Neo-Prehistory—Exist. Regenerate. Repeat?

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Neo Preistoria—100 verbi/Neo-Prehistory—100 verbs. Exhibition curated by Andrea Branzi and Kenya Hara at the Palazzo della Triennale, Milano, Italy, 2 April–12 September 2016, as part of the XXI Triennale International Exhibition.

ANDREA BRANZI & KENYA HARA (ed.). *Neo Preistoria—100 verbi/Neo-Prehistory—100 verbs*. 256 pages, numerous colour photographs by Toshihiko Ueda. Milan: Triennale di Milano Servizi; Zurich: Lars Müller; paperback 978-8-88986-115-8 €28 and 978-3-03778-493-8 €35.

As archaeologists we try hard to communicate our insights to a wider public, whether through lucid writing, as exemplified by Brian Fagan's many books, or increasingly through technology such as a 60-second YouTube video. But our subject runs away from us, and our audience, as it gets ever more technical. A century ago, discussion of the chronology of Stonehenge relied on everyday language to describe the order in which the stones were put up; now it depends on Bayesian statistics applied to calibrated radiocarbon dates (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2007). How many practising archaeologists understand that well enough to explain it lucidly in 60 seconds? Or really understand it at all?

We are right always to try, but as the technical fence that separates new research from everyday understanding becomes higher, it is especially instructive to observe the view from the other side: what non-archaeologists believe to be true about the past, thanks to—or despite—our technical efforts. 'Neo-Prehistory' is one of those views, wonderfully installed as a temporary exhibition in Milan for summer 2016. The ambition is to capture the "long and often dramatic history of man, from the most ancient prehistoric times through to the present day" (p. 10) in the form of 100 verbs illustrated by 100 objects. Conceived in association with the Hara Design Institute, the exhibition occupies a large rectangular space, with every surface in black except for the mirrored walls. With gentle lighting and reflections of reflections, the space feels as if it extends infinitely, and fittingly so if these 100 words express everything about humanity. Each numbered word is printed in white on a black vertical plank installed next to a single object illustrating that act or impulse. The visitor can walk though the exhibition, as I did, in numerical sequence. After a break, however, I walked through in the reverse order, starting with 100, and I think the show works better that way.

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The 100 words in numerical order are:

exist – hold – destroy – strike – smash – make – kill – polish – shoot – fear – worship – spin – hunt – boil – devour – cultivate – store – share – command – sound – condole – love – deify – bedeck – fight – reap – inscribe – navigate – perform – amass – obey – measure – barter – carouse – taste – imbibe –beautify – copy – whet – orientate – improve – build – compete – comprehend – observe – research – fire – cut – think – learn – play – move – cherish – work – earn – gamble – accelerate – pollute – invent – manufacture – pilot – annihilate – slaughter – attack – despair – surrender – operate – fascinate – relax – cook – plan – transmit – expand – trend – intimidate – consolidate – embellish – travel – commemorate – celebrate – overindulge – recycle – communicate – condense – shop – automate – imitate – fly – survive – pretend – deliver – output – restore – remote-operate [breaking the rule as it is not a single word] – *scrutinize – rely – minimize – self-organize* [another double] – *visualize – regenerate*.

It is striking to me how many of these words are aggressive and violent, starting with six of the first ten. *Fire* in this context is not the heat and welcoming light from the burning grate, but to fire as in to launch a projectile, illustrated by a sixteenth-century wheel lock gun, *Archibugio*. Later comes the sequence of *annihilate – slaughter – attack – despair – surrender*. So it is a bleak list, perhaps echoing the concerns of our own era, especially in the West, where unmatched material wealth is coupled with a mood of fear and uncertainty.

bedeck – "To spruce up one's personal appearance by attiring oneself with splendid clothes and decorations. To wrap oneself in formal clothes that are different from usual". Photograph by Yoshihiko Ueda of "Bronze brooch for fastening clothes, depicting a scene from everyday life". Fibula, eighth century BC, bronze, collection of Museo Archeologico Nazionale d'Abruzzo, Chieti.

'Neo-Prehistory' is the result of a collaboration between Andrea Branzi (architect and designer, Italy) and Kenya Hara (professor in science of design, Japan) and the ambition and format of the exhibition echo Neil MacGregor's celebrated radio series, *A history of the world in 100 objects* (2010). The objects, displayed in chronological order from prehistory to AD 2016, are identified by date but not by place of production or discovery. We thus have the routine tyranny that an archaeological show—even one as un-archaeological as this—must start at the beginning and advance to the present. Yet our experience of archaeological stratigraphy starts with the most recent deposits and digs down in reverse chronological order. And in seeking to understand what we find, we start with our own existence in the present and try to grasp the life-experience of humans ever more distant from ourselves. Some of the object choices are clichéd: a Tomahawk cruise missile for *intimidate*, and an early model of the Apple Mac personal computer for *consolidate*. Some are striking, in part because a single object, well lit, impresses much more than does a case packed full. At one, I winced; the object exemplifying

