

From the Artistic Symbol to the Symptom of Art

The issue we propose to debate is whether the categories of symbol and symptom imply different determinations when it comes to art.

Viewing the symbol from its Greek derivation (*symbolon*) and the renaissance, as a means of interpretation associated to the artistic (as one of the parts of the division, the symbol maintains the receptor out of the work of art) and the symptom as a reference to the work of art – art as a manifestation of the symptom emphasises the process bringing the receptor into the work of art.

We shall also look into clarifying the difference between the perception of the artistic symbol (through artistic images) and the work of art that manifests itself visually through the symptom and try to reach a conclusion, based on these two perspectives, about the characteristics of the art terrain, within the triangular framework *author-work of art-spectator*.¹

Can we consider the artistic as a domain of the images (symbolic) and the art as a domain of the objects (symptom)?

The symbol as a “divine” entity that implies the pure form, the symbol interpreted in light of its linguistic Greek origin as one of the parts of the split object, stimulating interpretation, the symbol as an autonomy identity whose result is simulacrum [Volli in Melotti, p.73-87], or the symbol as an operative moment [Boidi in Melotti, p.102], it will always implicate an entity in the artistic image, whereas in the work of art remains the implication of the symptom that manifests the action that gives rise to art itself?

In this case the consideration of Modernism is once more a moment of exemplary rupture.

Lets,

“Thinking Modernity in terms of the idea of similarity beyond the image, a similarity that bears no room for a mirror, an absolute similitude to the object, without an identity equation, a similarity without «how» and without «Sameness», out of all analogy, similitude or transposition.” [Wajcman, 1998, p.208]

Like Santen (1997) refers “ in the advent of the European Modernity the symbolic entities, in conclusion, they are sustain by *impulse*, by performing as compulsion for repetition. Renouncing to the possibility of being simulacrum or phantasmagoria, they symbolise each thing and their contrary, introducing the “presence in the representation” [Didi-Huberman, 1990, p.195]. Within this limit the images do not satisfy or symbolise, as objects of desire, but as a need to liberate which edges the non-representation of the manifestation of the symptom of art, and in this aspect the symbol is integrated by the symptom. At its limit the images of art become hyperbolic «symbolising» the symptom.

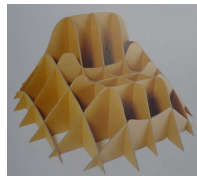
The oscillation between structural “decadence” of the symbolic change and the substitute of direct “experimentation” reflect the central paradox of Modernity: the individual’s desire for autonomy is summoned by the community, which inscribes the individual’s body as it own. For art this *strange presence* is constituted by the presence of the spectator in the work of art itself. The redeeming possibility of art as a sublime object of “discovery” comes into existence through irregularities, incompatibilities, and the inadvertences of the art system. The symptom as the “legitimate” guarantee of art reveals itself in the irreconcilable aspect of the art system; in the interaction with the irreducible

¹The references of our analysis are based on Modern Art, especial examples of artistic vanguard - approximately between 1850 and 1950 - up to the works of art of the XXI century. We resorted to the work of Gérard Wajcman, especially the book *L’objet du siècle* as a reference to the concept of *object of art* defined by the triangular framework *author-work of art-spectator*

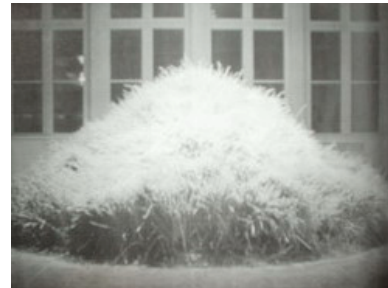
aspect of the fanciful object. The perpetuation of the symbolic resides in the contradiction of what is denied as acquisition. Transcendence reveals itself in the heteronomy of the possibility to exist.



Nucleo, Terra: the Grass Arm-chair
polypropylene, grass, soil, rocks, 2000



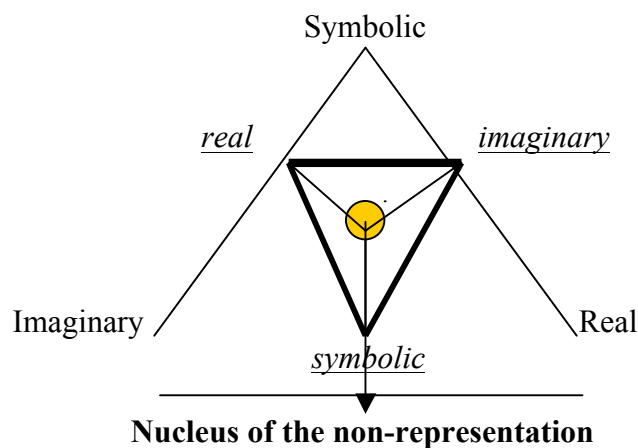
(ardboard)



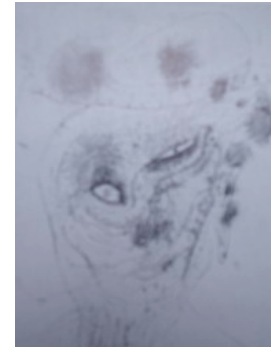
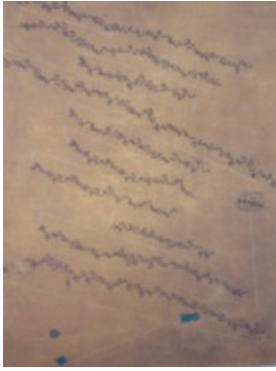
Hans Haacke, Grass Grows,
earth, winter and annual rye grass, 1969

