congresses and the like) nothing but *sheer boredom*?

It is without doubt exceedingly pretentious to try to answer these questions, even more so if there is a desire to avoid plunging into an ideological statement, understood as a series of principles ready-made to respond to reality through manipulation.

At this moment I can only vaguely sense some attempts at a reply:

– I fully agree with the architect Clino Castelli on the urgent need to create a *language*; the introduction of fundamentally aesthetic values which should represent the basic ethos and offer the possibility of transforming products (and their typologies) by means of a rich iconography for design.

– Conceive of ecological design not as some mythical isolated land but as an *integral part* of a far vaster and more highly articulated *whole*. In these years of professional life the evolution of the eighties towards the nineties is becoming clearer (although it is true that to define both of these would take an entire article) just as is the need to operate as a designer no longer simply on the individual product or object but at the very heart of a design strategy (almost an observation of life!), which someone might designate as *design direction*... But that too would mean another article.