

## Daniel Spoerri's imaginary charge

Transported on the flux of images that make up Daniel Spoerri's visual adventures, it becomes possible to push forward the frontiers of creation until we touch with our own hands all those images that are conceived in the blending of different objects, always poised between the visible world and the invisible, between nightmare and dream.

In order to detach himself from the media-surfaces of the modern world, invaded as it is by the technological devices of the live transmission, Spoerri puts into play the emotional tonalities of being, the enigmatic correspondences, the secret heartbeat of both the normal and the different. He renders plural the cultural identity of each individual, to re-direct the gaze towards the spaces of a heterogeneous and multiple knowledge, towards the universe of the fantastic and of the hybrid.

The assiduous frequenting of banal objects can be the origin of a multitude of sensations and of associations, at times proustian, with traces of both collective and private life. If art is the reign of bewitching myths, Spoerri does not simply establish a web of contacts with the memory of the myths of our forebears, but above all points to the deepest animus of every type of sacred, unknown and mysterious entity, the story and facts of which circle around objects that are bearers of sentimental content, around fetishes and reliquaries displayed as symbols of social rituals.

Spoerri adopts a comparative view capable of contemplating various alternative versions of existence, without ever falling into archaeological re-evocations or into recourse to the past as model; on the contrary, he captures the world of an existence related to a "different life", distinguishing its outlines, discovering its limits. The participation of things, as though they were talking objects, goes beyond the museum or ethnographic context, through the fascination, the evocativeness and the attraction of amulets and talismans, totems and utensils removed from their use.

Spoerri's art does not reward nostalgic inebriation, it does not exhaust the passions, on the contrary it nourishes them with tales and events drawn from the heritage and the culture of all nations. Each object draws us into a polyphonic experience, an experience in which there proliferate external voices and internal anxieties.

Striding beyond the totalising flattening of reality emitted by operational circuits and virtual manipulations, Spoerri regenerates a landscape of diversified identities, he dialogues with a chorus of forgotten cultures, mythical and totemic subjects. He transports into the happenings, collages and assemblages, the terrestrial and archetypical elements of the territorial origins, of the biological and imaginative roots of man. He makes use of everything that confers the practices and customs of everyday life.

His life is marked by a multitude of situations and experiences, of places and cultures. Born in Romania in 1930, while still a child he fled to Switzerland – to Zurich – following the death of his father, a protestant pastor assassinated by the Nazis in 1941. In the Helvetic city he first entered the world of the arts as a classical ballet dancer, then as theatre director (Ionesco, Beckett, Tardieu, Tzara). Then he takes part in the experience of the Nouveau Réalisme born in France in 1960 with the aim of distancing the work of art from its aura of singularity, revealing it to us as an "everyday" thing, in contact with society, proffered to be seen through its objective presence. The interest in the object of commonplace use, or the industrial object diffused in "the mass of society", calls to mind some of the practices of those historical avant-gardes occupied with rendering the sense of things precarious and hazardous, from Cubist collages and the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp, to the *objet trouvé* or the surrealist object of desire, and it relates dialectically to the contemporary affair of New Dada and the to "combine painting" of Rauschenberg.

Along with artists like Arman, César, Tinguely, Yves Klein, Christo, Daniel Spoerri shares the practical-theoretical assumption that governs the new presentation and direct appropriation of reality, according to

which the real is “perceived in itself and not through conceptual or pictorial transcribing”. An undertaking aiming at breaking away from the cryptic and atrophied procedures of the abstract expressionism of the second European informal period.

In his *Tableaux pièges* (trap paintings), which follow the *Pièges a mots* (traps for words – sayings and proverbs associated with various objects fit to render polyhedral the sense of the work) the artist entraps the objects and the inert remains – now unpleasant – of meals consumed by diners often unknown to him. He glues the entire repertoire of dinner utensils, glasses, greasy cutlery, plates and dirty ashtrays onto boards hung vertically on the wall, maintaining the casual arrangement decided by whoever had used them. The result is the vision of a scrap of reality which, in its apparent fixity, declares itself to be in slow movement: the public [in] observing the traces of those meals, of those objects, sets their vitality in motion once again. The very fixity helps us to comprehend better the feeling of “a situation found”, it draws us into the evocation of the motion that has taken place.

