

The Annibale Oste's poietic research as emblem of sustainable cultural design

abstract

The history of design shows that, especially in relation to art, even the products of technique can have a symbolic charge, given by their own function but tapping also from the communicative, knowledge and memory dimensions. This kind of objects, called *semiofori*, represent the main field of implementation of the research in design performed by the Neapolitan sculptor-designer Annibale Oste from the eighties for more than two decades. Poet, passionate about the topic and about the cultural stratifications of history as well as the new and unexplored, he manages to join together the three elements through continuous experimentations. Studying, trying and discovering, he combines together the new and traditional materials, the artisan techniques with the industrial ones, giving a shape to memories and fantastic stories. In this way the design becomes animated, able to express itself and to make contact with people and the surrounding environment; to transmit its own cultural contribution and to stimulate, at the same time, the creation of a new culture.

keywords

memory, semiotics, experimentation, poetry, innovation

Introduction

"Why something we use everyday can't become a dream object, stimulate imagination, bring poetry in daily life?" (Restany 1990).

There are several doubts concerning the nature of industrial design and its products, as a result of the complexity that all along characterized the cultural identity of this discipline, especially because it started and evolved through a constant dialogue with other knowledge. In particular, the link with plastic and figurative arts contributed to the enhancement of a linguistic and conceptual prosperity that determines an interesting ambiguity, since it gives descriptive value to industry-made objects, in order to carry out specific functions. The continuous research of equilibrium to combine formal and functional quality within the project, brought over time showed that everyday objects, even in the time of highest technical perfection, managed to carry meanings initially developing from the criteria of their usability, but then broadening to communication, knowledge and memory dimensions (Vitta 2001: 17). These kind of objects were defined *semiofori* and they belong to a particular category, comprehensive of all those objects that share a practical function and an acknowledged social value, and can be studied from a material point of view and of their meaning (Pomian 2001: 113). According to Remo Bodei, semanticizing can happen by establishing a meaning and affective qualities for things, or

by framing them in relational systems – with the users, the context, or even other objects – and including them in stories that can enrich their immaterial depth. Consider only the product technical characteristics and performances, identifying them as the final result of a production process, diminishes the understanding of its conceptual dimension. On the contrary, by establishing them to meanings, their life can become longer and they can own an intrinsic quality (Bodei 2009: 33).

The designers have the tasks of creating, together with the form and function, the relational dimension between the things, people and the world; imagining their creation as vehicle of knowledge, experiences and stories to be passed down, shared and widened.

1. Narrative objects between technique and poetry

In the literary piece *Tutta la vita*, Alberto Savinio states that, because of their ignorance, men believe things are mute, since they cannot listen to their voices; moving around unaware, in the middle of mysteries (Savinio 1945).

Annibale Oste decided to enter these mysteries, working with the matter, experimenting techniques until he managed to entrust every created object with the ability to autonomously communicate the conceptual matrix that generated its own form. Emotional and visionary, he can perceive the need for poetry in a world characterized by an incredible loss of identity. Poetry is harmony, rhythm and equilibrium, expressivity. The main target of his work is narration; in particular, the memory dimension and the symbolic value of the objects represent the most analyzed fields of investigations. Given his systematic approach and technical skills, he does not carry out artistic acts with an aesthetic purpose, instead he engages each time in a research, planning the design starting from the study of the characteristics of the employed materials: bronze, resins, wood, ceramic and glass and others. Using almost magical potentiality, he transforms them into symbolic elements, metaphors for a historic memory or for stories he created. For this reason, they are strong objects, embedded into time, able to resist trends without obstructing or influencing (De Masi 2013: 14). It is not only about recovering the *genius loci* with a mechanical and detached process, but also about making a selection of the signs of history; this can happen only through their comprehension, choosing to build or deconstruct them in other period (Huber 1997: 23), pushed by curiosity towards the deeper part of cultural stratification of the context he belongs to.

“I am the son of my city, which faces directly the Mediterranean Sea, and these are my sources: on one side the Greeks, with their rigor and the appeal of their myths, on the other the Baroque with its inventions and its boldest freedoms” (Oste 1983).

Despite the lack of production facilities comparable to the Northern cities, Naples has been defined a metropolis before many other Italian cities thanks to its demographic size and cultural thickness. It is listed among the European capital cities of design experimentation in the exhibit *Capitales du Nouveaux Design*, launched in 1991 in Paris, because of its contribution to linguistic innovation, with whom it offers alternative production systems to the ones belonging to large industry. In this scenario, starting from the 80s, the *Mediterranean design* takes shape, testimony of a different relation with the object, as a result of culture being supported by tradition as cultural heritage, ideas and techniques (Gravagnuolo 2004: 58). This happens simultaneously and similarly in other places as well, however in this case it is deeper, more authentic. These are the

years in which the Italian Good design of the rational-utilitarian school, turned towards the European *Existenzminimum* principles, faces a new view on the modernity, recovering values considered lost from the past. Defined by Ambasz as “reforming attitude” in the exhibit *Italy: the New Domestic Landscape. Achievements and Problems of Italian Design*, it shows a level of complexity, already present in the postwar period, which becomes evident only with the Radical movement, the Alchimia and Memphis groups or with designer such as Ettore Sottsass jr, Alessandro Mendini, Riccardo Dalisi, Ugo la Pietra, spreading their ideas through images, writings and objects coming from the *dada* lineage. Oste takes this cultural matrix well spread in the north, but he stays on the edge of it, looking also to the local dimension and reconsidering them through a personal style as well. On one side he opposes the popular folk with whom the southern production is usually interpreted, on the other he evades the *Radical design* transformation from conceptual-artistic avantgarde to commercial operation. He does not make it by denying the link with the industrial sector, but by setting himself free from the boundaries it imposes, acting in parallel to designer such as the already mentioned Alessandro Mendini or Gaetano Pesce, the Castiglioni brothers and, more recently, Ron Arad. Although there is little information, for his discretion and for a less commercial approach to the projects, developed as personal research, he works with several companies across the Italy, such as Poltronova for mirrors, Reminder for mirrors, handles and shelves, Rapsel for bath furniture, Mangani for a variety of porcelain, Altraluce and Lumen Center for lamps, Fornace della Cava for lines of tiles. At the same time, he becomes interpreter of an archaisme ultramoderne which indicates a leap forward in the design adventure during the 80s, realizing poetical objects through which he connects technical experimentation and Mediterranean grandeurs.

