

A brief history of light (bulbs)

Human culture is a metaphorical and symbolic one. Throughout our brief history, we have created myths that pervade our lives and have given significance to certain objects, imbuing them with meaning and relevance. We know that most of these stories are not real but symbolic, yet we actively choose to listen to them. From the Burning Bush of the Mount Horeb to the Zoroastrian Eternal Flame, it seems that light is a recurrent one and it is no surprise if Whittlesea's work may somehow recall one of them.

At the fire station of Livermore in California resides the oldest light bulb in the world. Known as The Centennial Light, this hand-blown, carbon filament, common bulb has been burning bright since 1901. Originally designed by Adolphe A. Chaillet, a figure who somehow fell by the wayside, it was manufactured along with countless others in the late 1890s. Apart from a few minor interruptions and a couple of relocations, the light bulb of Livermore has been carefully maintained by several dedicated generations of firemen, becoming a sort of local hero, making the headlines every now and then and even having birthday parties held in its honour. But for the world at large, it represents so much more. Living in the age of the throwaway, this bulb may appear to us as a freak of nature, a fluke that by chance has managed to exist for over a century (although due to its old age it now only burns at a meagre four-watts). Sometimes fact is stranger than fiction you may think, but The Centennial Light is not that much of a strange fact. This bulb might actually be one of the most 'normal' light bulbs ever manufactured. What happened then? To the others I mean, because The Centennial Light, last time one checked, seemed to be doing all right.

In the early 1930s, a certain Bernard London theorised a principle that he thought would solve the American economic crisis and that he kindly summarised in his pamphlet *Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence*. The logic behind what he called "planned obsolescence" goes as follows: the shorter lifespan a product will have, the more it will need to be replaced and the more it will need replacing, the more people will have to spend money on replacing it. Simple. The strategy would have consisted in the government imposing a legal obsolescence on consumer articles, in order to stimulate and perpetuate consumption. If London did not quite manage to convince the White House to apply his idea at an official level, it goes without saying that the fundamental principle behind planned obsolescence got enthusiastically recuperated by individual companies and lobbyists.

Funnily, the first goods to be the victims of such ideas, even before Mr. London's plan was made public, were light bulbs. From 1924 to 1939, an organisation called the Phoebus cartel controlled the manufacture and sale of light bulbs. Its members, international electricity companies such as Philips, Osram and General Electric, worked together at reducing the lifespan of light bulbs from 2,500 hours to 1,000, and did not hesitate in distributing fines to companies who would produce longer-lasting bulbs. The Second World War, alongside a growing concurrence from Scandinavia and Japan, ended their activity, but for almost twenty years Phoebus ruthlessly operated to prevent technological advances that would have produced longer-lasting light bulbs and in result, engaged in large-scale planned obsolescence.

It is a shame really that Chaillet died in 1941 and his secret for eternal light with him. Especially because in the 1950s, planned obsolescence took another dimension, applied to every type of goods from nylon stockings to refrigerators. You might want to thank Brooks Stevens in particular for his brilliant ideas that consisted in instilling in the buyer the desire to own something 'a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary' for at present, planned obsolescence has become the norm in our economy. Working towards making bad quality products... To produce in order to destroy... Buying for the purpose of throwing away... Here is the philosophy at the core of this new industrial ethics and the very reason why we renew our mobile phones every two years and our printers every 1,800 pages.

In case you are now wondering if the bulb Whittlesea chose is one of Chaillet's, let me answer now that, no it is not. It is actually its little sister, Mazda. Created in 1909, a few years after the light bulb in Livermore was first installed, Mazda was launched on the US market by General Electric, the company founded and directed by Thomas Edison (ironically the same company later involved in the Phoebus cartel). Becoming the best of what the American lighting industry had to offer at the time, it is said that this bulb was named after the universal God of the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazda (Ahura meaning light and Mazda meaning wisdom). The Zoroastrian mythology, or more exactly its modern version Mazdaznan, finds many resonances within Whittlesea's work. Founded at the end of the 19th century by Otoman Zar-Adudht Ha'nish, Mazdaznan claims that the power of breath is the key unto wisdom and emancipation. By practicing everyday a series of breathing exercises amongst other healthy activities, one would be able to develop their physical, spiritual and mental faculties. Such ideas are wholly present within *A Breathing Bulb* as well as in Whittlesea's recent publication *Mazdaznan Health and Breath Culture (first six exercises)*. It has been said that Edison too was influenced by the teachings of Otoman Zar-Adudht Ha'nish, but this has never been proven and could well be just another mythology.

If *A Breathing Bulb* does not instantly evoke the Mazdaznan cult nor the theories behind planned obsolescence, it may recall another achievement: Martin Creed's *The lights going on and off*. Although both works consist of a 'misbehaving' lighting system, *A Breathing Bulb* and *The lights going on and off* have actually very little in common. One exploits the existing light fittings of the gallery while the other practically ignores them, existing as an object in itself. One is about 'everyday stuff' with the intention to reveal the physical presence of the visitor, whereas the other is about extra-everyday experiences that aim to open the viewer's mental space. Here, the light reveals something else than just the gallery space; a sensibility beyond physicality in a very Kleinian way. Having probably more affinity with Yves Klein's *The Void* (1958), Whittlesea's work is concerned with spirituality; the reconciliation between the mind and the body. Like Klein's infamous piece, misunderstood for all the wrong reasons, *A Breathing Bulb* is not about staring at an (almost) empty white space. Rather, it is about transcending the viewer's ability to look, to perceive in order for them to go beyond the tangible reality, to reach what Klein identified as 'the immaterial sensibility'. In a similar fashion, Whittlesea's bulb speaks to us through a meditative language, inviting us to enter a state of transcendence. Absorbed within its light, we begin to unconsciously respond to its calling and breathe with it; in, out.

In Mazdaznan, as in other occult and esoteric traditions, the control of the breath is considered to be the secret for eternal life. Otoman Zar-Adudht Ha'nish even claimed that his exercises would allow one to live for hundreds of years. With its slow, steady pace, undulating between light and dark, *A Breathing Bulb* evokes this very idea. While it makes us think about life, it inevitably makes us think about death; about creation and destruction, survival and obsolescence. Emphasising our relationship to mortality, the perpetual rise and fall of the bulb somehow mimics the cycle of life and death; each fade up and fade down being like a small birth and death. As the title of the work itself suggests, not only does the bulb regulate the breathing of the viewer; it pulsates independently, without you. Even when the gallery is closed, it keeps illuminating not only the space and what it contains but also the street below, breathing in, out, in, out; always on, always alive.

Burning without interruption for thirty days (720 hours; 2,592,000 seconds), Whittlesea's bulb will eventually go through 185,142 cycles of fading up and down during the show. Reconciling the idea of light's meditative powers, our current attitudes towards spirituality and contemporary issues relating to consumerism, *A Breathing Bulb* acts as a sort of beacon, illuminating the way towards a more direct experience of the world. Just as The Centennial Light could be regarded as tangible evidence of planned obsolescence, Mazda may well be too. Will the light bulb manage to go over the 1,000 hours limit imposed by Phoebus, without interruption? Maybe we will never know, but maybe it is not that important in the end. *A Breathing Bulb* could become one of these myths we like to listen to and in which many other stories are embedded, be they the tale of an ancient God of Light, incongruities such as planned obsolescence or the relentless desire for eternal life.