

TOMMASO FAGIOLI

WHERE IS MY SACRED?

Fondazione Pastificio Cerere
5th dec 2018 - 14th jan 2019



PREMISE

«The sacred is an element of the structure of consciousness and not a moment in the history of consciousness. The experience of the sacred is inextricably linked to the effort made by man to build a world that has meaning. Hierophanies and religious symbols constitute a pre-reflective language. Since it is a specific language, sui generis, it needs its own hermeneutics.»
– Mircea Eliade

With these words the Romanian historian of religion and anthropologist defined, in his *Fragments of a Journal 1945-1969*, the aspects of this dimension, presupposed to every religion, connected to one of the most ancient and foundational experience of humanity : the “feeling of existence” together exciting and terrible, capable to open up primordial man to the mystery of his own presence. That man, according to Mircea Eliade, was intrinsically *religiosus*, in the sense that his experience of the world was integrally and originally permeated by a transcendent character, so it can be said for that primitive sensitivity, the Cosmos itself, as a whole, was manifestation of the sacred.

Today, after Nietzsche’s terrible declaration about the death of God (“Gott ist tot!”), meaning the end of a world based on *theo-eschatological* horizon in favour of a world based on *technical-materialistic* premises, we have been orphans of the divine, nostalgic for a spiritual or a numinous dimension, forgetful of the sacred.

Yet the radical experience of the “ganz Anderes” (of the “radical Other”), of what language cannot explain, is irrepressible, and constitutive of the human mind. The exhibition is structured as an itinerary through three works I ironically define “pop-hierophanies”, which address three traditional aspects of the sacred: *beauty, invocation, and faith*.

The intent is to recall the *tremendum*, the *maiestas*, the *mysterium fascinans* of this terrifying and irrational experience, but also all-encompassing and full of wonder: the sacred. Hence the title of the exhibition:

**“Where is my sacred?”
And so - dear visitor - where is yours?**

ITINERARY – NUOVO SPAZIO MOLINI

“BEAUTY WILL SAVE THE WORLD!” – [BEAUTY]

At the entrance of the space, a 3D cardboard print of the Venus di Milo (created by NextMaterials from Milan), stands as a totem at the beginning of the “hieratic path”, waiting for the visitor. The statue is covered with medical bands like it was wounded. My intent is to address the idea behind the famous statement by Prince Myskin in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*: « Beauty will save the world. »

On the body of the goddess, turned into a projection screen, and on the back wall, a video montage shows the *evil* of the world: terrorism, pollution, war, overpopulation, murders, violence, but also catastrophes and natural events, those primordial events that have opened up humanity to the overwhelming experience of the sacred (hierós), which initially manifested itself as a *cratophany* (krátos = power): the showing of natural forces.

The statue is in silence, like an infirm deity, appearing and disappearing, while the video plays. Her silent epiphany, as a symbol of beauty, is what can redeem (save) the world. In the presence of the goddess, the video changes theme and shows the *good* of the world: acts and situations of extraordinary grace, a gesture of help or goodness, a sublime song, the pathos of harmony in human and natural forms that unleashes in mankind those feelings of *compassion, enjoyment and power*, which typically characterize the experience of beauty.

Beauty is the principle of order and civilization. It is an intuition of harmony, creative drive, superior adaptation, effort of the imagination, sublimated horror.



It is an extra-ordinary “tool” capable of emancipating mankind from the so-called “evil”: its own destructive and self-destructive tendencies.

In this sense, a *beautiful* gesture is intrinsically *ethical*, certainly senseless in the face of the absurd, thus sincere selfless, hence superhuman, extra-terrestrial. Just like the “turn the other cheek” can be understood as an artistic performance, in which the possibility of holding back a destructive and violent impulse, in favour of a higher end; so beauty can be seen as a regulative ideal capable to drag humanity, as a whole, towards higher and inscrutable ends.

All these images are gathered from that *digital collective unconscious* that is YouTube.

From this point of view, the destination of the human species towards beauty, also inted as marvel of discovery (of its own infinite potential) is the only possible *motif* that can justify the human efforts to survive and prosper. A super-human response to a super-human question: what’s the point of it all? Or: why existing at all? Perhaps simply to *contemplate*.

Beauty, therefore, will save the world.
Of course, as long as the world preserves beauty!