The work of art does not reveal itself in the unity-of-being as a desire to be achieved, but rather as the revelation of what is “phantasmagorically” possible. The breaches in the modern structure have consolidated the possibility of the artistic proliferation and the consideration of its limits: from the most solitary to the most “convivial”. That is, if on the one hand the art domain - as a solitary presence - can be found in the anthropological borders, such as in Art Brut. On the other hand, we verify the presence of some objects of design that currently place themselves on the aesthetic limit. Contrary to *an* essentially solitary art, design shows solidarity with the possibility of fantasy instrumentation as a guarantee of human legitimacy. The possibility of the *being-related-with* another and new object that “arrives” is liberating, contradicting the breach of trust in the human.

Let us taking into consideration the triad figure RIS, real-imaginary-symbolic [Žižek, 2004, p.98].



From the vertices of the triangle, *real-imaginary-symbolic* we can establish an infinite network as the constellation space of movement of the individual, thus forming successive triangles (infinitely) that personify in themselves the different territories of what is real, symbolic or imaginary. Each of these territories is subject to the domain of the different images. These domains, however, are not fixed; on the contrary they exist as if limited by *porous membrane*. The nucleus of this corresponds to the non-representation, banning the image. In this nucleus the existence of images would prove to be self-destructive. The images of art manifest themselves as symptoms of the work of art itself, as loose ends of the system of art; they are presented by the gaps - in the aesthetic domain, where the symbolic manifests itself as being insufficient.



Art interprets the symptom through human desire. The work of Art Brut or certain Surrealistic automatisms distance themselves (referring the limit) from art in that they are not interpreted but rather establish themselves as reconstructions (fanciful) of reality. They represent the fundamental fantasy that cannot be interpreted but merely (re)constructed, according to the Lacanian notion, of the “acephalous” understanding: “Interpretation and reconstruction are in relation to each other like symptom is to fantasy: symptoms should be interpreted; fundamental fantasy should be (re)constructed...” [Žižek, 2004, p.62].

Francis Palanc, Sur une ligne droite c'est la ligne de ma vie, 1959

Michaux, Without title, 1967

Wols, Selfportrait One, 1941

The work of art will be double like the sign which implies a very precise symbolic determination, as an active force, whose oscillating tension (re)constructs fantasy, appearing as psyche, supernatural apparition, dream, shadow. In this case the image as symbol of mobility (re)presents and interprets the truth (?) while a symptom. As a result the truth is included in the order of the subjective desire and understanding derives from the pulsional reconstruction.

These works of art borders the threshold of the psychotic universe, defined as “a universe where the individual is unable to forget, and (primordially) unable to clamp down the pulsional dimension of the symbolic function, that expands itself in the general state of rot and decadence”.² [Santner, 1997, p.59]

In this abstract we intended to demonstrate that the objects of art distance themselves from the artistic images via the symptom as an inclusive possibility of a demonstration of art. The objects of art renouncing the external symbolic interpretation include the viewer as a constituent of the work of art, placing emphasis the procedural unity.

As a limit the symbol becomes part of the symptom in art, becoming the referent that recuperates the *gaps* of the artistic past.³ By emphasising the process, the object of art (the symptom) reveals itself as the designator of the unity and thus contradicting the artistic images that represent symbolically what is still disassociated. Nevertheless, the objects of art which are still subject to the domain of representation⁴ can only gain a unity that is revealed in its disconnection from desire, thus allowing the artistic image to be interpreted in the object of art.

² Santner refers to Kafka's example through Surrealism. For example: “the sense of surrealistic in Kafka's texts seem to derive from the *excessive* closeness of that dimension of social reality”. (p.65)

³ With regards to the symptom “traces of a recuperated past” we use the Žižek's considerations in the book *Benvenuti nel deserto del reale*, 2002, on Santner, E. manuscript *Miracles Happen; Benjamin, Rosenzweig and the limits of Enlightenment*, 2001

⁴ Since only in the last years, since Bergson to Derrida, much work has been done regarding this issue. Aware of undefined clarity of the term and concept *representation.*, we shall base our interpretation of the concept on the tangibility of the comprehensible through the sensitive [Nancy, 2002, p.63]

The announced end of the art as a historic model; in rupture with the symbolic, denying an “evolving explicative unit” of history, and still “expressing itself” as an action (production of the work of art), refers to its problematic question as the action of human understanding (philosophy), in a relationship with a possible transcendence. It no longer refers to a religious transcendence but one that alleges itself as earthly art that “self-diminishes” as a practice. It does not refer to the “problem” as something outside itself; art “reproduces itself” autophagically (like the fictional image where the individual can but only eat his own son).

Scorning what is external; refusing the symbolic existence of/for use, that is, its inability to consider beyond the Other, art cynically evokes its own self-destruction, thus, promoting the «emptiness» of art as we know it.

One way of conceiving what is a work of art: more than an object that being different from all the other objects of consumption; more than filling, satisfying our *libido vivendi*; it will on the contrary take, move, divide, perforate in us loads of holes.
[Wajcman, 1998, p.219]

We propose art implies the consideration of pulsation as a legacy of art, guaranteeing its “legitimacy”, revealing art as a “tranquillising” pulsional.

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