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On the Verge of Rationality

They say that, in contemporary societies, ceremonial practices do not exist as meaningful religious acts but only as desperate attempts made by man in a bid to put his life in order and find meaning in it, when he finds himself in danger. And yet holy rituals could be perceived as a necessity that man never abandoned, despite the secularisation of contemporary reality and despite the ostensible liberation of human thought from "prejudice". As Ludwig Wittgenstein characteristically stated in 1931, in his remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*:

For no phenomenon is in itself particularly mysterious, but any of them can become so for us, and the characteristic feature of the awakening mind of man is precisely the fact that a phenomenon comes to have meaning for him. One could almost say that man is a ceremonial animal. This is partly false, partly non-sensical, but there is also something in it. [...] If one holds it to be self-evident that man is gratified by his fantasy, then one must consider that this fantasy is not like a painted picture, or a plastic model, but a complicated construction of heterogeneous components: words and images. Then one would not place operations with written and spoken signs in opposition to operations with "mental images" of events.

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Centred on man and the fundamental question of defining the intense religiosity that, by nature or nurture, possesses him, George Hadjimichalis' piece *Masks and Votive Offerings* initiates a dialogue between painted representations of two groups of objects that, at first glance, seem very different, but which directly relate to man and his tendency for ritualistic behaviour: exact copies of African masks and realistic depictions of Greek Orthodox *tamata* – votive offerings. On a dark grey background, he renders in pencil the masks of the ethnic groups of Liberia, Gabon, Guinea, Zambia, the Ivory Coast and Tanzania – masks that have danced in the masquerades of the Grebo, the Mahongue, the Poro, the Mbunda, the Bete, the Gio, the Dan and the Makonde, as mediators in the relationship between man and the unseen.

GH's selection from the huge range of traditional African mask-making – and, by extension, myth-making – is purely aesthetic and probably random, as is their juxtaposition with eight painted reproductions of votive offerings: a kidney, an eye, an ear, a foot, a girl, a boy and a soldier, figures inspired by the abstractive metal votive offerings of Greek Orthodox tradition, come to life inside a grey frame with a black background. The two together, masks and votive offerings, votive offerings and masks, iconic and symbolic representations, all at once, make up pairs of artworks that take on the form and properties of a double-sided icon.¹ They create associations between recognisable images, objects full of meaning, in an attempt to "see" the images in the archetypal sense of the word, which pertains to images endowed with properties and powers that transcend the everyday, images tasked with introducing, presenting and, at the same time, representing man.

Through this piece, GH represents the representation of man before the divine. By extension, he embodies human uncertainty and the need for heaven-sent protection against the dangers of life, thus highlighting common features in human behaviour. Beyond what is represented by the image of these particular physical objects, as objects that function and are understood in the context of special ceremonial acts, the objects themselves reflect and encompass human feelings, fundamental needs and activities: in the case of the votive offerings, piety, the inherent tendency for religiosity, and their various manifestations; faith and

¹ The iconography of Byzantine double-sided processional icons, in particular, combines, on the two sides of the same panel, different subjects, which are, however, associatively connected in the minds of the viewers, through the sermons and interpretive comments of the Church Fathers: one side shows a sorrowful Virgin and Child, while the other depicts a scene from the Passion of Christ, such as the Crucifixion, or the dead body of Christ as the Man of Sorrows. I would like to thank my colleague, byzantinologist Anastasia Drandaki, for making this interesting point.

hope, promise and dedication; veneration; worship; salvation and atonement; reciprocity. As for the masks, they represent, literally and symbolically, the myth, people's relationship with the spirits and the ancestors, initiation but also entertainment, encouragement, fertility, good fortune and hope, peace and protection, catharsis, honour and triumph, good and evil.

Representation, therefore, is a keyword that applies to *Masks and Votive Offerings* as a whole. Just like image, symbolism, ritual, need, fear, hope, worship, faith, performance, and many other words and concepts that pertain to the interaction between religion and society, that represent relationships of the earthly with the supernatural.

With keywords that correspond to ideas, I am attempting a personal approach to GH's work, applying my own, anthropologically predisposed interpretation of the dialogue that possibly develops on his double-sided icons. With all the consequences of the inherent subjectivity of this visual transcription, a new dimension of the life of objects is explored, which pertains to the appropriation of the objects themselves and the idea they stand for, in the field of contemporary artistic creation. And that in the belief that the dialogue between art and anthropology exempts the function of artistic creation as a means of understanding and recording human behaviour and the complexity of human relationships. The human is redefined through aesthetics, aesthetics not just as *poesis*, but also as reality or, more accurately, as perceptible, physical existence.

