

Maurizio Anzeri's Po(i)etic Genealogies

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Humans grow hair. Like most parts of our bodies, some people see hair as a natural endowment. Yet no other part of the human body better than hair can be considered a cultural product of humans' creative ability and their desire to appear unique, different, and crucially, separate from what they see as 'nature'.

From Leviticus proscriptions and Buddhist teachings, to shaving practices of Amazonian Indians and hair-cutting rituals of medieval kings, head and body hair, eyebrows, eyelashes, armpit or pubic hair have, not surprisingly, captured humans' attention and curiosity across space and time because of their inherent versatile character and their capacity to grow even after death. Admittedly, humans are concerned with hair in all its distinctive permutations in ways that often exceed a normal preoccupation with other parts of their bodies. The extreme attention given by humans to hair is reflected in the multiplicity of practices and beliefs associated with the presence or absence of this unique material on the body. Perhaps what most intrigues humans is the fact that hair comes *from* the body, but it can also be detached from it. As a result it can stand for it in a metonymical relationship that renders it doubly significant for human's capacity for abstraction and philosophical musings.

Throughout the centuries and across the world, hair has also been used as a byproduct of the body, one that when detached from it still functions as a powerful signifier. This is because it contains something of the body's energies and potentialities whilst visibly retaining a vitality that expresses the potential to carry symbolic power. More or less universally, hair is believed to contain what can be called 'vital force'. It is for this reason that among many groups around the world it is imbued with meaning and is at the centre of much ritual activity. Whether attached to the body or cut, woven into elaborate Papua New Guinea headdresses, or pleasingly stored in Victorian *memento mori* glass pendants, hair functions at once as a potent symbol and an agent. In other words, it is something that can actively affect human action. Regardless of the ideological apparatus that may support particular belief systems, hair works like any other thing that mediates between the symbolic and the material world. As such, it has



Dayak shield trimmed with human hair, Borneo, Southeast Asia. The Trustees of the British Museum (As 1900 C3.634).

an effect on reality because in it converge ideas of cause and effect that shape the way we do things. This is why objects in most parts of the worlds can be thought of as being imbued with life. Human hair byproducts too have this characteristic.

Many objects are made of human hair. Ropes, threads, nets, capes, embroideries, neck ornaments, shields, vests, hats, headdresses and ritual objects employ this material to create inventive solutions for communicating implicit meanings transferring power, and create connections. Such objects can be found in the most disparate regions of the

world and date from different epochs. Aboriginal Australians extensively use human hair for coiled

ceremonial hats and braided belts, as well as for body wear such as funerary neck strings that establish kinship and maintain genealogies alive. Borneo tribes such as the Kenyah and Dayaks decorate their war shields with trimmings of human locks for protection and good omen, and Marquesans similarly wear elaborate garments made of large quantities of this material as part of the martial attire.

The longstanding use of human hair for ritual activity is confirmed in the archaeological record. Archaeological data confirm an early human fascination with hair that undoubtedly stems from primates' propensity for grooming, caressing, plucking and cleaning each other's hair. Since prehistory, the evidence of beheading, and more specifically scalping in many parts of the world has been interpreted as symbolic act linked to the importance of hair in both political and ceremonial activities.

In the prehistoric Americas, for example, artefacts made with human hair found among the Pre-Hispanic



Jivaro shrunken head, Ecuador, South America. The Trustees of the British Museum (Am 1913,1212.1).

populations of northern, central, and southern parts of the continent tell us about the symbolic significance of this material and its association with fertility, abundance, regeneration, and notions of genealogy, lineage, and descent that clearly echo practices and beliefs from other regions and periods. Until recently, Baja California shamans in charge of mourning rituals among Cochimi and Kiliwa Indians used elaborate capes made of hair locks fastened to large nets that they collected among the mourners in recognition of the blood ties that connected them to the deceased. In North America, on the other hand, Mogollon peoples of the desert southwest utilised human hair to make nets that ensured bountiful hunts. Such meshes, used to corral rabbits before the 1500s, indicate a significant relationship between human hair and locally elaborated ideas about abundance, prosperity, and fertility given the explicit preference for this material over agave fibers generally used in cordage and ropes found in the same area.

