

It sounds strange to call a work of art a “Relic”. The term calls to mind collapse, wreckage, or traces of a catastrophe. It sounds hard, but also meaningful. It says that what remains is lost forever. Hermann Nitsch uses the word “Relic” to signify an Action that does not represent either a picture or a performance. An installation? Purely formally, Nitsch’s Relics could be defined like that, but they look very different from the inside. Although they comprise an autonomous work, at the same time they are processed remains of an event that brought destruction. In this context, the Relic should be seen less as a testimony and more as a moment of reflection.

The Orgien Mysterien Theater gives birth to everything; it is Nitsch’s wide-ranging theoretical framework and his splendid, practical realization. The staged performance of the Orgien Mysterien Theater is theater in its purest, most authentic form. An act of primary celebration of life through direct and tangible confrontation with death. The main element is the Action: all the plots which the active actors/performers and those Nitsch describes as passive, perform together with each other in physical and ritual contact. It is a plot that is also acted out with animal cadavers, with blood (which directly records the tragic dimension and recalls the sacral principles), with entrails (the “invisible” body, the secret and unearthly presence), as well as with grapes mashed to a sticky paste in Dionysian fashion.

Consequently, the Action in the Orgien Mysterien Theater is the relationship between the bodies, between the bodies and the space, between the bodies and the materials of the Action, and becomes a theatrical form full of sensual experience that also involves a very high degree of emotional and spiritual intensity. It represents a kind of journey into the interior that Antonin Artaud expressed in a wonderful metaphor: the unknown that hides within us. The Orgien Mysterien Theater really does test the human element in its purest form and removes the outer layers of daily life, of society, and of formal roles. This is possible through a vehement and violent conflict, without - to paraphrase Artaud - glossing over the “cruelty” of existence and being, and with ceremonial rigor always playing a role in this. The Dionysian, the orgiastic drunkenness that forms the roots of the scenically staged Actions, is never chaotic, uncontrolled and amorphous. On the contrary, it has a certain rigor and its own surgical precision. In other words, it has a form, in common, incidentally, with every ritual, every sacrificial death. Nitsch has always considered this aspect of his work very important, just as when he often speaks about color as one of the guiding elements in the process of artistic creation, although this dimension of sensual experience is so powerful that this aspect is usually ignored. The Orgien Mysterien Theater, however, represents the recording of the Action, the organic material and the form. All three concepts can be unambiguously classified with one adjective: vivid. The Orgien Mysterien Theater represents an opportunity to reflect critically on the dimension of the living in its purest and most contradictory form, in which the festival and death mutually interact.

The physical transition of the Action into the space of the production (in the broadest sense) is a perceptible fact. The organic materials, and the blood, sketch and describe not only the bodies of the performers but also the place. They develop a sticky, glutinous texture drenched in smells and colors, with a numbing effect. Although one tends to assume this relates to the Relic of the Action, this is not the case. The Action turns out to be quite different and much more complex, both in formal technical terms and with respect to its essential being. The Relics are works that Nitsch later shapes on the basis of the Action and by reworking the signs and mementos. The goal is not to exhume the remnants of the performance materials but to achieve a further creative moment of revision in which the materials and the form are brought into play in a different way. The Action no longer exists, the Action is over. It existed, it affected the audience and the artists deeply, but it is past and all that remains is the Relic.

How are Nitsch’s Relics assembled, and what elements compose them? Of course, they change from one instance to the next, from Relic to Relic, but there are recurring signs and elements that one can determine and define as Nitsch’s “expressive grammar”.

First of all, there are elements that physically emerge from the performed Action. Pieces of big white canvas screens on which festive acts are carried out with blood and arousal. During the Action they are smeared and soiled with brown, reddish stains, giving them a powerful, organic intensity. Then, in most cases there is a painter’s smock that one of the “active actors” wore, and which bears the traces of physical contact with the blood and Action materials. The painter’s smock is displayed in a position almost resembling a cross, Nitsch

has devoted very significant words to this smock and its presence as an object, along with the meaning he assigns to it in his artistic vision. It is worth citing and considering these words Nitsch wrote:

“the intensity, often with even greater spontaneity than it achieves on the picture surface, transmits to the PAINTER’S SMOCK. it is automatically stained, besmirched, befouled, trodden on, smeared, poured on, sprayed with blood (with red paint), with all the colors of the rainbow, of the color spectrum.”

