

Lost Wisdom

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A starting point for a discussion of this work can be the funny observation that a barber's chair and a dentist's chair actually do look rather similar. And also, what one does at the hairdresser's and what one does at the dentist's are two rather similar things: Both professions, hairdresser and dentist, have as one of their task to rid us of our bodily surplus, - the hair that grows on our head (or in about 50% of cases, in our face), or four teeth at the back of our mouth that squeeze all the other teeth and cause pain. Yet we tend to think of the hairdresser's and dentist's as two very different environments. One profession would like to see itself as something you would need to consult on a monthly basis, too look good and to adapt yourself to the constant changes in fashion and life styles. The other is set in a clean clinical environment. It is scientific and something that most people fear.

"The Lost Wisdom" is a video piece, performed in London in July 2002. It lasts half an hour and is set on a brightly lit, theater-like stage. The three actors, - the dentist/hairdresser, his assistant and the patient, - all speak Italian. And as the performance begins, one realizes that there is a large audience present outside of what is visible on the video screen. The audience applauds, laughs and shrieks in agony as the

bloody tooth is pulled out of Peretti's mouth. First the artist has his nails clipped and trimmed. Then his beard shaven and his hair cut. Then he has a wisdom tooth pulled out. At the end, the assistant holds a mirror up to his face so that he can see himself. Peretti takes a good look at his hair and his face and then he opens his mouth to inspect his teeth. Clearly content with the result, he smiles at the dentist/hairdresser and his assistant. Then he takes his jacket and leaves.

With an audience present, with the sharp light illuminating the chair, the equipment and the three people on stage, this can only be a theatrical performance. The dialogue is sporadic, a word in Italian is pronounced every now and then by the hairdresser/dentist: "Specchio", "sputa!", "grazie". It sounds and looks a bit like Ionesco. But as we are watching a real event, someone actually having his wisdom teeth pulled out, there is something rather uncomfortable about the whole spectacle. Perhaps we are supposed to feel relieved at not being the one having to suffer up there on stage. Perhaps the artist is feeding us with disturbing images to satisfy the new spectator's voracity. Perhaps we are only watching a professional at work, maybe the audience is composed by students but then, why would they laugh and applaud, and why are two different professions so weirdly blended together?

One might say the first and foremost, the story is about the aspect of time projected onto the human body, the hair and the teeth that we have to get rid

of. It is about the act of removing surplus, un-needed material: How these acts of removal are the physical evidence that time has passed. In a highly theatrical environment these simple acts of removal are made into a spectacle. **“An everyday act is transformed into a special event; here everyone can act as the main character”**. The small orders and commands in Italian work brilliantly to transport the entire happening elsewhere. One is pushed to believe that what is happening on stage tells a story. There is no story, strictly speaking, but the hairdresser/dentist and his assistant are making a point. The performance makes two types of operations, - one purely cosmetic and the other strictly necessary, - blend into one. In this hybrid environment, - half hairdresser's, half dentist's, - with Italian actors and with the whole performance concentrating on the removal of bodily surplus, one can sit back, watch and enjoy an absurd comedy. A shelf underneath the video screen displays the main protagonists of the play, - a round ball of human hair and a tooth. ironically critic.....