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Rituals in Exhibition

Mario Perniola

Ritual versus myth

At first sight the work of Haim Steinbach seems rather unexciting: what is striking is its repetitive, I'd even say "ritual," character. Often it re-presents a single object, on occasion quite devoid of any interest in terms of either content or form, a full three times. To comprehend work such as this, one has to rid oneself of a number of prejudices and, above all, to break free from the preconceived hostility towards ritual repetition that characterises the Western philosophical tradition from Plotinus to Diderot and from St Augustine to Lévi-Strauss. For this tradition attaches value not to *ritual*, action repeated, but to *myth*, the recounting of an action that was performed once only and is regarded as capable of imitation but not of repetition. Herein lies the difference between the dimension of rituality, linked to the problematic of the *same* and of its reiteration and the dimension of theatricality, linked to the problematic of the *original* and of its imitation. In ritual, there is no "exemplar" that "comes before" in an ontological sense, founding mimetic action and conferring upon it value and meaning. Steinbach's works are not imitations of prime objects such as might represent a model for them, rather they themselves are prime objects, having no hierarchical relationship with the original and no hierarchical relationships among themselves. Artistic activity therefore is no longer understood as mimetic action but rather as ritual action.

Compared with the luminous and festive quality of the mythic world, the world of ritual appears opaque and oppressed by a vague malaise: one has the impression that to step into its realm might mean the loss of everything that is immediate, spontaneous and vital. It is as if experience were suspended and immobilized in an enduring present: there is something that prevents it from precipitating towards the achievement of a purpose or even merely towards the fulfilment of a need or the satisfaction of a desire. Something so sad and funereal hovers around Steinbach's objects that I should not be surprised if an ill-briefed public felt the urge to throw open his wardrobes, to put on his jackets and to drink from his jugs, if only to introduce a little animation into this lifeless and depressing universe. For here there is nothing to look forward to but the duplication, triplication and quadruplication of one and the same object understood as an abstract entity and devoid of any qualitative definition. In the photograph by Konstantinos Ignatiadis, Steinbach himself seems to share the hallmarks of his work, appearing stock-still and inexpressive, awaiting a cloning that will multiply him into a plurality of simulacra, all simultaneously present. To enter into the world of the ritual is thus to perceive these shortfalls, this lifelessness and this absence of spirituality and creativity if not as a positive strength at least as an aid and encouragement to penetrate a world which, although devoid of splendour and joyfulness, is nonetheless rich in surprises, refinements and somersaults.

What is the relation between individual ritual actions or, for that matter, between their results? We have stated that there can be no hierarchical relation, even of a chronological nature. Ritual thinking accentuates the category of space over that of time: everything already obtains simultaneously in

the present moment. Yet this does not mean that individual ritual actions or their results are equal and interchangeable. Ritual thinking is not nihilistic, would never consider that "one thing is just as good as any other and all is well." Repetition is as far removed from equalness as it is from mimesis: it is a process that "goes from same to same," that moves from same to same, i.e. that transits, mutates, changes through tiny displacements, minute shifts, imperceptible declensions. The challenge for the ritual posture is to evade tautology, to elude whatever remains identical, mired in a state of complete and obtuse fixity, in a word, to sidestep banality. For ritual is not the same as routine, not the poetry of a monotonous and tiresome life; rather it is the effectiveness of something that repeats itself and returns without our noticing and without our wishing it and that amazes us precisely for its unaccountable and unpredictable character.

Exhibition versus intimacy

The second significant aspect of Steinbach's work has to do with its dimension as display. The various objects are laid out on carefully designed and positioned shelves and ledges. Yet it would be a mistake to interpret this dimension of the work by reference to some kind of domestic intimacy, to a postmodern Biedermeier in search of *Gemütlichkeit*. Steinbach's work is not oriented towards the inwardness of experience but towards its outwardness or even towards "externity," i.e. towards an outwardness so radical that it escapes any comparison with its opposite. I would therefore be tempted to introduce the term "exhibition" in an acceptation that ought not however to be taken to signify spectacular ostentation but rather externalization and presentation.

