



Fetish, Shaman and Root Seeking — Evgeny Antufiev’s Maze

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Abstract: This essay is mainly about Evgeny Antufiev’s solo exhibition: “Twelve, wood, dolphin, knife, bowl, mask, crystal, marble and bones — fusion. Exploring material”. Analyzing his motivation and final presentation, aiming to grasp the unique national characteristics of Evgeny Antufiev’s artwork, exploring the source of Shamanic elements and how these effect his artwork. This article goes through “Fetish, Shaman, Rooting” three topics. Evgeny Antufiev’s artwork has special charisma, also provides a paradigm for contemporary art create activities. And the most important is to bring more dimensional thinking of artistic activity which intends to against the era.

Keywords: contemporary art, shamanic, Evgeny Antufiev, fetish

1. Introduction

“When the space of a shared myth has slammed shut, one’s own cognition becomes the basic for creation and the perception of reality.” (E.A.)

In 2013, Evgeny Antufiev’s first solo exhibition “Twelve, wood, dolphin, knife, bowl, mask, crystal, marble and bones — fusion. Exploring material” (hereinafter referred to as ‘Twelve’) was held in Italy, visitors were required to wear gloves and shoe covers to enter the venue. The central exhibition area is placed with a miniature landscape made of marble — displays the entire exhibition venue layout. In addition, there are human-like or animal-shaped “dolls” or masks made by clothes, paddings, and bits of animal bones or teeth; bone-handle knives made by meteorites and dolphin ashes are surrounded by minerals and insect specimens collected by the artist; photographs of hands holding slime; a circle consists of marble sticker, glitter, eye shadow, marble powder, glass beads, dolphin bone and dolphin bone powder; a spiral crystal chandelier; and a spiral symbol on the floor of the hall which refers to immortality, etc.

2. Fetish

Throughout the exhibition, artist used a lot of collected objects to present individually or combinedly. Although the texture and material of a single object are very different, after the artist reconciled designedly, the goal and theme of the exhibit are not complicated or disordered. On the contrary, like the shaman’s costumes and props, a new harmony based on metaphorical functionality is formed.

Artist regards all the objects he collected as part of life materials, putting them on the bed he sleeps on regular day, and distributing them all over his living space. Combining himself and the living surroundings in weaving personal myth as a protection. Also called a self-created personal shaman — setting protection, blessings and curses around himself. This thinking also reflected in the artist’s conception of the entire exhibition. The exhibition’s form is the same as how he makes precious collected objects guarding every place in his real life like an array.

During the New Age Movement, in order to resist material life and commodity fetishism, people began to turn to paganism: primitive religion and oriental thought were returned in the form of ecological movement and self-spiritual treatment; the buying spree of props, clothing, utensils and music about primitive witchcraft. People who bought these original props tried to gain power to reverse cultural identities by possessing them, thus resisting the collective mental illness caused by modernity. Evgeny Antufiev noted, “Today, mythological consciousness is already not a form of overcoming ignorance (albeit imaginarily), but rather a means of painlessly submerging oneself in ignorance. The creation of one’s own protected form of existence. Many means exist of defense against loss/attack/change, but it is possible to totally evade danger only when one’s entire life and the space around it have been completely organized in a corresponding way.”[1] Although without saying that “protected forms of existence” refers to his creative form and habits of being surrounded by objects, there IS a connection — between the possessing primitive props and the using based on the properties that have been assigned to the objects during the longtime using.

In the course of writing his personal mythology history, Evgeny Antufiev moved from an open hybrid to self-comfort. His mother once said in an interview, “When Evgeny Antufiev was 10, we went to Milan for the first time. Of all the

souvenirs on the stall, what immediately caught his attention was a toy with an odd stuffing. After I bought it, he spent so much time studying with it that the toy exploded and its stuffing went all over the place. I think Evgeny Antufiev's interest for an exploration of matter started then, or maybe before, but it came out then." Perhaps as a child, experiencing the tumultuous period in Russia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the dismantling and fascination with things offset some agitation caused by social and political changes. From personal fetishes to today, creating by combining the collection of human-like and animal-shaped puppets and ready-made materials, Evgeny Antufiev retained this spontaneous religious psychology as the original motivation of artistic creation in his art works, using myths and fables to disclose his obsession about telling eternal substance, and all the essential components to achieve that obsession. Evgeny Antufiev supports that need with objects from auction deals, second-hand markets and friends.

3. Shaman

In the book[1], Evgeny Antufiev cites a letter from Angela Boskis about dolphins in the aquarium located Kharkiv, Ukraine, rain and snow in the day, and botulism Bacillus (Botox).