Borrowing his definition, the painter’s smock is Nitsch’s “habit”, the sacral robe of the ritual. It is not by chance that cope pluviale, symbols of the Catholic liturgy, are sometimes used in the Relics: not with the intention of desecrating, but to give additional emphasis to the sacral solemnity of the artistic gesture. The painter’s smock is the equivalent of the Orgien Mysterien Theater on the level of the scenically staged ritual. It is the lived image of sacrificial death, the visible echo of the “torn dionysus”, as Nitsch formulates it, the “essence of the tragic” not in its literary sublimation but in its revelation of horror and suffering.

Stretchers are often used as the basis for the Relics. Stretchers that carried the bodies during the performance are turned into tables, altars. And even if they are not presented as such, there is always a table-altar among the Relics, with the painter’s smock or the screen serving as a background. One thus begins to imagine how the Relic is a carefully thought-out (posthumous) construct, a composition of the material that follows its own clear logic.

To grasp this logic in its totality, one has to take a closer look at the Action materials. There are those that emerge from the performance and those that are completely different, that are autonomous, and consequently tell their own personal story. The surgical instruments are especially notable: scalpels, spreaders, objects used for operating on the body, for opening it up, tearing and cutting it. Objects that make us feel uncomfortable because they evoke surgical operations, necessary but painful suffering. Then there are the test tubes and the distillation flask that are also signals because they belong to the field of medicine and remind us of bodily fluids and excretions.

These are materials indirectly related to the scenic atmosphere of the performance. If they were not used during the creation of the Relics (as can happen with the scalpels), then they are pure, clean and, to exaggerate slightly, one could almost say, sterile. They are strongly reminiscent of the physical Action on the body; they remind us of the blood as the inevitable result of this Action, and they do so on a cold, mental level.

Finally, there are other elements that seem completely out of place at the center of the operative and theoretical context characterizing Nitsch’s work: pieces of sugar or little piles of paper tissues. Nitsch used one or the other to create completely parallel rows characterized by their purity. In this context, the materials are also important, but what really counts are the paint colors. The pure blossom white, arranged in that geometric pattern, enters a dialogue with the other elements, and even contextualizes them.

As explained above, Relics are assembled works that emerge from an arrangement of different elements that, in turn, set up a dialogue that can be described with the related Actions less in a documentary way, and more critically. One thing that becomes clearer when we look at its construction is the formal rigor, which is Cartesian in nature. That “form”, which is the main element of the staged Action, but is almost mutilated in the scene by the emotional intensity of the moment, is expressed programmatically here. In this case we are talking about an exceptional ordering and an absolutely faithful regard for detail that leaves nothing to chance. Not only is the arrangement of sugar pieces or tissues exactly prescribed, the distance between the elements is also measured out to the millimeter. The surgical instruments are produced in the same order in which they would appear on an operating table. However, following the formal principle, the Relic is constructed as the cooling-off space of the Dionysian (see above) of the Action it derives from. Let us envisage the dialectic between the materials once again. If the painter’s smock is the embodiment of the organic, of heat, of what can be sensually experienced, the sugar pieces and the tissues, which are particularly impressive for the geometric clarity of their arrangement, are symbols of freshness, of purity. The dialectic tension between the two poles is immense. In Nietzschean terms we could speak of a tension between the Dionysian and the Apollonian; in other words, of a kind of liturgical symbolism that, with its fiery formalism, recalls the sacrificial act it has been through, that endows it with meaning and from which it emerged, but which no longer exists and which represents a lack. Now it is less an object than a place of observation that causes the observer to think back, to reflect, just as the performed event becomes a place of participation, and of emotional reaction.

We began by noting that, from a technical perspective (according to the language of art criticism), Relics can be classified as installations. But we have also shown how restrictive this definition is. We shall conclude by

trying to find a better explanation. Particularly with regard to the performed Action, the Relic that derives from it is, for that reason, not a completely new work (even if we have rightly emphasized its autonomy and special nature). Yet it is a testimony to a sacrificial procedure that no longer exists, a ritual and formal sign of a physical and bodily fact. We could say, it is a testimony in the sense of the Gospel: a return to detachment and, as it were, self-reflection. The Relics of the Orgien Mysterien Theater represent a perspective of reflection on the sacred, on the bloodstained sacrifice they emerged from.