Unlike theoretical approaches that ground their essential point of reference in inwardness, exhibition thinking highlights the outwardness of experience, the way that experience is estranged from itself. Against the "feeling from the inside" of subjectivism and intimism, exhibition thinking opposes a "feeling from the outside," a transformation of the self into a foreign body, a perception whereby it is not the subject but the objects that surround it that are able to perceive. This mode of feeling runs with the grain of a considerable strand in twentieth century aesthetic thought which, in stark opposition to subjectivist theories of empathy, has viewed estrangement as the nub of artistic experience. At this point, however, it is hard to dodge the following question: can this powerful urge towards estrangement be contained within the display of objects or does it invoke, if only for the sake of its own completion, an exhibition of the estranged body? In other words, is Steinbach's work really so far removed from Body Art, or is it part and parcel of the same sensibility to which such as artists as Nitsch, Gina Pane and Orlan belong?

Irrespective of any individual artistic poetics, estrangement is a fundamental aspect of twentieth century aesthetics and as such is of relevance to every art form. From Shklovsky's literary *ostraneniye* to Brecht's dramatic *Verfremdung*, from Benjamin's *Schock* to Blanchot's *effet d'étrangeté*, from Bullough's concept of "psychical distance" to the Freudian notion of the *Unheimliches* or to Pierre Klossowski's *simulacre*, aesthetic experience has been lived and thought of as a powerful and savage process whereby feeling is uprooted from the subjectivity and intimacy of the self. Artistic territory thus seems to remain off limits to anyone who persists in regarding their own subjectivity as the centre of emotional life, avoiding exposure to the bewildered loss of bearings and radical "externity" that aesthetic sensibility entails. This has very little indeed to do with pleasure, since it involves taking a step into a dimension set apart from the intentions and consciousness of the subject.

Conservative philistinism has always raised doubts and voiced worries about the "morality" of these experiences: is "feeling from the outside" politically correct? Might not the elevation of the external over the internal, of exhibition over intimacy, preclude the possibility of experiencing something authentic and spiritually valid? Are not theories of estrangement allied to the logic of a mercantile

society and the alienation of labour? Is there not in exhibition an implicit yielding before frivolity and mendacious appearance, if not indeed before pornography and universal commodification? What answers can be given to these questions? That the arrow that hits is the same arrow that heals. That aesthetic estrangement is the remedy for social alienation. That in order to get beyond evil one has to pass through it. But these seem to me to be politically correct responses that nonetheless miss the point. Indeed, such replies are on the same level as the questions they answer and somehow share a cautious moderatism that is wary of taking on any risk and above all unwilling to partake in any way of the experience of "feeling from the outside." Ritual thinking calls for a more courageous theoretical initiative that bends its efforts to investigating the processes and devices whereby repetition and exhibition emerge as concepts of key importance to an understanding of contemporary experience.

Availability versus rarity

The world in which we live is no longer characterised by the rarity of commodities and by want, but by their abundance and availability. This is a world that is brim-full, where everything is plentiful supply. Yet this does not in any way imply the triumph of a hedonistic attitude: as critical theory has pointed out, the very structures of desire have been profoundly altered by the ways in which commodities are supplied. Wolfgang Fritz Haug was thus quite right to lay bare the general aspects of a *Warenaesthetik*, a commodity aesthetics¹ that demonstrates how the use value and qualitative experience of objects come to be supplanted by a "technocracy of sensuality" far removed from needs and natural instincts: this technocracy is closely tied to a process of abstraction that confers vast importance to packaging and to advertising imagery. To this extent, the Cornflakes boxes that Steinbach displays aptly interpret the aesthetic orientation of capitalism.

It was Heidegger who remarked that humankind had passed from the era of objectivity into that of availability (*Bestellbarkeit*): whereas the previous era was founded on the distinction between subject and object, the latter spells entry into impersonal and neutral dimensions where the notion of the *thing* (*Ding*) performs an essential role. The *thing* however is not the same as the object: it does not enter into a relation with a subject. Indeed the subject is involved in a process of reification that turns it into a "thing that feels," and that opens up new and unthought of horizons of sensibility and experience. In the world of availability, such notions as pleasure and pain, desire and fear appear wholly inadequate: they are too subjective and passionate in character. The type of sensibility to which "the thing that feels" introduces us is, on the contrary, conditioned by a suspension of all passions, an indifference.

