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ABOUT RESTORING AND NOURISHING/EATING BEAUTY

"Thanks to you love for aesthetics and beauty, you are now entitled to a passionate bite"

Zoran Todorovic

Art as beauty and truth

The art of the 20th Century is nothing but interwoven questioning, denial and/or affirmation of the supposed universality of Art, presumption based on the fact that "art speaks above all boundaries of our differences" and is intended "to simply be truth and beauty." In a broader sense, this critical position redefined the idea of Culture as set of prominent ideas and values of a given civilization to the idea of Culture as set of ways of life, territories of social meanings and identities. The praxis of culture thus not only shapes the meaning and understanding of the world, but helps constituting its very identity through the consumption of those meanings.

The Culture is thus realized through the semiotic production and formulation of the subject, a process not in the least neutral nor indifferent, but deeply influenced by the legalized distribution of power, systems of repression and resistance, and the predefined distinctions between the socially acceptable and unacceptable and accordingly qualified individuals, as well as by the confusion and antagonism between different social groups, generally formed according to gender, class, religious beliefs, race, sexual orientation, level of education . . . Reconsidering in this context the categories of beauty and truth as those which traditionally (and) decisively influence the constitution of the essence of art understanding, the question of validity of their legitimacy and (absolute) authority arises. And, ultimately, is the survival of those values and at which degree endangered? Rather than venture a definite (either positive or negative) answer, considering the reasons of a precise shaping, "mapping" mutual relations and fluctuation of boundaries of different thoughts and (bad) tastes seem more appropriate to the present situation. Thus the myth of Truth and Beauty is, unfortunately, nothing but a consequence of complex processes and mechanisms of formation, disintegration and impact of different, more or less homogenous, cultural practices. The Fetishism which arises is directly linked with the fetishism of pleasure offered by the Truth and Beauty of a work of Art. The idea of the Work of Art as bearer of the classical ideal of beauty in the last centuries has changed to the one of commercial good supposed to have something of a beauty susceptible to have an elusive market value determined according to the self-ruled and thus also elusive parameters of the dominating taste/desire.

Beyond Beauty

Through "Assimilation," realised in April 1998, in Maribor, Slovenia, as part of the "Living Act" project, Zoran Todorovic, according to his elective personal iconographic mode, tells narratives on idealized feminine beauty and adoption of obsessive and unreachable norms and standards of perfect beauty; on the traditional female relation to pain and beauty, of the privileged position the face, compared to the rest of the body, is having in our culture, as the most precious attribute which identifies us, as well as narratives on hospitals and operating rooms as mystery places of the allowed transgression of archaic taboo forbidding body touching/opening, freeing (by devouring) from by social standards, cumulated and /or unacceptable surplus to the eroticising/perverse nature of the passionate food enjoyment, and the ones arousing questions of the boundaries of the body and the boundaries of art. The decoratively modelled aspic was therefore served with vegetables in

in a rustic refectory, on a duly set oval table clothed with a green tablecloth (as the one used in operation rooms) and accompanied with an informative "Menu." It indicated that the served meal was confectioned out of women's face skin and grease tissues (discarded after a conventional face-lifting operation), onion, carrots, parsley, salt and pepper. On the walls of this improvised refectory ran the frieze of chronological snapshots taken during the operation, focussed on taking off/removal of the face's "excess," recycling this ungracious/excess into beauty/new object. Bearing in mind the potentially eatable nature of the new product, the initial scenario would have had the person undergoing surgery eat the excess to be hidden, thus eliminating it definitely (and with pleasure) through a natural process of defecation. Nevertheless, noting that the Society is the one in power to define and sanction what is permitted/undesirable and stands behind the excess production, Todorovic renounces to the initial project and offers this unusual aspic to this same Society, thus transferring the problem of such excess from the private to a public realm. The unease and shame, transformed to/through art work, thus overgrew the intimate dimension and return in the form of a boomerang-provocation to their generator. On this point, I shall try to focus on two points. One: the context conditioning the ablation of (women's) face skin and fat for the sake of the so-called "aesthetic correction" and two: the use of this "material" as metaphor of surplus. Are we surprised to learn that the visitors at the opening, regardless of their sex and/or gender, ate this "damned part?"

"How far do you go for your beauty?"