What drives man to project his feelings, his hopes and his ideals through images and works of art, either as illusion or as *actual* spiritual fulfilment? That is a hard question to answer. In any case, man's religiosity, awakened spirit and active presence are defined by his aesthetics and his sensory stimuli. Which is why man invests sanctity in the material and converts it into a token of faith, hope and worship. In the words of Mircea Eliade (1959), "by manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu". Besides, sensual stimulation, as Danny Miller calls the ability to see objects because of their physical nature, turns them into participants in human relationships, where they take on an identity of their own and live their own life, parallel to man. In a spontaneous and particularly innovative way, in the context of the practices that accompany them, the masks, like the votive offerings, are invested with force, with life, since they are subjected to the human belief that they are a means of solving problems, while they retain an inherent, secular value as objects with general, discernible and natural properties. For some, their worth is in the form they take. For others, it is based upon their function and, by extension, their functionality.

Involved, primarily, in the environment of votive practice, votive offerings are understood in the context of religion and thus they acquire a momentum in relation to faith in the divine being. An act of benediction imparts a sacred power to the "simple" materiality of the image they present, and that sanctity is now attributed to the material itself. Such images-symbols unleash concrete statements. Literally, figuratively and symbolically, they depict man and they exist to represent him before the divine.

In its contemporary Greek Orthodox version,¹ the concept of offering presupposes a system of exchange, under which the offering can assume a spiritual or material form. Often spontaneous but consistent, involuntary but defined from without, the practice of offering is a cultural performance that manifests itself on a collective level. Because an act that is personal and deeply spiritual takes place, in most cases, in a public space, and acquires a purely secular and intensely social character. It could be said that it takes on the form of social drama, a moment of worry and anticipation of salvation, in an environment that Victor Turner described as *communitas*, an environment of social communion. Its externalisation communicates the "possibilities" of offering and its social implications form the basis of its validity. As GH aptly pointed out during one of our conversations, a mother who pledges her soldier son in a time of war does it because she

¹ Offering is found all over the world, mainly as a plea for or recognition of a cure, and is directly related to pilgrimage, especially among the Catholics of the New World. Its existence beyond the canon of the Church, which is also manifest in its adaptations in the context of each culture, reflects a model of operation that is activated in conjunction with representations of the past and the needs of the present. Which is precisely the reason it is believed to have originated in ancient times and older religions.

wants to do it, but also because other mothers have done it before her. Through a dramatic symbolism, therefore, the act of dedication expresses fundamental beliefs and values. As material offerings, votive offerings play a central role in this process. The presence of votive offerings in churches – if not as proof of a miracle, then certainly as tokens of the faith that inspired it – bestows upon them the role of “communicant”, not just with the divine, but also with the people around.

African masks, with a comparably dynamic, apotropaic and expiatory character, take part in masquerades as means for mediating with the gods and ancestral spirits, which they represent and introduce to the community, with man as the go-between. Sometimes as important religious ceremonies and sometimes in the context of annual festivities, masquerades almost always revolve around myth, to which masks refer either symbolically or sculpturally. Masks are not worn merely to cover the face, but presume the wearer has been possessed by the spirit, since they contain a supernatural power, always in a general and collective context of performance and release of tension, which includes music, dancing and activities such as poetry, drama, sacrifices, drum rolls and story-telling.¹ The African attitude towards history, which is constantly reviewed through performance, is expressed with an emphasis on the present.

The style, sculptural rendering and adornment of the masks varies, depending on the character that they represent and the mask's duties, but also in relation to the aesthetics of the ethnic group it belongs to. Each mask plays a specific role, which may reflect duties of political or social control, like the *Sachihongo* mask of the Zambian Mbunda, chosen by GH, which depicts the ancestor of the same name as the ultimate male, or the *Deangle* mask of the Dan tribe of Liberia, which represents the ideal of the demure young woman and embodies the noble spirits of the forest.

Despite the fact that a large number of African residents have now converted to either Christianity or Islam, which forbid such manifestations,² rituals and ceremonies with masks have traditionally been a basic part of life of almost all ethnic groups of Sub-Saharan Africa, while their religious worth reflects customs and values that are expressed through art.

Masquerades, then, just like the act of offering, are products of an amalgam of cultural beliefs, since they are a part of broader religious systems, which are considered true and effective in the context of the collective consciousness of the people who perform and activate them to this day. Those two very different forms of ritual behaviour combine votive and communicative properties, involving, on an individual and collective level, people, objects and spirits/saints. GH discourses all these meanings, the emotions, activities and potential of man, masks and votive offerings, gives himself up to the associations of his personal experiences and readings, as well as his aesthetic preferences, and creates a new piece of art, bringing together the representations of two objects centred on their religious properties, and thus initiating a contemporary dialogue between objects and history.