Indifference, however, does not mean insensitivity: it would be a mistake to regard it as a mere abolition of the faculty of feeling. Rather it is the condition that opens up the possibility of a different sensibility: it is what provides us with access to an abstract and infinite emotionality that is constantly available and full of surprises.

Dependency versus pleasure

The world in which we live can therefore be defined as "post-passionate," in the sense that emotional life is no longer dominated by a subjective emotionality but by a much more problematic and ambivalent sensibility, to the study of which psychoanalysis has made a fundamental contribution. In particular, it is the Freudian notion of repetition compulsion (*Wiederholungszwang*) that provides a point of reference for the analysis of ritual: it is a point beyond the pleasure principle that is of major relevance to the understanding and description of the contemporary world. Jacques

¹ Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Kritik der Warenaesthetik*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971; translated as *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1986.

Lacan was therefore quite right to lay great emphasis on this experience and to take strong issue with those theories that placed the quest for pleasure and the satisfaction of natural desire at the centre of emotional life. Further, in Book VII of his *Seminar*, Lacan made a vital contribution to the investigation of the psychological aspects of "thingness" (*Dingheit*)². The *thing*, in Lacan's view, has nothing to do with the object, for whereas the object remains within the horizon of subjective representation, the thing refers back to a reality principle whose primary demand is for the return of the same. It is therefore connected to ethics (the Kantian *thing-in-itself*), the super ego, sublimation and the struggle for recognition. Yet Lacan did not conceive of reality as something full and available; on the contrary, he attributed to it the features of emptiness and lack: it is around this void that art organizes itself, without however being able to fill it. Lacan's attention was therefore captured by those conceptions of the world which, like Catharism, placed nothingness, absence and evil at the very centre of the human condition: mediaeval courtly love could thus become the paradigm for the experience of loving.

It seems to me that it would be rather hard to find in Steinbach any elements moving in the direction indicated by Lacan. Here everything is granted without reservation. The relationship with the thing that is suggested to us by Steinbach's work is without concealments and without veils. Far from being unattainable, it is within arm's reach. Its emotional tonality has nothing to do with the pathos of lack or with the ontological pessimism in which the roots of Lacanian thinking are plunged. Yet the availability of the thing should not lead anyone to think it subordinate to subjective desires. Rather there is the experience of addiction to a thing, within a type of relation that is rather less unconscious than the repetition compulsion of obsession. It is in recent psychology and sociology that one might perhaps discover interpretive schemes more suitable than those offered by Freud and Lacan: to be more specific, studies of addiction are as close as one can come to the contemporary mode of feeling. In this respect, the contribution of the English sociologist Anthony Giddens merits the closest scrutiny³.

In a society in which everything is available it is doubtful whether emotional and affective interest will assume either the form of passion or that of repetition compulsion: the former is too closely tied to the subject, the latter to a traumatic event generating anxiety. Addiction, on the other hand, is both more general and more indeterminate: Giddens has remarked that the notion of addiction, originally applied almost exclusively to the consumption of alcohol and drugs, has been greatly broadened out over the last few years. One can now be addicted to eating, smoking, sex, even to work, gymnastics or love! What matters is not the specific content of the addiction but the general form in which the interest makes itself manifest. Recent studies on this topic that are cited by Giddens identify seven general features of addiction.

The first feature of addiction is excitement, the "high." This is a gratifying experience that cannot however be defined as pleasure. Indeed it actually signals the waning of pleasure in the sense that this was understood by a tradition stretching over two thousand years from the ancient Greeks down to modern times. Starting with Aristippus, the principal exponent of the Cyrenaics, pleasure was conceived of as an intimate feeling that had its centre in the subjective inwardness of the person who experienced it: indeed, the fact that I am unable to say anything about the pleasures enjoyed by others is proof of the almost solipsistic character of this experience. Plato sought to socialize pleasure, placing it in relation to the objective idea of the beautiful; his reform, however, was oriented towards the knowledge of truth and linked to a series of presuppositions (hierarchy of

² Jacques Lacan, *The ethics of psychoanalysis 1959-1960, the seminar of Jacques Lacan*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Book 7, London, Tavistock/Routledge, 1992.

³ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992.

senses, purity, moderation ...) that are a far cry from our current sensibility. What is even more alien to us is the Aristotelian reform of pleasure, which turned beauty into metaphysical perfection. Finally, Epicurus, considering the only true pleasures to be those of the spirit, suggested as a model the pleasure experienced by the gods.

Modern thinking about pleasure has re-asserted its internal character. For Leibniz, who can be viewed as the pre-eminent modern philosopher of pleasure, every action moving from the interior of substance brings pleasure: in a literal sense only that which moves outwards from itself by virtue of an internal principle can be said to exist. Pleasure, which Leibniz defined as a feeling of perfection, is connected not to any external movement but to an infinite and inexhaustible reserve of motive power. It is only with Freud that pleasure takes on the character of something that is conflictual and disruptive, at loggerheads with the drives of the ego. Yet all of this is not devoid of ambiguity: firstly, since the simple notion of pleasure crosses over into the much more complex concept of *Lust* (wanting, yearning); secondly, because during the second phase of his thinking Freud set against the pleasure principle the "Nirvana principle" which, linked to the death drive, tends to reduce excitement to zero level, i.e. to lead the living being back to the inorganic state.

In reality, the excitement felt in addictive processes has nothing whatsoever to do with pleasure: it is characterised by a "feeling from the outside," an experience both sensory and emotional that is experienced by something external to us. It would be truly misleading to interpret the work of Steinbach as the fulfilment of the passion of a collector who gathers objects in accordance with his quest for small variants: it is not a subjective pleasure that steers his rituals of exhibition but an addiction to things devoid of beauty and perfection. How can they arouse excitement? How can anyone be addicted to the banal, insignificant or even disagreeable commodities that he displays? How can such commodities arouse excitement? One can edge a little closer to his mode of feeling by reflecting on the arbitrary nature of fetishism: any item at all can become a fetish or cease to be one. It is not the sensory qualities of an entity that transform it into a fetish: the fetish is not an idol. What distinguishes fetishism from idolatry is precisely its abstraction as regards qualitative characteristics, its essentially conceptual aspect. What then arouses fetishistic excitement? I would say the simultaneous presence in the same entity of an extremely concrete dimension and an extremely abstract dimension: what is presented to my gaze is precisely "this" vase, neither its image nor its reproduction, but at the same time "this" vase might just as well be replaced by any other object. The fact that something solicits the greatest interest without meriting it in the slightest is strange enough; but addiction entails a step beyond fetishism.

In addiction, the thing solicits not only interest, not only devotion: it imposes its dominion. The works of Steinbach aspire to this dominion: the senselessness of this pretension is on the same level as the extravagance of the phenomenon of addiction viewed in its generality. Why does art arouse a lesser degree of excitement than alcohol or cocaine? If art generally remains beneath this level, why then should it interest us at all? Guns, wardrobes, clothes, cups... they are surely in no way inferior to smoke or gambling. Exhibits accordingly comprise guns and wardrobes, clothes and cups...

The second feature of addiction is the "fix." Excitement arises and is sustained when the frontiers that separate the self and the not-self come down: whereas pleasure keeps the ego shut up in itself, in its intimate discretion, in a feeling from the inside, excitement goes hand in hand with the experience of a feeling from the outside, as if the faculty of feeling were foreign to itself. The fix is a not-self that enters into us, explodes the barrier between inside and outside, frees us from our cramped subjectivity, bringing us into direct contact with the world.

What is decisive about the fix is the quantity involved, the threshold below which its effect is too slight. A certain intensity and a certain amount of time are required, without which excitement fails to occur. Addiction is not therefore like passion a merely spiritual or mental event: it involves being