This cover page question from the paperback edition of Brian D'Amata's book entitled "Beauty" (London: Grafton, 1992) made Michelle Hirshhorn read the book, and what she found is a story of a man, artist of genius, obsessed with perfection and longing to create the ultimate female icon,

chef-d'oeuvre combining Marilyn Monroe, Marlene Dietrich and Mona Lisa. The said gentlemen as a notorious example of dominant politics of presentation in patriarchal society victim, has nothing to do but dedicate himself to the desperate search of the absolute truth/beauty, using stereotypes as models, trying to (re-)construct and thus control female forms. If the "women," as constructed in patriarchal society, is formed by imperatives to be as attractive as possible to the undetermined on-looker, then plastic surgery is only another (the most up-to-date!?) issue in the long tradition of the female body colonization performed by medicine. In this frame of mind, the aesthetic surgery represents another insult (but also injury.) Doctor Marjorie Cramer, whom Orlan engaged to perform on her the 7th operation entitled "Omnipresence" (1993) in context of "The Reincarnation of St.Orlan" project, said about her profession: "This is a complicated topic: I consider myself a feminist, but nevertheless spend the most of my life making women look nice, as the society wish them to be. It's been awhile I have this conscience. Women do rather awkward things to themselves." However, criticizing plastic surgery, as Michelle Hirshhorn points it out, is based on a sort of paradox. Accepting and promoting the idea of plastic surgery means suggesting obedience to the oppressive norm of the abstract category of beauty. On the other hand, the unconditional rejection of this practice fosters the idea of "natural look" or the "natural woman" stuck in the cul-de-sac of biological determinism. This position also understands the promotion/return of/to the conservative values connected to the long fostered attribute of woman and nature in general opposed to the approaches with no fear of new technologies, as symptoms of the radical changes of traditional social institutions. And one last question: in which degree fashion, cosmetics, diets, health food and/or plastic surgery, compromise the reach of women's identity? Are those just antibiotics preserving from physical death, to paraphrase Orlan's suggestion? Is it the untouched / unexplored field of new possibilities to alter the boundaries of one's face and body, regardless of the previous norms of this society and/or any other imperative of ideal beauty? Be as it were, the position of plastic surgery in relation to women as most frequent users of this practice, can be seen as symbolic example of the Pigmalion syndrom. In other words, this praxis represents the traditional relation of the active male position as artist/creator to the passive female of an object awaiting to be magically transformed in the name of an unilateral desire and vision. It comprises the elements of cruelty, violence and pain, and the setting of what is considered socially and culturally acceptable defines the limits to its intensities. It doesn't even matter if someone (the woman) really suffers. What matters is exploring the configuration of power which determines who, when, how and if one will be suffering. Through the frieze of photographs retracing the operation, Todorovic makes the spectator (as he did previously himself) face the experience of the woman who made herself undergo physical pain (during and after the

intervention) to avoid her own painful fear of symbolic death as long lasting announcer of the physical one. Spectators are thus in a sort of voyeurist position whose on-lookers' pleasures turn into suffering, or at least into psychological unease, similar to the unease, tension and fear felt while watching horror movies (or horror reality). The sort that make you avert your eyes, temporarily brakes the chains of the mechanism of identification punishing curiosity in a sort. The sort of the Medusa's gaze power. Generally speaking, medical sciences respect the boundaries of the human body and is oriented towards their preservation, attaining upon them only when medically absolutely necessary, i.e. when the body is already, either from outside or inside, attained. In this context, the plastic surgery has a problem to define the kind of disease it treats/ablates. What is the *necesse est* of this surgical practice? Let us quote Bataille before answering to this question that on the surface of Earth, and "for the living matter in particular, the energy is always in excess, and the question is always a question of luxury, the choice is on the way of wasting riches." The surplus or the luxury in the case of Todorovic's work is defined in terms of the socially (un)acceptable, (un)desirable and/or (un)attractive look/behaviour. Thus "if the surplus can not be completely invested in growth, it absolutely has to be wasted with no gain, spent, willingly or unwillingly, gloriously or in a disastrous way." In this sense, "Assimilation" as the outcome of a (willing) expend of a surplus represents the accumulation of a surplus of another kind. Historically considered, the work of art, once coded and become fetish, has long been present as this other kind of surplus. The presuppositions that long constructed art were based on the concept of a creative artist producing unique, original objects, whose form is to be thought of in terms of pure aesthetic experience, and whose authenticity, based mainly on the great master's signature, could be exchanged for any money value. But Todorovic's concept/work was realised (cooked, moulded, decorated) by one of Maribor's restaurants' chef. Furthermore, the work was conceived as an object whose aesthetics are only an introduction to its literal good taste. What the surgeons preoccupied by the gainful aesthetics have discarded as ugly and excessive, Todorovic transforms, dealing with different aspects of assimilation through equalization, comprehension of a new matter (feeling) and their adaptation to the mind frame, the metabolism, transforming food into cell building material, merging of nations through linguistic, cultural and educational assimilation etc. Into one of the above falls the communion through cannibalism, positively connoted in certain societies although in present days obsolete and furthermore in principle forbidden. The cannibalism might still thought be encountered at a symbolic level, as in the centuries old rite of holly Christian communion. In a literal sense, cannibalism appears in extreme cases (as ultimate recourse for survival in the wilderness or psycho-dramas) filling the newspapers' columns we read with unease and incredulity, as well as in this one, in eccentric and

uncontrolled curiosity.