

Synaisthesis substantiae  
(The Co-Perception of Substance)  
Concerning an Aspect of the Work of Fernando Prats

36,000 tiny Hosts — the number is of such magnitude that perhaps it would be appropriate only to a mass said by the Pope himself — constitute a work of art. In a box of Plexiglas, reproducing on a small scale the central reredos on the Altar of Isenheim, they are placed one on top of another, one behind another, on against another, forming an amorphous mass. And yet, their materiality of light brown bread and their frame together create an astonishingly unitary fabric. Complete networks of abstract diagonals cover the surface, like invisible wefts and warps. Only now and then does a Host reveal its roundness frontally, as in a wafer box, like a sun that rises, sets or shines dazzlingly at midday. However, this detail is lost in the overall impression, which is synthesised as bread, only bread, nothing more than material, matter, substance — the substance of bread? Thus the impression is transposed to another level, substantiality is transformed into trans-substantiality; the piece of bread into the body of Christ; the earthy into the celestial; the dead into living; bread into manna; now into after — and vice versa: Retablo para elevación II (Altarpiece for Elevation II, 1999).

However, this is not the only altarpiece of its type. There is another, which is the product of the initial phase of making Hosts: it consists of those small rectangles of approximately 20 x 30 cm from which the tiny discs are successively cut. Fernando Prats places these partially made forms successively on a large support, whose dimensions are almost double those of Matthias Grünewald's original in Colmar: Anástasis (Anastasis, 1997).

This work seems to be an iconoclastic response to the famous masterpiece of the German Gothic; even so, it has nothing in common with negating. The choice of material, which Prats eloquently structures, clearly reveals the artist's symbolic orientation. He makes conceptualistically sober use of a cultural materiality that has the unique capacity to allow us to glimpse something beyond. The bread is resplendent bread. Its form and, above all, its materiality place the spiritual within eyesight of the sensitive observer belonging to the Christian world. «It is bread only apparently and externally, in reality it is Christ, that is, transubstantiation of matter» (Joseph Beuys). Here the material acts between two levels linked by a story. It is bread as the antonomastic metaphor for all human food, and at the same time the essence of all the stories about Christ and all His words. He Himself arranged this identification into a symbolic act and made its sacramental repetition the central contents of His message: Do this in

my memory. In the Last Supper, Jesus picks up the bread from the table and says: This is my body, in other words, this is me. This is the bread that gives life to the world.

All hunger is hunger for life, and the hunger for life is insatiable. Hence it is understandable that Jesus should transpose his whole story onto this iconic message; for in His message, God represents the life that lies beyond death; the life that man yearns for; according to the Word of God, Jesus is bread for the earthly life.

Despite the astonishingly Christian nature of the materials and contents, it must be stressed that the oeuvre as a whole of this young Chilean artist is not Christian art, but a variant of a conceptualism whose goal is to go beyond the level of pure rationalism and raise it to a broader vision of the world. The rational attempts to become united with the intuitive; the present with the past; enlightened thought with «romantic» thought. This purpose is better expressed in the words of the French artist Gloria Friedmann, in whose work everyday objects assume a central role. She allows the sensitive observer into her perception, which «speaks» through forms: «I leave as much space as possible to the feelings that the materials arouse, and also to the invisible bonds that tie them to times past. Earth, stone, wood, skins, oil and wine are ancient symbols which evoke philosophical dogmas and primordial spiritual images, the meaning of which seems to have been lost — a kind of poetic philosophy that does not presume to be scientific truth, although it heightens the credibility of certain perceptions».

Fernando Prats, who was born in Chile in 1967 and now lives in Catalonia, evokes the concept of art through art itself in order to liberate it from its immobility and reorient the aims of man's artistic activity. Prats' oeuvre shares the critical approach of post-war European artistic movements such as Arte Povera, Conceptual Art, Action Painting, Fluxus. However, in contrast to the superficiality of American Pop Art, his initiatives denote a return to the interior. Indeed, Prats might appropriate for himself the following statement by Jannis Kounellis: «I reveal the non-visible [...], what I set out to achieve is the ability to reach an interior image, that is, what the image represented at its origins». In this sense, Prats belongs to the tradition of the broadened artistic concept, which takes advantage of man's and society's connatural imaginative capacity in order to obtain a new humanity in art. For Prats, Joseph Beuys' concept of the inner eye is more important than external images.