As well as the staying of an event whilst it takes place, the *Tableaux* are moved by a further interest: an investigation into the order and the unconscious chaos of each of us, taking as a starting point the arrangement – orderly or disorderly – of food on the table. Accepting life’s eternal cycle through the imprints of the precarious and of the present.

That which is destined to be neglected and abandoned – the food – appears as though it is the origin, an essential part of existence. It is brought to the scene of the work, and follows a temporal pattern that, passing from the initial order of the composition arrives at the chaos of the chance arrangement. It introduces contents and forms more ancient than we are, multiple chronologies, irreducible one from the other. It calls to mind the features of atavistic atmospheres, the daily ceremonies of social living, the innate norms of basic survival.

A number of laid tables provoke, in the onlooker, a growing disquiet referring to something that touches us intimately. There are aroused impressions of fleeting instants, of daily moments dedicated to assimilation and sustenance, from lunch to aperitifs, from breakfast to supper. The mass of tableware on the vertical board of *Tavola dei molfettani* also encompasses distinct signs of both the age and the sex of those invited to the banquet. Amid the ensemble of chequered tablecloth with green napkins and the colourful double plates, one notes a small soft toy that looks like an elephant, or a woman’s jewel-case. In other cases the group of objects is entirely of the artist’s own invention. Another example is the *Fake poetic breakfast plate* series where, on wooden trays, the scene of breakfast cups, silverware and heterogeneous elements, like furniture or decorative accessories, attests, unexpectedly, to the veracity of a consummation taken place, albeit entirely imaginary. The result is that of rendering “fabulous” the surface of reality, so that the table becomes the site favoured for emotive projections, for rediscovered sensations, going back to the origins of the collective life.

Spoerri’s imaginative charge has, then, generated a long succession of gestures and actions, of events and creative stages, capable of soliciting, of reawakening the participation of the onlooker. In 1963 the mutation of Paris’s Gallery J into a restaurant pushes the spectator into a relational scenario where he participates in the role of protagonist and effective author of the work. The art critics are left guaranteeing the service at table, fulfilling the role of waiters carrying art to the consumer, serving the public. In contrast with certain actions of Nouveau Réalisme, Arman’s *Colère* and the *Expansions publiques* of César, or Klein’s *Anthropométrie*, the user, living and practicing the *tableau-piège*, is transformed from witness into artificer of the work.

This involvement [of the spectator] will culminate in Düsseldorf in 1968 inside the Ristorante Spoerri; a restaurant specializing in gastronomic experimentation, backed up by in depth studies of ethnography and culinary cultures; a project dedicated to food as metaphor for artistic creation; the most social and

intimate form of creation: a ritual and convivial space, a weaving together of relationships and knowledge: an element aggregating around edible specialities from all around the world. Here the cooking explores the “obscure” side of eating and consuming, placing the diner before an exotic menu rich in culinary curiosities which are, in our culture, often reduced to food scraps. Novel dishes such as omelette of grilled termites, python sauce, steak of elephant’s trunk.

Culinary whimsies will later come to be expounded by the artist in *Eat Art*, with the conception of an art to be consumed, that came about in New York in 1970 during an illumination: «au lieu de faire la Vénus de Milo en marbre, ou aurait pu la faire en sel. Personne n’aurait remarqué la différence». Spoerri considers art as food and food as art, and gives life to a gastronomic atelier devoted to the display and consumption of works of art based on projects by artist friends (Beuys, Arman and Liechtenstein). As edible object, the work of art distances itself from presumptions of eternity in order to flirt with the subject of the ephemeral temporality that is an internal part of digestion. It is not only contemplated, but also interiorised through its ingestion and, eventually, digestion, in close contact with the biological and human phenomena, the processes of sublimation of matter.

For Spoerri eating contains in itself the moment of passage and of transformation; it marks the initiating period that places spirit and body, the great and the base, the drives for survival and reproduction in communion with one another – the cohabitation of biological/natural necessities and the rules of social and cultural order.