ORACULAR SKULLPTURES - [INVOCATION]

The main core of the exhibition are the *Oracular Skullptures* series: 10 skulls of animals lacquered in pastel colors with golden details, between the sacred and the profane. These “deliciously macabre” and “beautifully grotesque” pieces, the driving centre of the exhibition, evoke the strength and the animal spirit, reconnecting mankind with the natural – instinctive, unconscious – and the transcendent.

In ancient times, the oracle was a being or an institution

considered a source of wise advice or prophecies, an infallible authority, usually of a spiritual nature. The same term can also refer to a prediction of the future dispensed by the gods through objects or life forms.

From my point of view, each *skull* is an *oracle*: if questioned, even if only by looking, it will respond; if respected, it will bring luck, wealth, knowledge, love or wisdom. The animal skull abdicates here to its natural function, in favour of a cultural one, thanks to the artistic intervention.

The *Skullptures* are standing a thin line between the sacred and the profane. The glossy surface recalls a spray painted car, giving the skulls a “toyish-look”. At the same time, the skulls look like magical creatures, astral beings from outer space or otherworld. Each colour, is my interpretation of the animal’s character. For the creation of this series, I was inspired by the Jungian readings of the animal in the dream and the suggestions of post-humanist theories.

In psychoanalysis, the archetypical meaning of animals in dreams is central. Unlike in commercials, where a desacralized version of the animal is used to express the “*as if*” of the consumer or the product, in a gratified manner; in dreams the individual “*is*” the animal. Because of their body structure and behavioural characteristics, animals in dreams hold a huge symbolic power, they function as synthetic catalysts of a wide range of feelings and situations: they crawl, jump, fly, swim, camouflage, attack, sleep, surrender, watch around. The animal in dreams can be downsized, reduced to minced meat, transformed into bones, or become a numinous and out of scale super-Animal: a huge lion, a magical horse, a golden bird.



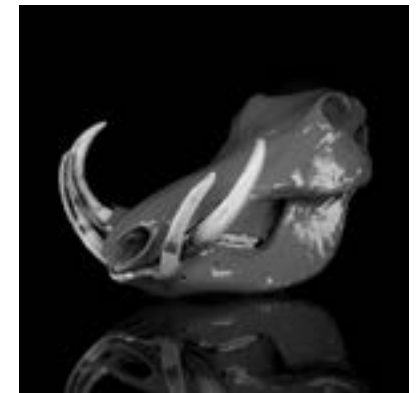
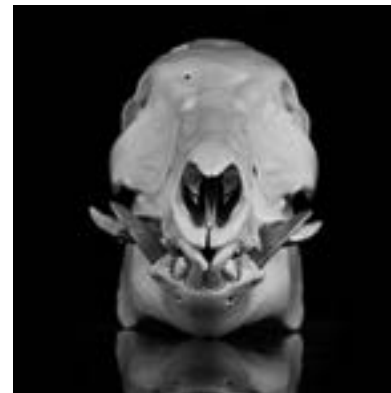
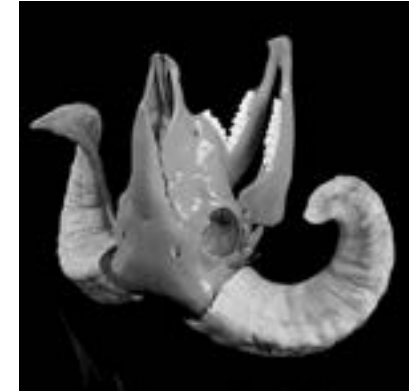
Also the animal represent a repression of the traumatic experience we inflict upon nature in order to dominate, survive, and prosper.

In this sense, the *Skullptures* can be interpreted as guardians of the terrestrial order, as warnings both for the individual and for humanity as a whole.

Precisely linked to this last concept, in post-humanist theory the figure of the animal is very much linked to the displacement of anthropocentrism, but not necessarily in the anti-specist key. The animal symbolic power, its ability to arouse wonder and fear is, in fact, precisely based on its "species-specific difference" that inevitably becomes "ontological".

In its bony version, suggested by the *Skullptures*, while the human skull is the emptied face that reminds the observer of the *future* of his inevitable mortality, the *presence* of the animal skull can evoke a sense of nostalgia for *taht past* condition humanity has forever left behind. Observing the animal skull, the observer is inevitably driven to fantasize about his own primordial wildlife, through that evolutionary line that reconnects him to the first life-forms. An archaic state shared by humanity of the origins in which the earthly microcosm was immediately connected to the macrocosm.