“The analysis could end here,” notes Claude Lévi-Strauss around halfway through his book *The Way of the Masks* (1972). And since I am “sharing” that phrase with Lévi-Strauss, feeling compelled to add one more thought, I will also share his concern about understanding objects in the context of the process by which they obtain their meaning. In order to understand the place of objects in the world, it is essential that we explore the cultural environment that initially produced them, and the new conditions under which they function later. That function corresponds to variable parameters, which, in turn, depend on changes in the value system of the people who interact with the objects, and originate from culture, history, society, everyday life, religion and the interconnection of all.

¹ In African metaphysics, it is compared to electricity; it is thought of as a power inherent in objects and people, which may be released with terrifying fury, or mastered for the greater good.

² And certainly in conjunction with historical, political and economic factors, which have undoubtedly caused changes in the ethnic identity and culture of contemporary Africans, and which are not discussed here.

So, which is the point where the potential life of masks and votive offerings meet human existence? Where do they "dwell" in human relationships? Votive offerings and, even more so, masks, are not just used but indeed take part in "rites of passage", in periods of transition from one state to another. As mediators, votive offerings are tokens of self and mementoes of miracles. As mediators, the masks are catalysts of "transportation" and metamorphosis. The ambiguous and indefinable features of objects are expressed through a wide variety of symbols. Through the ritualistic "habitation" of the mask and the symbolic "incorporation" of the votive offering, man goes through a socially and structurally ambiguous period, a stage that Victor Turner defines as *between and betwixt*.

Parallel to their religious existence, the "worldly" image of votive offerings has changed over time, in relation to the way they have been approached by scholars of traditional art. In the early twentieth century, when the intellectuals turned their attention to folk handicrafts as *curios*, with the emphasis on those in danger of being lost, votive offerings were barely given the time of day. With the passage of time, votive offerings were sometimes the object of sporadic studies and exhibitions, or a source of inspiration for artists. Today, cut off from their past life and outside of the churches, votive offerings exist on the verge between sacred and profane, material and immaterial, the verge between discourse and action, the real and the imagined, art and craft: *between and betwixt*.

Without necessarily following the same path, masks are also, quite literally, on the verge. They came to the West, orphaned of the relational context that assigned them their meaning, bringing along only their physical properties. They exist without the details, actual or symbolic, that complete their presence: the rest of the costume, the environment, the music, the dancing, the colours, the smells, the sounds. They came to the West and the transience of their material existence was abolished, since at home they were made to live only briefly, to dance and then return to nature, decompose. And, finally, they came to the West to be included in private collections and displayed in museums, but without any recognition or understanding of the aesthetic value they held for their creators and users, and without even the intention of attempting such things. They came as objects of ethnographic interest, as *curios*, which were only recognised as works of art (for whatever that might mean) much later, through the western eye of the modernists of the early twentieth century, and following a process of their reinterpretation in relation to their new environment, the Western world, and not the one they were (often violently) snatched from. So William Rubin (1984) is absolutely right in saying that Primitivism is an aspect of the history of modern art and not of tribal art.

For each object that survives in time, therefore, the body of knowledge that surrounds it is enriched with new interpretations. All the "layers" of meaning are now incorporated into the objects, like palimpsests. GH recognises the power and adaptability of the objects and, applying an ethnographic perspective, appropriates that momentum, triggering a new interpretation of their physical presence and taking part in the creation of yet another dimension of their existence. That way, he creates a new object, which encompasses the properties of the objects it represents.

How will we read the history of these objects, which is recorded and re-enacted, permanently now, on wood and "exhibited" on stands that allude to museum display cases, which bring back the third, sculptural dimension to the objects they represent? And how will we view these pieces in the future, when they are still here, unaffected by time, isolated from history and yet incorporating it, thus assuming a fourth dimension, that of time and history?

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Through *Masks and Votive Offerings*, George Hadjimichalis projects the past and the future as the present, adopting the African take on history and the role of the African sculptor, who shares the element of anonymity with the creators of votive offerings: he lets the objects themselves assume the role of protagonist, since he is essentially dealing with forces that exist beyond him. And by doing so, he becomes the "bearer" of ideas, beliefs, prejudices, emotions, which he openly shares with us, but also with the previous creators and users of the objects, as well as with the objects themselves. Besides, and I will once more quote Lévi-Strauss (1972),

in claiming to be solitary, an artist indulges in a perhaps fruitful illusion, but the privilege he grants himself has no reality. When he thinks that he's expressing himself in a spontaneous fashion, that he does original work, he answers to the past or present, actual or virtual creators. Whether aware of it or not, no one walks the path of creation alone.*

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