Culinary performances and themed banquets create short circuits in the universe of our habits and our taboos, in the controls of the practice and the normality cultivated by civilized living. We find ourselves disorientated before the dinner entitled *l’Hommage à Karl Marx* (1978) prepared with the help of the students of the Cologne Academy of Fine Arts on the occasion of the tribute to the Academy’s director, himself called Karl Marx. The people invited to participate are chosen from the phone book because they share a name with a celebrity from the worlds of music, philosophy, literature and the visual arts. The menu proposes foods that refer to famous men (boucles Schiller, Mozartkugeln, Hitchcock orange juice, Bismarck herrings). Gathered together for this gala dinner one can meet Karl Jaspers, train driver, a painter called Christopher Columbus, the metal worker Albrecht Dürer, and so on.

Other banquets upend our olfactory sensations, the connection between physical and chemical senses. They invent a *Menù Travesti* in which differences emerge between appearance and taste, short circuits between what we see and what we smell, and in which the inversion of the order of the courses and their contents disturbs the habits of taste, to the point of provoking simultaneous pleasure and disgust, attraction and repulsion. *Banana-Trap-Dinner* (Edinburgh, 1970) begins with a Lady Curzon soup served in a coffee cup (and finishes with a coffee presented in a soup tureen) continuing with a «glace-purée de pomme de terre et chocolates-boulettes de viande». The impression that this will be a coupé of ice-cream turns out to be an illusion: the appearance does not correspond with the mixture of meat and potatoes that it contains. Again for *Le diner palindromique* (Schwarzenberg 1998, Hamburg 2005) the inverted order and the effect created by vanilla spaghetti in a raspberry sauce, or a final cumulous of scraps in marzipan and chocolate.

The marzipan is used again in the *Eat Art* happening directed by Spoerri, organized in the exhibition spaces of the Torrione Passari in Molfetta (October 2004), where it is adopted in the realization of a life-size skeleton. This edible skeleton was produced in precise anatomical detail by skilled local confectioners, and offered out at the collective tasting as an invitation to dine around the remains of an ancestor crowned with laurel, a presence of macabre and disturbing implications. Spoerri opens up a network of links with still-living traditions and customs: from the small sugar skulls eaten in Mexico on the anniversaries of the dead, to the human-shaped breads baked in Romania, or to the English “Jelly

Babies” candies.

The inclination to devour, typical of cannibalism, is to be understood as a gesture that transforms death into new life, a social initiation that allows the experience of interchange/exchange with the energies of existence. Through this inclination, links with the Earth as magical womb are maintained, scraps of a natural and human skin become assimilated; an operation develops absorbing vital forces, ousting the fears and the limitations of the hyper-rationalized bourgeois world. As in the primitive devouring, the distinction between active and passive is unknown, as are the concealment and the alienation of desires – theorized and analysed by modern psychoanalysis. The same takes place in the happening at the Torrione, so that the assimilation of the skeleton may generate a situation close to intensity and energy. The sugar, together with the marzipan, might be taken to represent the energetic element through which to celebrate the passage through life and death, the dividing line between spirit and matter, chaos and the cosmos, reason and madness.

The happening conceals the features of a totemic meal, in which the father is consumed in order to acquire power, concealing the origins of those sacrificial rites lived as a form of closeness between man and his gods. It shares the magical/symbolic characteristics of the banquets practised during initiatory ceremonies, accompanying other rituals. The devoured and consumed body, with the scope of assimilating the virtues or the powers of the forebears, assumes elevated spiritual values: in imitation of the gods, considered anthropophagi (pre-Columbian Mexico or Polynesia), the vital forces, relating to the fecundity/fertility of being, augment.

Spoerri had dealt with the same symbolic circulation in *Le Dîner Cannibale* of 1970 (after in Galerie de Jeu de Paume, Paris 2002), realizing edible human forms based on moulds made of the body of François-Xavier Lalanne: fingers, head and feet cooked with different foods, sweet pastry and meat, «cocktail au sang, doigts bouillis, phallus délicieux, pain de pied, beurre d'oreille». He well knows that at the origins of food there is always killing and butchering, the moment in which the animal is killed in order to be eaten, the cyclical course of life and death. For Spoerri, consumption and devouring, as experiences of regeneration, allow the accumulation of energetic breaths useful for survival.