In this sense, the animal skulls are an invitation to regain a more universal look that includes all beings.



in Byzantine and generally Paleo-Christian art and also of medieval art, particularly present in the mosaics and in the frescoes. It is the embodied version of the deity, with which to relate visually.

Christ in the fifth century was considered the organizing principle of the Cosmos, generated and not created by God the Father, the key to understanding reality and the answer to the mystery of existence. The human desire for order had found its fulfillment in Jesus, the incarnate Logos, the Reason and the Structure of the Cosmos. The intellectual and spiritual implications of this meaning of the Cosmic Christ are still felt today. The eminent philosopher Alfred North Whitehead even advanced the idea that the scientific vision of the world, now deeply engraved in Western consciousness, has its roots in the theology of the Christians of the fifth century.

In my vision, the union of Ritter Sport Minimeter tubes - a symbol of industrial production and of human desire (chocolate) - with a sacred object like the Russian Icon of Christ Pantocrator - the mathematical order of the Cosmos - creates an apparent contrast, which ultimately reveals its coherence and connection on several levels.

Ideally, the work of art brings together the cultures of Central, South and Eastern Europe, while the LED strip lighting, in addition to provoking different emotional states, recalls Chinese folklore and the low-cost products of globalization sold through the platforms online.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

SACRED

- Bataille, Georges, *Theory of Religion*, Robert Hurley, Zone Books, 1973.
Caillois, Roger, *Man and the Sacred*, New York, Free Press of Glencoe, 1960.
Eliade, Mircea, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957.
Otto, Rudolf, *The Idea of the Holy*, reprint, New York, 1970. ISBN 0-19-500210-5
Perniola, Mario *Più che sacro, più che profano*, Mimesis, 2011.

“BEAUTY WILL SAVE THE WORLD”

- Dostoevskij, Fëdor Michajlovič, *The Idiot*, 1869.
Eco, Umberto (curated by), *History of The Beauty*, Rizzoli Int., 2004.
Gadamer, Hans-Georg *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. Cambridge University Press, 1986.
Gramiccia, Roberto *Arte e potere. Il mondo salverà la bellezza?*, Ediesse, 2014
Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgment*, 1790.
Nesti, Arnaldo (curated by), *La bellezza salverà il mondo*, CISRECO, 2018.
Plato, *The Symposium; First Alcibiades*.
Plotinus, *Enneads 253-263*.
Sant'Agostino, *The confessions*, X, 27.
Todorov, Cvetan, *The beauty will save the world*, in “*Etudes Theologiques et Religieuses*” 82(3):321-333+471, January 2007.
Zahnd, Brian, *Beauty Will Save the World: Rediscovering the Allure and Mystery of Christianity*, Charisma House, 2012.

ORACULAR SKULPTURES

- Bateson, Gregory, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*, Hampton Press, 1979.
Berger, John, *Why look at animals?* Penguin ed. 2009.
Braidotti, Rosy, *The Posthuman*, Polity, 2013.
Coetzee, John Maxwell, *The Lives of Animals*, Princetonn Univeristy Press, 1999.
Derrida, Jacques, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. New York: Fordham University Press., 2008.
Hillman, James, *Animal Presences*, Spring Publications, 2007.
Hillman, James, *The Dream and The Underworld*, William Morrow Paperbacks, 1979.
Jung, Carl Gustav, *Psychology and Alchemy, 2nd Edition*, London: Routledge, 1980.
Jung, Carl Gustav, *Visions. Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930-1934*. Claire Douglas Ed. 1998
Stoneman, Richard, *The Ancient Oracles: Making the Gods Speak*. Yale University Press, 2011.
Von Franz, Marie Louise *The Way of Dream*, Shambhala Pubns; 1994.

“IS THERE CHOCOLATE INSIDE?”

- Evdokimov, Pavel, *Le Christ dans la pensée russe and L'Art de l'icône: Théologie de la beauté*, 1970.
Florenskij, Pavel A., *Iconostasis*. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. 1996.
Spidlík, Tomás; I. Rupnik, Marko, *La fede secondo le icone*, 2000, Lipa.
Whitehead, Alfred North, *Process and Reality*, New York: The Free Press, 1978.
Whitehead, Alfred North, *Religion in the Making*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1996.

www.tommasofagioli.com
©2019



FONDAZIONE
PASTIFICIO CERERE