anchored to something external, to a physical, chemical or technological factor, to something that is inorganic or is perceived as such. For example, sexuality turns from being a need or a passion into an addiction only once I perceive the body as something non-living, as a non-living being that can nonetheless feel. It seems to me that connected with the experience of addiction there is an "artificial" sensibility whose character is experimental. The feeling of addiction has various affinities with ecstatic experiences of religion, poetry or love: what makes it different is the fact that it is anchored to a "thing". Steinbach's obsessive attention to the measurements of his shelves belongs to the realm of the fix. The third feature of addiction is the impression that one is entering "another world" and taking "time out" from ordinary life. Addiction shares this feature with the kind of aesthetic experience described by the English psychologist Edward Bullough. After all, aesthetic experience is centered on itself and not on the ego and its pleasure. Asking someone involved in an intense aesthetic experience whether or not they find it pleasing is a bit like calling a sleepwalker by their name: the more intensely one is involved in an aesthetic experience, the less pleasure it affords⁴. To feel aesthetically is to experience a "psychical distance" from the practical self, bound up in its schemes and goal-centered logic. Emotions are not felt subjectively but are held "in abeyance." This does not depend on the unreality of the things presented: it is not unreality that creates distance but distance that creates unreality.

All of this raises a question, given that this feature of aesthetic experience is essentially already implicit in the "aesthetic disinterest" of which Kant spoke. In what way does "psychical distance" of addiction differ from Kant's "aesthetic disinterest?" The answer should be sought in a state of indifference that is not confined to the aesthetic dimension but pervades the entire emotional horizon; Kant's division of people into three faculties collapses and "psychical distance" comes to apply to the whole of human experience.

The fourth feature of addiction is a sense of self-displacement, estrangement and loss of one's own subjectivity. This is a phenomenon that is familiar to the twentieth century literary, theatrical and artistic avant-gardes and experimentalism to which I have already referred. What one might add arises from the common ground shared by this sense of being adrift in unknown territory (*spaesamento*) and literary evidence on "feeling drugged." From De Quincey and Coleridge to Burroughs, Michaux and Aldous Huxley, a number of *topoi* keep recurring, which have recently formed the subject of a careful study⁵. The first of these points that deserves mention here is the devitalisation of the body and the accompanying animation of objects. A strange inversion in fact takes place whereby people become less and less lifelike while the inorganic world appears to take over their role in the perception of events. The reification of humankind and the sensitisation of the environment are two complementary sides of a single phenomenon⁶. Oscar Wilde described this aspect of addiction in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Another point that recurs in literary accounts is the broadening out of space, its infinite extension and expansion. Once again the reference is to externalisation: all is surface and clothing. Steinbach provides a number of examples of this transformation of people into clothing, into fabric. Last, one should not overlook the phenomenon of excess interest, i.e. the bedecking of the world in intense attention. To perceive something in a new light generates - as Wittgenstein said - a colourful and intense *epochè*.

The fifth feature of addiction is negative feedback. Two pathological conditions strike me as particularly interesting: psychosis and allergy. Both are in fact closely linked to an alteration in

⁴ Edward Bullough, *Psychical distance as a factor in art and in aesthetic principle*, (1912), in "Problems in Aesthetics," ed. M. Weitz, New York, Macmillan, 1970

⁵ Alberto Castoldi, *Il testo drogato*, Turin, Einaudi, 1994.

⁶ Mario Perniola, *Enigmas. The Egyptian Moment in Society and Art*, London-New York, Verso, 1995.

normal relations between the ego and the external world. Psychosis is characterised by an identification with external reality that at times can assume (as in the celebrated case of President Schreber) cosmic dimensions. The fact that the only artistic realism that can be imagined nowadays possesses marked psychotic features says a good deal about the situation in which art currently finds itself. The conception of art as imitation has given way to a conception of art as complete identification with the external world: Steinbach's motorcycle helmets are just that: motorcycle helmets. Should this process of identification fail, a different pathology, a sort of negative image of psychosis, comes into play: the inability to identify with the external world is experienced at a physical level as allergy⁷. For it is to the realm of allergy that belong all those devices intended to safeguard one's identity against an invading and insurgent reality that threatens to jeopardise one's internal equilibrium. At times it can appear that one and the same person or artistic phenomenon can be suffering simultaneously from both conditions, at once psychotic and allergic. It might be interesting to use this dual key as a way of interpreting Steinbach's work: in more general terms, in twentieth century art allergy to the world has deep roots that reach down into Abstractionism and Arte Povera.