At the beginning of this letter, a diamond-shaped structure appeared, with "ice, Botox, marble, immortality" occupying four corners around the dolphin. The four are mentioned or told separately in the letter as follows:

On this day, we were able to experience all the states of water: liquid, ice, steam; (Ice)

The wind was in our faces, burning us with its icy touch. Even the Botox was freezing on my face. When you're in the cold for a long time, it started to show in spots. You were also getting ready to do this and freeze your face; (Botox)

The dolphin themselves seemed to be formed out of marble. They seemed so solid that within them there could not be blood, guts and bones. Have you ever thought about why marble is so attractive? It looks like an exsanguinated, finely veined body. There is something attractive, deathly pale, in marble. The dolphins had all that as well; (Marble)

After all, there is Botox in the universe, and it doesn't matter much in which of its parts it is located. (Immortal)

Evgeny Antufiev described: "Do not focus on a single text because each text is connected with others and make sense in this relationship." Such connection structure between the small units is also used in the whole "Twelve" exhibition. Each unit is an illustration of a miniature ritual structure, objects carry functional energies, they are used in sympathetic magic, distributed or formed into one common matrix.

Shamanism, a religion rooted among nomadic people, originated in Altai Mountains, the borderline between the four countries: China, Russia, Mongolia and Kazakhstan. Their cultures have a lot of spiritual feelings of overcoming and co-existing with the nature power. The Republic of Tuva, where Evgeny Antufiev was born, where shamanism existed as its traditional religion for centuries, was banned and oppressed during Soviet Russia. In the mid-1990s, shamanism revived and now many local shamanic organizations still exist and play an important role in people's daily life. People routinely visit or ask them for help with daily supplies such as milk and meat. The shaman's familiarity with myths, legends, nature, and oriental wisdom also provides a reason for the mythology, the concept of life and death that Evgeny Antufiev is now keen to create. Among the Tungus of the Transbaikalian region he who wishes to become a shaman announces that the spirit of a dead shaman has appeared to him in dream and ordered him to succeed him. For this declaration to be regarded as plausible, it must usually be accompanied by a considerable degree of mental derangement[2], Shamans' pursuit and sanctification of maniac (corresponding psycho in ethnic group), wizards need to suffer hardships such as skinning and dissection[3] to acquire abilities, and the use of sympathetic witchcraft of personalized symbols, all have become very representative issues in Evgeny Antufiev's works.

With regard to the choice of materials, Evgeny Antufiev favors extremes, both extremely hard (bone, marble, and crystal) and soft (dolphin, mucus, cotton-filled soft fabrics) observed in his work. It seems that the purpose of the combination of materials is that there is no possibility of ambiguity, they are considered by the artist as the only two important things in the organic combination: bone and flesh, wrapping and supporting each other, just like in the shamanic culture, the binary opposition of bone and flesh in the process of individual sanctification while becoming a shaman, bones are regarded as the ultimate source of human and animal life, symbolizing the mystery of life in reincarnation. Shaman reborn by boiling the corpse, counting the bones, tying the bones together and attaching new flesh.

There are also many dolphin-related objects in the hall, such as dolphin bones, dolphin ashes and rings made of other mineral powder, meteorite knives in the shape of dolphins, as well as dolphin icons in the book and texts describing dolphin performances in the aquarium, to which he wrote, "Have you thought about why marble is so attractive? It looks like an exsanguinated, finely lined body. There is something attractive, deathly pale, in marble. The dolphins had all that as well." [1] Dolphins have the shape of knife, and they dance up and down through the gap of the flesh and the bone, like skilled and magical craftsmanship in Chuang Tzu, "Then, very gently, I move the knife until there is a parting and the flesh falls apart

like a lump of earth falling to the ground.” In this sense, witchcraft-shaman’s special hallucinations exist as a techno-drug capable of helping individuals detach from reality.

The artist had the following conversations with his mother in the interviews he collected:

-Nadezhda Antufieva: What you’ve told me about it seems more like a project for your own tomb than an exhibition.

-Evgeny Antufiev: Exactly! With a marble knife in one hand and a cup of slime in the other, in a mask of white wood, my body will rest in a sarcophagus of bones and crystals, guarded by twelve specially trained dolphins.

“Dolphin”, Evgeny Antufiev’s personal shamanic symbol, guides people’s thinking towards life and death topic. The entire exhibition “Twelve” points to the determination of the soul. Also, as a start, it’s not difficult to understand that the artist asked the audiences to wear white shoe covers, gloves or a brightly colored hat in the entire visiting process. The costume represents a religious microcosm qualitatively different from the surrounding profane space. For one thing, it constitutes an almost complete symbolic system; for another, its consecration has impregnated it with various spiritual forces and especially with ‘spirits.’[2]The process of exploring the exhibition equals the observation of eternal sacred places, human beings cannot enter in their own form, they can only hide like shamans wearing their ritual clothes to temporarily shield themselves from mortal identity then enter a psychic state, and complete the rationality of this concept together with Evgeny Antufiev.