Nevertheless, the common participation in the meal solemnifies, socially, the moment of encounter and of entertainment with others, the time for gathering and for exchange. In this, the macabre banquet reveals and conserves the components of a vitalistic feast. The symbolic and social act aims at containing the hypothesis of a link between everyday group action and spiritual attitude: it confirms a situation experienced, which in absorption and in the collective rebirth seeks the connection with the magical, archaic importance of our own cultural homelands, a habitat which is not exposed to the risks of suspension or removal.

The relational experience of Spoerri's banquets has prefigured many of the adventures of the contemporary [artistic] panorama, like Rirkrit Tiravanija's gorgings and *Currys Thais*, the London restaurant designed by Damien Hirst or the bar opened in Munich by Tobias Rehberger. It has provoked reflections on the casual division of the participants between rich and poor, in *Die Küche der Armen der Welt* (*La cucina dei poveri del mondo*, Bochum 1972), meditating, on one hand, on the frivolousness of refined and elegant foods with a limited nutritional value and, on the other, on the consistency of a poor “working-class” alimentation, consisting of legumes and the traditional dishes of the people. It has arrived as far as the promotion of *AstroGastro* feasts, which are gatherings with menus referring to the signs of the zodiac, “prepared according to astrological points of view”, where everything is edible in expectation of its own future, beyond the frontier of what is already known to us.

On the other hand, as far as regards his assemblages Spoerri has adopted an entirely original practice called “de-tromp-l'œil” (undeceiving the eye). Different from tromp l'œil (wall paintings of architecture and

gardens of such mastery that they appear three-dimensional and real) here the concrete object, superimposed on a canvas or a photograph, betrays the image's illusion of depth as well as its false consistence. Here we are dealing with the artist's desire to hold tight to something that is certain because it is visible, and safe because it is objective and concrete. The disillusion begins precisely from the bewilderment felt in front of the object pressing onto an illusionistic surface, when the gaze fixes on a tap with shower head fixed onto an anonymous painting representing an alpine torrent in the piece *La douche* : the tap advances like a permanent, inescapable presence, it reactivates the simple and absolute evidence of the real, objective entity.

Combining, borrowing and comparing elements of reality, Spoerri begins an imaginative contamination of banal, everyday things: «When combining an object and an image, or an object with another object, it is not a question of scientific logic, but of an entirely subjective intuition». A practice which accords with the surgical operation and with the dissecting table, as site of dissections and disturbing encounters.

Experience and fantasy, the factual and the mythological, the bizarre and the tragic, [all] characterize the cycle *La médecine opératoire dessinée d'après nature par N. H. Jacob* : re-compositions of bodies starting from very diverse elements which relate with the background image, now profaned by its prosthesis of unusual fetishes, sometimes kitsch, sometimes of the highest quality craftsmanship.

Spoerri eventually arrives at immobilizing and fixing things on enlargements of Johann Kaspar Lavater's prints taken from Charles Le Brun, for the *Carnaval des Animaux*. Referring back to the tradition of the artist-scientist he interprets the physical and behavioural similarities of man and beast, associating with the evolutionary chain of images those objects that appear "intuitively", related to one another, approachable by one another and traceable one in another.

For *I guerrieri della notte* he makes use exclusively of handmade objects united with industrially-produced objects serving a different purpose, including plumbing tools or agricultural implements; objects almost always found in flea markets or junk shops. These are compositions that present mysterious and anthropomorphic presences in which every sign is bizarre, speaking a language which the author challenges us to understand, somewhere between the casual and the intentional, the sacred and profane, human and animal. Sets of pincers, potato peelers, old saws and rusty grinders are re-contextualized, arranged in unusual ways, associated as alienating compositions, enriched with multiple connotations. In the assemblage the elements mix more easily and more dangerously one with another, corrupting one another without aiming at any paternity. So art, rather than being an instrument with which to imitate life, is the means of rendering it inaccessible.