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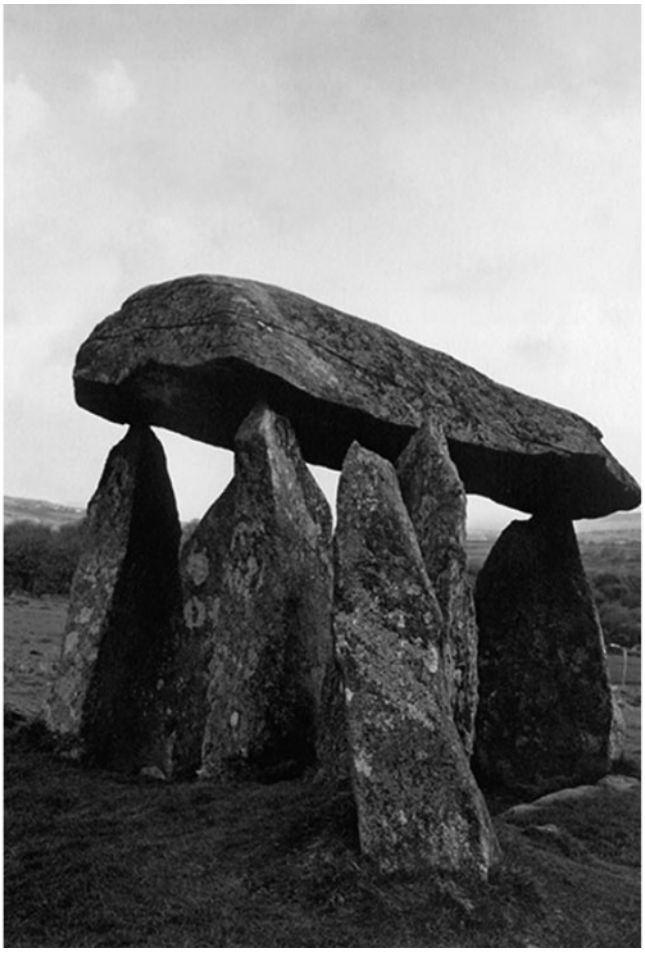

fear – "To experience anxiety and worry about natural disasters beyond mortal control". One of the few of the 100 that is not a portable object: the Pentre-Ifan dolmen, in a 1972 photograph by Paul Caponigro: "Dolmen (stone burial chamber). Found worldwide". The subject—one of the 'Druidical' relics of wild Wales as explored and enjoyed by the Romantics of the nineteenth century—has been a favourite for nearly two centuries now, but this understanding of megalithic monuments really needs a better-informed view! Why does it express fear? How do we know that?

devour, that is "To intuitively find, choose, put in the mouth, chew and swallow things that are necessary to sustain life", is a 'Fijian cannibalistic fork'—that standard prop of the Victorian terror of the savage. Fine, but in how vanishingly few instances of human eating was the 'necessary' way to sustain life the devouring of other humans?

In short, we might ask whether all the diligent archaeological work of the last 100 years has had any influence on these artist-curators' perception of the past? Or, is the exhibition as it would have been a century ago? Are we still thinking of ancient lives as nasty, brutish and short, with cannibalism as a routine recreation? The past is so often a mirror; we look in it and find historical justification and explanation for what we believe we experience in the present.

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Some words I found missing are *imagine – respect – give – care – cooperate – support*. Given permission to add a one-hundred-and-first verb in order to capture a universal human trait especially evident in our own era, I would add *virtualise*, as it might capture the two current fashions for the virtual over the real and for inventing new words of, often, graceless form.

I also miss any reference to space, to where each object comes from (both in the exhibition and in the main part of the book, although there is an object source-list at the back of the latter). The abstraction of universal traits such as these is only part of the story; at any given place, at any given time, each was expressed (or not) through particular physical objects or actions. For many of the verbs, therefore, one could list a hundred or more diverse objects that would exemplify the same universal trait.

The accompanying book, elegantly designed, matches the installation but cannot capture its feeling of expansion towards infinity, nor can its small photographs express the visual force of some of the 100 objects. In opening, the curators explain, "Combining 100 individual tools and 100 individual words, we have attempted to translate the history of human desire into a kind of fixed-verse poetry" (p. 16); this reader did not get much understanding from this introductory essay. The content of the exhibition and the book might have been much improved if the production team had included an archaeologist of broad experience, who would know better the evidence for past human character, and who could improve the illustrative objects so as to avoid the predictable. One could, for example, do much better than a hand-axe, a polished stone axe and two stone spear-heads among the older items from archaeological contexts—the most obvious classes of object and so often used before.

In sum, a stimulating show, wonderfully installed, but also worrying. First, for its dark view of what are claimed as enduring human universal traits; a more optimistic perspective might begin with evolution and the idea that no species survives if its social life fails to provide for sufficient of its offspring to flourish. Second, does this dark view suggest that our archaeological focus on the technical specifics mean that too few of us have grasped a broader view? If we archaeologists are timid in painting a big picture from our knowledge, so laboriously recovered, then others will paint pictures from whatever sources and imaginations they find to hand.

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