“Therefore, objects borrow a function to tell a mood, an emotion within the ancient rhythm of life. In this sense, they are not self-centered models, or rather uniquely linked to the function they were destined for, self-accomplished, but they wait to be completed, to receive a tender look, love and a story to compose. The objects are accomplices, thought to help through the journey of life, and in this sense they are healthily optimistic” (Oste 1989).

Is an example the line Mediterranean: new voyages into marble line, coordinate in 1989 for the Effepi Marmi company, in which he bring back the beat, the rhythm, the energetic leap of fantasy that characterize Napoli, being able to became lighter a hard material (Fig. 1). Becoming conscious of the memory heritage becomes a creative instrument for him. Thus, the participation to several local cultural exhibitions, oriented towards the valorization of material and immaterial culture through object design, is very significant. In 1989 he participates to the Festa dei Gigli in Nola (Napoli) with the Salumiere lily, replacing for the structure the papier-mâché with the fiberglass, in search of an innovative contribution to tradition.

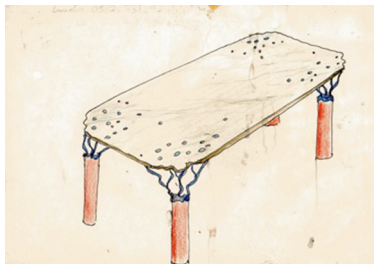


Figure 1.
Annibale Oste
(1990), *Sugli Alberi*
a variant of the
table, bronzze,
ground glass and
marble, wood.
Annibale Oste
Archive, Napoli.

Ten years later, for the *Arte e design a S. Agata dei Goti* exhibitions, he creates *Aère*, an installation that poetically dialogues with the context and the people. In 2007 he realizes the *Sterminator Vesevo* cart for the *Piedigrotta* event in Napoli. Furthermore, in 1995 in Wakayama Marina City in Japan the *Lucifesta* begins, bright installation realised until 2006, through which he takes out of context the illuminations tradition of south Italy, transmitting in a geographically and culturally distant territory a message of history and cultural identity. The collaboration with the Neapolitan workshops, endless source of practical images, allows him to work on scraps and memories left by the city. Especially the one with the Artistic and Mechanical *Mercogliano* Foundry is important both forces the company in north Italy to create partnerships with this reality for the development of his projects, and in the products that actively participate to an act of valorisation of the culture of the place. The *Pompei* table set, created in 1992 with Nanda Vigo for the *Giornate napoletane del design* (Fig. 2), properly expresses the above mentioned idea, since starting from the recovery of the original prints. Just as in the case of many handles and knobs, created in the foundry and produced in Milano by Poggi&Mariany Company.

However, the narrative instrument is not based only on memory as story material. He himself often creates stories, tales, poems that give life to objects. Ironic and dreamlike, they still are the outcome of a brave and passionate experimentation. *Poltronamente*, from 1980 (Fig.3), has the main purpose of generating thoughts and imagination. Conceptually and formally structured on an oxymoron since, despite the rigidity of the shell and its heaviness the form and the feathers secured with resin transmit lightness and softness. It is enough to scan the names of his creations: *Venne la pioggia*, *Firmamento*, *Mobilenergy*, *Formopera*, *Vasi montagne*, *Bocche di luce*, or those of the most recent *Opere mobili: La sirena*, *Pesci fuor d'acqua*, *Tappeto volante*, *Il Tuffatore*, to understand how the immaterial becomes subject of project, and to sink into his idea of design and to observe how this temporal warping towards the past becomes a specific composition style, that dilates the space of the exhibition by extending distances (Corbi, 1990).

Figure 2.
Annibale Oste
(1992), *Candelabro
Pompei*, brounze,
ground glass and
marble. Annibale
Oste Archive,
Napoli.



Figure 3.
Annibale
Oste (1980),
Poltronamente,
fiberglass with
inserts feathers.
Annibale Oste
Archive, Napoli.



Conclusion

In a moment of transformation for the whole production system, in which the craftsmanship is reaffirming itself with new tools and approaches, memory and creativity become strategic elements to be combined together to support cultural, social and economic development. First of all, today a project of "good design" must be able to understand what functions the object has to satisfy in relation to the needs of modern man, according to the territories, cultures and changes underway. So that happen it is essential a technical and cultural knowledge that can be derived only from a historical tradition, consolidated in the time and experiences (Burkhardt 2007: 70). In this sense, the orientation of design *mediterraneo* and the Annibale Oste's poetry can stand out for being innovative and pursuable today. The most interesting aspects to be highlighted as points of a replicable creative method are: the critic approach in the exploration of the borders and the conditions of the connection between past and present, functionality and representation, tradition and experimentation; the interest towards the anthropological dimension of the everyday object, considering the conceptual and semantic value at the same level of the functional and technical one; the recovery of artisan and industrial practices in new shapes and experimental languages. In addition to the ability to put in a balanced dialogue a global and a local dimension, without an inferiority complex or unoriginal imitation. Showing how its globalization can enhance the value of local traditions, stimulated innovation from deep cultural roots.

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