We have an important example in *Piume per cappelli*, composed of groups of hat stands in bronze, each with a wooden head furnished with a knife, saw or machete. The wooden forms, femi-nine and masculine, used by French and Italian designers and milliners for the production of different types of toque, cloche, bowlers, caps and berets, act as heads for long thin bodies, taking blows from a variety of old saws, bill-hooks, gardening knives, and ornate African sickles. In the diversity of these tools there appears an unexpected wealth of detail and of references traceable to different places and different times, to everyday customs, to the practices of our anthropological origins.

A variety, this, that partly distances us from the surrealist grouping, identified in few objects and in exclusively dreamlike and allegorical combinations. A group of things nowadays unused or little used, collectors' objects which, in contrast with Arman's accumulations, aim above all to variegate, to multiply and to articulate reality. This repetition of one type of object in different forms but with one common use introduces variations relative to their evolution and their adaptation over time and according to their diverse functions. Through the maze of wooden heads each group provokes formal and plastic slippages: a comparison between the machetes and the saws with slight variations in "design", a fleeting com-

parison between the sickles and the curved and decorated African swords.

The characters of the series *Piume per capelli* recall the figures of those warriors and knights struck down, when least expecting it, in revenge or punishment. They also encompass iconographic references to representations of the martyrs in historical altarpieces: the martyr's head with the axe buried in it. These figures, driven through and struck by swarms of saws and sickles, move amid doubling and multiplicity.

The most unexpected analogies are provoked like sleepy traces that must be re-awoken so that they can begin to speak again, and to suggest symbolic relationships between things. Beyond named and commonly expected presences, long-buried relationships and dispersed similarities are rediscovered. Under the signs established, a mixed and touching scene of combinations of objects is enacted, capable of distancing us from the parameters of a rhetorical and anaesthetised vision, and of placing us in a choral, multiple atmosphere.

The visual fog in which we live has accustomed us to a fictional world, a world in which ever more frequently the ephemeral spectacle substitutes real life, and in which external elements fall into the frenzied turbine of the flow of information. The effort required is, therefore, that of achieving the pace of an inverted time, of affirming a parallel sense of time that might take us forward with the same freedom to breathe that comes from contact with the immediate. Art proceeds through the only possible certainty which is the manifest and visible material of action, the object contaminated by the artist.

In the assemblages it is possible to manipulate, mount and glue to alter reality, the germinator of new contexts, new destinations and re-visitations.

Having to concede it a second life, the identity of the object is to be reconstructed according to a gallery of oblique and unexpected relationships, stimulated by the contamination and by the reciprocal montage of human scraps with the scraps of animals and objects towards the banal and the ephemeral, towards a one-on-one between elements in symbiosis. Through this geography of associations between heterogeneous regions, Spoerri wants to show a reality in the shadows, to solicit a trespassing into what he calls "ethno syncretism", in the encounter of objects originating in non-European cultures, such as African masks and ancestral figures, ethnic signs and the paraphernalia companion to diverse rites and cults.

Ethnic objects imbued with socio-cultural contents, with references to customs and traditions; these, together with bits of dead animal or materials with which we have a closer relationship acquire a new magical significance, a role that is aesthetic/emanating rather than practical/utilitarian.

The work of art takes its shape from dramatic inserts of fetish-figures, which end up depriving it of any positive and reassuring function. Spoerri's "vanishing point" is his interest in those legends (European and non-European) which, with their unsettling presence on the boundary between certainty and uncertainty, represent at least the radical possibility of an overturning of the mental and anthropological establishment of the institutionalised and atrophied Western culture of television and the web.

Spoerri renews the attention paid to an endogenous creativity, to a subterranean deposit of cultural nourishment perceived as a womb swelling to give birth to figures of fantasy, like those of the medieval and renaissance illustrations with ostrich-necked human hybrids, often equipped with horns and bizarre protuberances. His hybrid is to be understood in the sense of a return to marvel, to the suggestions of a gallery of unexpected visions.