The pathologies of addiction bring us back to a theoretical issue that lies at the very core of current thinking in immunology⁸, the branch of biology and medicine that studies immune reactions. Over the last few years, great progress has been made in immunology and this discipline is now expected to make a vital contribution to the understanding of the mechanisms causing cancer and AIDS, auto-immune conditions such as Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis, the processes whereby artificial organs are rejected... Immunological research centers on the study of the relationship between self and not-self. How can the organism distinguish between what belongs to it and what is foreign to it? How can the range of components forming part of the organism be broadened through experimental manipulation? How can the organism remain unharmed in spite of its penetration by infectious agents? In art as in science, in psychoanalysis as in medicine, we come up against problems that can be traced back to the same issues, the same questions. This appears to me to provide the most eloquent evidence of the fact that, as in the past, the task that philosophy is called upon to perform is of fundamental importance.

The sixth feature of addiction is the interchangeable character of its focus. As Giddens has remarked, it is not unknown for someone to struggle free from one form of addiction only to succumb to another. Obviously, what underlies this pattern is the plasticity or mobility of psychological processes, which makes such transference possible. This does not mean that no distinctions can be drawn between addictions: being addicted to art or philosophy is not equivalent to being an alcoholic or a cocaine addict. The fact that the psychological processes involved are the same should be taken to signal the dynamism of cultural activities rather than their capacity to shrink to the level of banal forms of existence.

The last feature of addiction relates to disturbances attendant on self-discipline: addiction seesaws between "letting go" and "tightening up." Someone addicted to food, for example, may swing from bulimia to anorexia or vice versa. It is not hard to identify the same dynamic in cultural activity: I'm thinking of the oscillation typical of twentieth century aesthetics between the goal of art and the origin of art. It is important to realise that we are no longer confronting dialectical oppositions but the ambivalences occasioned by addiction.

Neutral love versus pure relation

⁷ Sami Ali, *Le visuel et le tactile. Essai sur la psychose et l'allergie*, Paris, Dunod, 1984.

⁸ Gilberto Corbellini (ed.), *L'evoluzione del pensiero immunologico*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1990.

Ritual, exhibition, availability and addiction: these are the four keywords we have used to describe the form of sensibility within which the work of Steinbach operates. We have set these against others, such as myth, intimacy, rarity and pleasure. To provide a summary of the overall sense of the two perspectives, it is worth referring once again to the work of Giddens, not this time in order to follow up his arguments but rather to take them as a target for polemic. Giddens' entire discourse focuses in fact on outwardness, addictions and ritualised relationships. His end point consists in the elaboration of a notion of pure relation, which he defines as a situation whereby a social relation comes into being by virtue of the advantages that each party can derive from a sustained relationship with the other. Of the three forms of love known to the Western world-courtly love, Baroque passion and romantic love - Giddens favours the third on the basis that it is self-reflective and inspired by transcendence. His solution can therefore be regarded as advocating a relationship based on a combination of emotional intimacy and common interest.

This is indeed a far cry from the world of feeling and emotion that we have been delineating here. If we wished to define it with a single expression, we might refer to it as the realm of *neutral love*, as described by the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector in novel *A paixão segundo G.H.*⁹ In this short book, Lispector recounts the entry into an "other" sensibility, quite different from that which is customary, and which she in fact defines as "neutral love." Such love entails abandoning subjectivist sentimentalism and entering into a depersonalised dimension: "I desire the inexpressive... to want to human sounds to me over-beautiful." "I do not wish for beautiful love," but for neutral love. The latter is based not on transcendence but on the experience of the *thing*, on the vision of the world as "an opaque piece of thing:" this is "the enigma," "the secret of the Pharaohs" and "the joyous matter." Yet however neutral and inert, "the thing has a sensitisation of itself like a face." Depersonalisation is "the great objectivisation of oneself," it is "the highest exteriorisation that can occur." For those who have attained this state, ritual is no longer a "mask of falsehood," but the "essential mask of solemnity." "Ritual is the fulfilment no less of the life of the nucleus, ritual is not external to it: ritual is inherent... The only destiny with which we are born is that of ritual."

⁹ Clarice Lispector, *A paixão segundo G.H.*, Rio de Janeiro, 1964.