

ACTION AND THE ENGLISH ART LOVER

After seeing Matteo Peretti's show at the Archgallery in London, a well-known critic commented: "Remarkable range of styles. . . integrated, challenging and good quality. That's what we all expect from a group exhibition!" The critic was surprised when I told him that it was not a group exhibition, but the work of a single artist. "A solo show!", he exclaimed, ". . .where are the marks of the single artist?" I did not bother to replay to him. My silence hid a long suppressed answer that I am going to develop here.

In the show room, the critic saw a big square canvas covered with shopping bags, a ball made of coat hangers suspended from the ceiling, a video and two prints inspired by Japanese cartoons, a stuffed canary, a *basso rilievo* covered with chocolate wrapping paper, a phial filled with tears, a stool, a Frieze magazine, a bottle of mineral water, and a stuffed dog.

This array of disparate objects reminds us of the seventeenth-century European wunderkammer, a precursor to the modern museum that pre-dated traditional classification systems and combined biological oddities, zoological rarities, and geological specimens, exhibiting them along side works of fine art. The resonance of proximity and juxtaposition created a shifting array of associations and speculations. Collectors were attempting to create rooms which contained 'the whole of knowledge' in order to somehow understand the pre-scientific world better.

Does the multi-dimensional nature of this exhibition reflect Peretti's epistemological practices? Is he attempting to understand something of the contemporary world he finds himself in?

The titles of some of the works on display, "Shopping" , "Crying", "Feeding", "Eating kisses", seem to offer subjective interpretations of this particular area of enquiry: collecting. Here we have a unifying theme, a theme defined by the intense anticipation of the viewer's response. A theme permeated with an intense sensitivity toward the anticipated response of others about it. For example, the phial of tears has a story attached to it. The 36 teardrops were shed by the death of *Frank*, the stuffed canary. It is as if *Frank* had been created just to give an explanation to the tears, in anticipation to the question: "Why did you cry? For whom?" Thus "Feeding", the theme attached to the stuffed canary who consumed 16 bags of bird food during his short life, gives meaning to "Crying" in a sarcastic way.

What is at stake here is the question of whether, in considering the origin of *Frank*, we afford primacy to the viewer's response or to the artist's intention. It has been a characteristic emphasis, at least since Romanticism, to explain a great work of art as an emanation of a talented individual who is the source of all its meanings. Other natural-seeming assumption of bourgeois culture is that the artwork refers to the world beyond it. X seems to undermine these two assumptions: it appears to originate in the viewer and it refers to another work of art (the phial of tears) rather than to the world beyond it. So the focus cannot remain an epistemological one, concerned to show how Peretti is trying to understand the world he finds himself in, but rather becomes a structural one, engaged with relationships, interactions, transpositions, joyful deferments and endless switching of meanings.

"The English Art Lover", for example, invokes the pleasure to be had from the gaps and deferments of a meaning never fully completed. The stool and the bottle of water might refer to the absent security guard of a gallery or a state museum. Tied up to the stool, the stuffed dog adds up to the idea of the missing guard while at the same time suggesting the

possibility that the whole installation might be a humorous challenge to the complacency and the false sense of security of the English art establishment. Lying on the stool, the Frieze magazine makes possible the transposition between the guard and the English art lover, overlaying and switching both meanings.

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“The temporal and mutational nature of the world is the only element which supports and informs the true statement; the true statement is the only one which is able to negate all the other existing statements.”

Going back to the question of unity and style, we can think of “collecting” as a structural function that gives a sense of unity to this exhibition. “Shopping” is the title of a collage made of shopping bags collected by Peretti during a two/three-year period. “Crying” gives title to a phial of teardrops shed during that time. “ Changing” is a ball made of coat hangers, also collected during this period. “Eating Kisses” is made of multiple silver chocolate wrappings, presumably belonging to the same chocolate box. “Heroes” are two prints made of card-sized Japanese cartoon images downloaded from the Internet. They resemble the collections of cards and stickers that we used to love in our childhood. Finally, “The English Art Lover” stands apart as an installation that is both a criticism and a humorous anecdote about the English art collector.

As a member of the transnational community, Peretti moves freely between New York, London, Paris and Rome. Collecting those objects which refer to Peretti’s daily actions might be a link between these different cities, a ready-made activity that is the product of urban culture as, for example, the act of shopping.

“If we can not separate any of the objects of the world from their names, how can we separate them from their form....things are simply what they are but in a specific moment, with a specific history....is time which dictates form.”

Although we cannot extract “Shopping” from this difficult history, one feels the need to liberate the artwork from its contemporary context, as if to celebrate its autonomy as an object with its own laws. The Janus-face of the artist, immersed in a visual language that bears pervasive traces of the history of art, is turned towards the future, towards a viewer whose positive response cannot be guaranteed. For example, “Heroes: Honour and Sex”, the two prints made of card-sized Japanese cartoon images, can be situated between this past-future polarity. Their target audience is the generation that grew up watching Mangas. And yet this narrowing of empathetic sympathy by potential viewers is in itself a deconstruction technique that aims at reclaiming the artwork from the grasp of conceptualism. Even if we do not empathise with the artist’s previous experience as a child TV watcher, we delight in the aesthetic qualities of the work, in its balanced composition and bold use of colours.

To sum up, the critic might have grown used to seeing in everything the author’s hand, but Peretti does not show his. And why should he?

“The essence of many works of art is to represent diversity within unity, my art does the opposite; it is a manifestation of unity within diversity.”

It is as if Peretti’s concepts and aspirations have been refracted through a series of disparate works, each with its own character and voice, each acutely aware of an absent interlocutor, the viewer to whom the work is directed and from whom it indirectly originates.