ON SIMPLICITY (Part 2)

Text by Marialaura Ghidini

Law 1: Reduce The simplest way to achieve simplicity is through thoughtful reduction. John Maeda, Laws of Simplicity, MIT Press; 2006

It is almost two months after my introductory text On Simplicity, which preceded this one. And in my mind, the idea of Simplicity has radially expanded as a result of both the discussions with the contributing artists and the independent paths of exploration proposed by each of the works now on display. For this reason, until a moment ago, I had intended to present a text that would go beyond this expansion. However, I soon realized that it would have felt as though I was deceiving the viewer were I not to disclose what the artists, at the time of our first conversations, were provided with, i.e. a second text complementing the introduction.

That additional text was conceived to expand on the implications of the act of *looking to the past*, focusing on the coexistence of present and past at a point in time. The text I sent out was more a compilation of notes rather than an essay and it began like this, with another quote:

'For Lotman the spatial models created by culture are evident in an "iconic continuum" whose "foundations are visually visible iconic texts"!.

The above citation is taken from Angela Ndalianis's book Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary entertainment¹, which in turn quotes Yuri Lotman's Universe of the Mind². Throughout her book Ndalianis reveals the analogies (and analyses the differences) existing between forms of contemporary entertainment - for instance, the workings of film sequels such as the Alien saga and its transition from one context (cinema) to another (comics, to name one) - and the Baroque form of the late 16th century. Ndalianis proposes a fascinating point from where to observe the mode in which contemporary popular culture is structured, and she does so by way of discussing concepts of seriality, fragmentation and transformation as they manifest themselves in these two different eras.

The concept of "iconic continuum" is key to me in simplifying the entanglement of time - and thus iconic forms - embedded in the concept of historical present, which I introduced in my earlier text as a consequence of the scenario brought forth by the act of looking to the past. An historical present implies a certain continuation, but it also presupposes a punctuation of shifts and changes that generate a conception of time that is neither present nor past.

There are current cultural forms that can be found in different times. And better still, there are iconic forms - be they ideas, objects or techniques - that migrate from one time to another, and in doing so move from one context to another.

In the scenario presented here, they move from the past to the present as a product of a *now* that is very much drawn to simplification, comparison and parallelism; acts that - as already mentioned in the introductory text - can be presently found in association with a retrieval of past forms of production.

¹ MIT Press; 2004

² I.B. Tauris & Co.; 1990

In this context, iconic forms are thus re-evaluated in the light of a transition that places them in a time which is both the sum and the merging of different time-scapes. These shifts in time imply changes, which become noticeable in a re-definition of the meaning of the retrieved form because of a difference in aims characterizing each stage of the continuous sequence.

Drawing upon a few elements I have already touched upon, the following exemplifies that which I see undergoing a re-definition.

The turning of knobs of a synthesizer had a particular significance in the Seventies, when Kraftwerk were experimenting with the possibilities of the medium in bringing electronic sound into the limelight. But it certainly holds a different significance right now. It is almost the same with the use of cassette tapes in music distribution; what before was the only way of disseminating the work of bands stands now³ for something else, which seems to originate in an interest in the past and its iconographic motives that, in many cases, can be either attributable to nostalgia and sentimentality, or just fashion.

But what really is the above-mentioned 'something else'? And where does the difference between these gestures lie?

In these instances, the uses of forms of production or forms per se that parallel former techniques are not anymore concerned with breaking the technological boundaries inherent to the medium employed. But rather, in these examples, the process of re-positioning is seen as a starting point for creating a multilayered relationship between form and content; a relationship complicated by the coexistence of present and past and the reference to a prior context.

Ultimately, what is this historical present about?

In this historical present, the then and now are inextricably interwoven. It becomes difficult to clearly distinguish the two to the point that, in some instances, their merging may suggest timelessness - or images of ideas frozen in time, or impressions of a potential (ir-)reality of the now. However, as already mentioned, the retrieval of forms, and therefore their migration, entails a change.

And consequently certain cultural forms become understood as a series of variations on a theme; variations which do not propose a flat continuum but a motif that functions by revitalizing a past significance.

This generates an interpretative framework that exists as a network of connections, which require an active participation of the receiver and, at least, a recognition of a previous cultural setting.

On Simplicity is the editorial of the second instalment of the online exhibition Simplicity (Part Two) featuring works by Francesca Anfossi, Joana Bastos, Erik Bünger, Patrick Coyle, Jamie George, Tristan Perich, Nadine Pütz, James Richards and David Wojtowycz + guest blogger Lorena Muñoz-Alonso; http://www.or-bits.com/simplicitypt2.php

© the author and or-bits.com, January 2010

³ See the record label *The Tapeworm*, which is a recent case in point of the rising interest in cassette tapes; http://www.tapeworm.org.uk/