The symbolism attributed to all these items reverberates with a panoply of meanings attached to hair from different regions and periods that, like gradations on a continuum, link in a chain of associations a variety of old and contemporary uses of this versatile material. Symbolic juxtapositions, dynamic relationships, metaphorical, and analogical uses of this material constitute Anzeri's rich and yet implicit repertoire of references that brings anthropologically relevant resonance in the context of contemporary art. Anzeri's anthropological genealogies can be traced back to humans' curiosity about hair and its inherent possibilities for conveying and storing culturally relevant messages across the generations. His sculptures contain this expressive potential that emerges from a direct connection to the etymological roots of words that in our Indo-European languages best describe his work: making and weaving (in the infinite possibilities it presents: twisting, plaiting, coiling, twining, roping, netting, knotting, weaving, braiding, but also embroidering, tapestry etc.).

True to the proto-Indo-European conceptual framework that define the process, Anzeri's act of making sculptural textiles literally embodies the concept of mixing and matching, the joining of parts at the ideological core of the Anglo-Saxon verb 'to make'. Interestingly, the ancient Greek term for 'to make' *poiesis* (from ΠΟΙΕΩ, to make) illustrates the use of words, gestures or objects, as communicative devices or

technologies aimed at creating abstraction, our most human characteristic, that resonates with Anzeri's metaphorical use of hair as both work and poetic play.

Weaving, on the other hand is the act of making a textile. This simple yet ancient art, technology, or skill, explicitly evokes the act of writing, that is, creating work that communicates something by matching and joining of lines (both material and metaphorical, real or imagined). The popular analogy of text (weaving words on the wefts of the page like in the medieval *Textura* or, the weaving of the text) and textile (weaving warp threads in and out of wefts) suffice to establish a clear correlation with Anzeri's work which for all intents and purposes is both a display of skill and an act of poetry.



Maurizio Anzeri, hair sculptures. 2011.

Like ethnographic and archaeological objects/artefacts made with textile techniques, Anzeri's work transcends and expands the canonical limits of what constitutes art in the West. In fact, his work challenges the viewer to question the very boundaries between the notion of craft and that of the art object, it blurs the confines between sculpture and the metaphysical presence essentially embodied in his figures made of brocades, braids, nets, stitches, and coils. This point is particularly significant because the poignant relationship Anzeri has established with ethnographic objects/artefacts reconciles art with anthropology in ways that enable him to locate his craftsmanship and technical expertise at the very core of Western artistic practice. Independent of the formal references to objects from the unmistakably European cultural repertoires such as tapestries, wigs, garments, or even sculptures, Anzeri's relationship with ethnographic objects is not based on form, but rather on praxis.

Limiting Anzeri's contribution to contemporary art to a simple list of aesthetic tributes to Western and art historical references (e.g. Versailles, Hendricks, Abramovic, Salcedo, etc.) would not only reiterate the canonical hegemony of concept over process, but would miss the important tenet around which Anzeri bases his work and artistic experience: the making. This is where his art/craftsmanship brings together an anthropological understanding of what it means to make objects and age-old skill based notions of art in the West. Anzeri's work clearly pays homage to the anthropological notion of the *chaîne opératoire*: that operational sequence in which the body as originator and expression of meaning is as important as the aesthetic qualities, intent, and agency of the finished artefact (whether or not, like many ethnographic items, it can be considered art). Anzeri describes his operational sequence in terms of processes conducive to quasi-trance states that are generated by the repetitive motions of sewing long strands of hair with machines, needles, and hair itself in total concentration. His insistence on the importance of this type of praxis informs his work with a form of ritualized behaviour whose anthropological relevance can be appreciated by comparison to his non-Western counterparts as well as to pre-industrial craftspeople, artisans, and skilled workers of Western traditions.

At the crossroads between anthropological legacies and western linguistic and practice-based genealogies, Anzeri's act of making as *poiesis* brings back the role of skill and technical expertise behind the production of what we consider 'art' in the most canonical sense. The meaning given by Anzeri to process and production is in many ways akin to a notion of art dominant among craft specialists, and art studio trainees since the times of Praxiteles. The very notion of 'art' (*ars* in ancient Latin means skill, or craft) as technological expertise that requires training and precise execution is fundamental in understanding Anzeri's genealogical links that tie him to both European/Western and non-Western contexts alike. These two apparently different contexts of convergence of technological and aesthetic traditions encourage us, as viewers, to engage with different sets of cultural and artistic premises directly evoked by Anzeri's work. Symptomatically, his first sculptures, cumulatively gathered under the title *Present Traces*, conjure up poetic notions of lineage that, like a locks and braids of hair linking generations among Australian Aborigines and Californian Indians, invite us to

imagine how the multiplicity of strands of which his po(i)etic works are made may reach far beyond the limitations of today's artistic genealogies.



Maurizio Anzeri, hair sculpture.
2011