4. Rooting

“Modernity is facing an uncertain and unpredictable future: no traditional reference can guarantee the choices of future path, because modernity is constantly creating fractures, and any knowledge based on science can’t tell the difference. Because action itself raises the level of uncertainty.”[4] Freed from the blind optimism about civilization and technology, people begin to reflect--the false prosperity that accompanies modernity, resist to the kind of violence and emptiness due to modern progress — where can people find the weapon of resistance. An important question arises, where do we look for the possibility of human existence that has not yet been alienated from original passion and labor? Westerners have turned their attention to “various cultural others”, while non-Westerners have made a reverse reaction to globalization, responding to the impact of globalization on local culture by seeking cultural roots.

By re-examining the truth of things that have long been marginalized and devalued by mainstream Western hegemonic discourse, will discover the unique value of place and local knowledge. If modernity is movement with “uncertainty”, then the effort of root-seeking can be understood as the survival calling for “certainty”.

An individual has roots by real active and natural participating of one community which preserves particular treasures of past and certain particular expectations for the future. Every individual need multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw wellnigh the whole of human moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part.[5] Evgeny Antufiev said in a recent interview:

-Marta Galli: You don’t believe artists should leave their country, why?

-Evgeny Antufiev: Artists are like insects. They are different kinds of insects: some are spiders, some are butterflies. But they all tied to their habitat. Miracles do not happen and insects do not leave their climate zones. And when they leave, nothing good can come of it.[6]

For Evgeny Antufiev, the tendency of seeking roots is both a rebellion against contemporary era and an answer to inner questions. For him, shamanic culture and materialistic obsession are the solution to his own problems, or these scattered elements provide enough sufficient spiritual and material images to create the spiritual world he wants to construct. And during this process, it also provides an excellent example for confrontation—intentionally or unintentionally—for people who exist in modernity but want to resist and in the fuzzy zone between eastern and western binary definition, Evgeny Antufiev found answers from shaman and myth.

Anthropocentrism as a worldview is caused by the loss of sincere religious motives and mystical reverence for the nature of the universe.[7] And the works done by Evgeny Antufiev is spiritualism for this world which has lost spirituality and full of materialistic desires. Monoculture collapse into a number of contradictory landscapes may be about to face endless debate and conflict, “One possible solution is to change basic conception of knowledge in order to make us relativists. Recognizing that there is no longer a single truth or the only way to God”[8].

5. Summary

When human groups reach a certain phase and look back spontaneously, through the perception of the original force, human activities and forms always have similarities constrained by the era. National products that differ from creators’ own culture are always used in the creation of various works, because they have the power to separate the artist himself from his own culture. As artists utilizing them, unprecedented miracles come to the present.

But one should be wary of this magical transfiguration, “One cannot be too cautious in these matters, for what with the imitative urge and a positively morbid avidity to possess themselves of outlandish feathers and deck themselves out in this exotic plumage, far too many people are misled into snatching at such ‘magical’ ideas and applying them externally, like an ointment.”[9] When seeing different culture as a decoration tool, it will turn into a flattened idealized aroma. While using it recklessly as aroma, people will filter their past stories, future possibilities, and empathy for the origin nation without compassion, so that the conflicts caused by sense and difference cannot be quelled, the desire for exclusiveness in society will come stronger.

It is an unrealistic ideal to simply expect to seek new models from other cultures, and alternative model of culture is not as easy as technology introduced.[10] Evgeny Antufiev, as an artist, is not like a multinational corporation who just puts shamanic wrapping paper on modern things. He disrupts the spiritual symbols of religion and shamanism, confuses and even does not care about the boundaries between these fields, using his own method to establish methodology, in which the most central issue is how the artist redeems his nature and spiritual completeness through the training of consciousness and repeated elaboration. Although this methodology will only responsible to the artist, it provides an excellent sample of how individuals trying to escape from their own era.

As he stated about “Twelve”, “This path is a dangerous one. The Symbolic body expands, the simple principles of connections cease to operate, and ever-new ones need to be found... My favorite form of perceiving information is as a maze, with paths that endlessly duplicated each other and sudden dead-ends. Let us consider this exhibition to be such a maze, made of bones, wood, crystals, cloth, snakeskin, smoke, and meteoric iron. Quotes have been torn from classic Russian literature and placed on the walls to show the way, and dolphins with eyes like liquid marble reside in the dead-ends. Sometimes, even I do not understand the mechanism by which this complex construction functions, or why precisely this tangled, unclear, glittering form is for me an ideal, maximally realistic reconstruction of the universe.”[1]

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