In the circular room of the Torrione Passari in Molfetta, the artist has reanimated the mythical tale of the unicorn, creating a circular composition with seven bronze horse-skulls from whose foreheads there juts out a long horn. Another two are placed on either side of the entrance like guardians, the points of their horns touching like crossed lances. To the nine unicorns, held tight by a green metalworker's glove that

looks like a knight's, he has entrusted the job of watching over and venerating a real horse-skull raised up on a sort of altar at the centre of the room, topped by a long ivory horn – a narwhal's spiral tooth.

The ritual parade converges towards the light source above, taking place around this unique relic, of symbolic value, more than two metres high, become reminder of virility, or emblem of the virginity associated with the legend of the unicorn which, according to medieval beliefs also possessed curative powers. This ceremony celebrates the attributes of an animal of fantasy, a cross between horse and deer, which the church held to be tameable only by a virgin, the pure and chaste woman represented in the medieval tapestry series "La Dame à la Licorne" now in the Musée de Cluny in Paris.

Observed in visual connection with the archaic architecture of the site, the piece restores a vast horizon of thematic iconographies. The composition as a whole could be said to evoke the sacred enclosures erected by our ancestors in order to establish contact with the fluxes – good and evil – of the Earth and Nature, and with the whims and moods of the latent spirits.

In effect the sensation is one of entering into a theatre characterized by rites as Pandean and fabulous as they are macabre and terrifying, animated by the desire to take a path steeped in visionary fertility. Those who follow it oscillate between being disturbed by the enigmatic figures, and the impression of stumbling upon a secret cave of powerful suggestions, contributing to a magical density.

The use of the figure of the unicorn, guardian of virginity, involves – for Spoerri – the recovery of the mythical values of existence, and of tradition in general. If his interest in the leftovers of a meal demonstrated an attention to the voices of the primacy and of the cyclical order of things, his arrival at the echo of great ancient legends connotes the source of cultural life. The unicorn proves himself to be a bearer of messages and news, an esoteric herald of the inquietude of that which forms part of the fantastic itineraries of Myth.

The installation presides over a reanimation of the imagery realized through tangible signs that divert, lead astray and enthrall. This mysterious structural arrangement watches over something which was once living (if only in human belief and in mythology) – the skull pierced by the long horn – and suggests the importance of an origin from which to begin a terrestrial journey that has as its destination the discovery of obscure sacredness. With this there appears the sense of belonging to a place, the orientation towards the familiarity of those signs established in the social and anthropological tissue, in the history and the literature of man. One of the signs to be found in the piece with the unicorns is that of the triangle, formed by the converging of the two lateral bucrania/guardians with the central unicorn. The triangle icon seems to allude to the female sex in as far as it is a metaphor for a uterus both perturbing and primitive.

With Spoerri we are seduced by the exhilaration of secret places still perceived as containers to be inhabited and to filter through a number of reference to our visual heritage. One breathes in the same disenchantment as that of the *wunderkammer* created by sorcerer-scientists or capricious potentates (like, for example, the castle of Ambras near Innsbruck): a Pandora's box of marvels and admixtures, container of images both sacred and menacing, of hidden talismanic meanings, of symbolic/sexual characteristics.

The latest phase of Spoerri's imaginings is represented by the expansion into stories of falsification and lost idolatries which form the input of the series *Idoli di Prillwitz*. The series was conceived in reference to the antique Slavic divinities known as "the Obotrit", which until 1855 (the year in which they were unmasked as a falsity) were thought to have originated with a tribe of the temple of Rethra.

Spoerri makes recourse to an imagery of objects based on the marriage of old vices presented upside down and African statuettes, of artisans' tools and motorcycle helmets, as though wanting to draw attention to an inventive exercise that is not citation or copying. Fancies taking shape incessantly and dominated by the vision of triumphal processional floats: *Bianco? Nero?*

So Spoerri's art could be said to constitute the memory of un-remembering faculties, an aggregating motion that associates emotive and sentimental projections with the magical motif of a labyrinthine and recondite visual experience.

GIACOMO ZAZA