

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Circle 5-8900 Cable: Modernart

No. 80

FOR RELEASE:

Wednesday, June 29, 1966

PRESS PREVIEW:

Tuesday, June 28, 1966

11 a.m. - 4 p.m.

The Museum of Modern Art, which has presented about forty exhibitions of well-designed useful objects, has now assembled an exhibition of objects with a different purpose, called The Object Transformed, on view from June 29 through August 21.

The transformers are 21 artists and designers from six countries who have taken familiar household objects and radically changed their appearance: fork prongs become beckoning fingers, glass milk bottles are melted and labeled "No Deposit No Return," a mattress is burnt and becomes an "Archeological Find," a radio is encased in a copper casket, forever silent, and a chair is mummified in fiberglass or veiled in an opaque taut plastic skin.

The majority of the objects in the show were transformed in the '60s. Notable exceptions are Man Ray's famous flat iron with tacks, and pipe with plexiglas bubble, both from the '20s, and Meret Oppenheim's fur-covered cup and saucer which caused a sensation when first exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in 1936.

The exhibition has been selected by Mildred Constantine, Associate Curator of Design in the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design, and installed by Arthur Drexler, Director of the Department. She notes in the accompanying catalog, "When an object is taken out of its familiar context, or even a single detail is removed or altered, a second set of associations may be brought into play. If the resulting visual metaphor is sufficiently powerful, even the most ubiquitous artifact may be transformed into a unique experience."

The common denominator of all the works in the show is that each was once an actual useful object, each has been changed so that it is no longer useful. The effectiveness of these transformed objects depends to some extent on our recognizing the originals within the transformation: knowing that they are, or were, an authentic cup and iron is necessary to a just appreciation of their new effectiveness.

(more)

In each case what has been produced is an object of emotional utility: a work of art.

The transformations do nothing to enhance the objects in any conventional design sense. An exception, Miss Constantine says, is Bruno Munari's clock, in which discs of colored plastic replace hands and numerals to make a kind of moving picture in which time is deprived of its urgency.

More often, a transformation removes an object entirely from the realm of design, sometimes with extraordinary fervor. A book, for example, is usually a carefully made object we are conditioned to handle with respect. Three examples of transformed books in the exhibition upset this response by acts of destruction. "Lucas Samaras covers a book with pins and nails and inserts between its pages a razor, a knife and a broken pane of glass; seldom has^a book been more dangerous to open," Miss Constantine says. "Jasper Johns presents us with an open book, but its pages are congealed in colored wax and the print is all but obliterated, concealing the information we suppose the book to contain. The desire to separate its pages is frustrated by its being contained in a glazed box, apparently to preserve it for posterity. John Latham's book -- actually one book and parts of others -- has burned and folded pages, and is forced open by a closed volume wedged between them like a hatchet: one book destroys another."

Almost as emotionally charged as books are household furnishings. Two of the four examples in the exhibition are chairs. One by Les Levine is completely concealed under a tautly stretched skin of shiny plastic, under which the splayed legs and arms of a Captain's chair seem to be struggling to emerge. Fabio de Sanctis' chair is swathed in painted fiberglass, its baroque folds and dripping paint combining to suggest the decomposing shroud on a mummy. A similar entombment is produced by the copper plates nailed over a table-top radio by Tony Palladino. The transformation of these three objects is brought about by covering them with an extraneous material which destroys their usefulness but presumably preserves the objects themselves. The mattress by Ralph Ortiz, however, is transformed by outright destruction. Gutted by fire and doused with water, and resembling a mass

(more)

of gray seaweed, it is perhaps the embodiment of a nightmare.

"Less violent, and sometimes amusing, are those transformations which neither add, subtract, nor obliterate, but merely deform, like Janet Cooper's cluster of sagging milk bottles and Bruno Munari's gesturing forks. Of comparable humor are Man Ray's pipe with a ^{plexiglas} bubble and Preston McClanahan's brandy glass overflowing with permanent foam. Both transformations introduce images which suggest an ephemeral use while at the same time making such use impossible, because the new images are permanent."

Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, and Lynn Traiger, Assistant Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. Circle 5-8900.