Like many other artists, Fernando Prats has also gone back to the Christian iconic tradition; he studies it and reflects upon it. Those aspects of the tradition that fascinate him most are the timeless themes such as life, suffering, death, resurrection, eternal life and so

on. At the same time he is conscious of the fact that with these major timeless themes he can no longer go directly back to the Christian iconographic tradition. Through new artistic questions, Prats seeks new forms of expression. At the same time, he is aware that the modern stands at the very edge of the legacy of tradition, whose essential, timeless contents must be brought back to life. A certain «naïf» characteristic helps him in this endeavour: as the product of a Latin-American culture, Prats is free from certain burdens that condition the history of European art in relation to the Christian iconographic tradition. At the same time, his cultural orientation is critical enough to allow him to overcome with his art those concepts of reality that are limited by the rational, and thus to identify in the transcendental the method of his view of the world, in the sphere of a religion that is at once classical and modern. From this he creates a new artistic «language».

This drive is revealed in another material, which for this young artist is even more fundamental than bread: soot. Here he applies two essential procedures: burning and bathing. In order to produce smoke, in a kiln specially made for the purpose he burns a mixture of solvent, paper and several different types of textile. Smoke is a fundamental element in all primitive cultures, and consists of air containing matter in suspension: soot, volatile charcoal, drops of tar, etc. These elements are the products of burning and rise in gaseous form as a consequence of the heating process. The size of the particles determines the coloration of the smoke.

Each of Fernando Prats' artworks begins with the coloration of the paper. A kiln, built for this purpose, «colours» the paper hung inside the hood with tones ranging from grey to black, depending on how long the process lasts, evenly depositing particles on the surface of the sheets. Thus the smoke particles are deposited on the surface of the paper like a new form of aggregation. In order to fix the smoked paper the artist immerses it in a receptacle full of liquid, and then executes the work using a variety of different media.

While in these procedures there is a specific presence of chemical elements produced by burning, on the other hand they contain highly important mythological aspects. For Fernando Prats, the propitiatory fire of ancient religious and cultural traditions represents the kernel of his ideas, in the same way that these ideas played a crucial role, as purification rites, in the cults of different cultures. Similarly, the procedure of bathing is related to initiation or transition rituals.

In both elements, bread and soot, and in their related procedures of production and elaboration, such as smoking and bathing, the artist identifies a broadened concept of art and of materials: transformation and transubstantiation. Man must free his perception of reality from

its physical burdens and return it to the ideal spheres of thought and philosophy. A concept central to his reflection is that of substance, a concept that the artist believes must be activated. For Prats, substance is an object not for scientific research but for metaphysical observation. Substance is innate as something alive in everything that is perceptible and to which everything refers. It is neither immobile, unmoveable nor material; rather, it is the very «mover», the element decisive to the dynamics of the being. Its literal meaning indicates that substance presupposes the existence of something that permanently subsists, in other words, something that remains constant in the alternation of phenomena. The idea it implies is that of something found in everything that moves and causes to move while at the same time maintaining its own stability.

The materials Prats employs are the object of these reflections. And it makes no difference whether they be bread or soot, medicines, oil, chrism, rubber, leather, felt, bone marrow, vertebrae or a material as apparently banal as sealing tape. Prats chooses things whose possible meanings may vary and reveal the aspect of the transformation. In this way the aspect is accentuated of what is at once spiritual and material, sensual and transcendent.

For Prats, the spiritual cannot be extended only towards the forces and conditions of matter, as Materialism contends. This artist, like other thinkers of the post-modern era, takes for granted the existence of a metaphysical spirituality. For him, visible reality is a form of manifestation of the spiritual. Consequently he understands his artistic work as an open-ended activity, as a search for Nature and its energetic forces, including its links with the mysterious concepts of consciousness.

Fernando Prats' highly versatile oeuvre goes far beyond the individual aspect of reflection on substance that I have described here. His main concern is to rediscover a *synaesthesia substantiae*, the means by which to unify the world of the rational with the world of intuitive, subjective thought. And the fact that this revives and recalls religious ideas of Western society is more than a mere secondary, coincidental aspect.

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