

TECHNOLOGIES OF THE INTANGIBLE

MAX CAROCCI

What makes Alice Anderson's art so compelling for an anthropologist are the multiple ways in which her practice intersects with many areas of the discipline's concerns. Much of Anderson's work is underpinned by methods, approaches and concepts familiar to anthropologists from comparative studies and data recorded around the world.

The prospect of finding convergences between them and Anderson's Art renders any interpretative exercise an exciting terrain to explore from an anthropological perspective. That the artist herself should find such connections is not only symptomatic of her sensibility and aesthetic choices, but of a more profound and widespread need to find new languages that can help us reveal the workings of art in what many call a 'post-human' world. It is the very humanness of Anderson's work that places it closer to an anthropological project, one that is at once loyal to human behaviour as its main subject of investigation as well as attentive to the changes engendered by the multiplication of technologies of information and communication. Anderson's art breathes humanness because both her artistic language and performative behaviour are rooted in humans' predilection for finding ways to connect material and immaterial worlds through acts of deep symbolic significance.

When Alice Anderson talks about her work as a 'rite' she conjures up anthropological meanings and categories of analysis. The ritual elements in her gesture-based practice are not just passing references to ceremonies tinted with 'exotic' ethnographic flavours, they are a concrete expression of a complex personal cosmology, created to give meaning to her cultural universe and articulated on the relationship between memory, matter and the body.

Alice Anderson's cosmology is structured around the notion of repetition, a common principle shared by material culture and ritual among all world cultures. Repetition is at the base of patterns, and patterns give order to the cacophony of human experience. The deep and relevant connections she finds between different human groups' patterned behaviours and her work are no coincidence. Like in traditional societies where periodical ceremonial activities punctuate the cycles of life, she emphasises reiteration, repetition, rhythmic cadence and cyclical movements in her artistic practice. Repetition indeed is what gives gravitas and momentum to her artefacts, produced through the recovery of knowledge embodied in gestures and which ultimately turn the intangible manifest.

In a purely anthropological vein, Anderson's art is probably better understood through the concept of 'multiverse', a spatio-temporal existential dimension recognised by indigenous Americans, Australian aborigines and other animistic peoples, in which simultaneous overlapping planes of experience cross and trespass the boundaries between the material and the metaphysical in a multi-sensory cosmology where colours, sounds, smells and tactile perceptions are given similar emphasis and salience. Truly among

the most important components that make up Anderson's multi-sensory cosmology are the equal importance given to the texture, colour and shapes of forms she creates, and most significantly, to the gestures that turn the intangible material. Anderson's reflective square surfaces *Body Itineraries* echo the multi-sensory worlds created by the Colombian Indians she visited and who, like most non-literate societies, shun Eurocentric 'ocularcentrism' to stress the complexities of the interplay between cognition, memory and the senses. Rather than being objects to be looked at, the iconic presences created by Anderson through her and her dancers' meditative weaving motions require attention beyond their appearances. They demand to be experienced and not contemplated, they want to be sensed and not observed, they invite the viewers to be perceived and not simply seen so that they can finally reveal the deeply human truths they conceal.

Among many cultures around the world the making of objects (production) is likened to the making of people (reproduction). They are equally significant operations because each gesture and bodily disposition involved in both these processes not only embody literal, evoked, inferred, referenced or indexed meanings, but also activate an object's agency. Making is the quintessential act of transformation, one that gives power to Anderson's creations. The act of making also acknowledges the very life that animates the materials and that, at the same time, imbues objects with human-like qualities. It is so that the glittering gold of Byzantine icons captures the viewers in a dialogue with the divine, that New Guinean shields' meandering patterns and pigments bedazzle the enemies, and milk and blood that cover Congolese ancestors' sculptures equally emanate the very life they are covered with. Matter, outside the scientific gaze, is hardly inert.

In other times and places, things often perceived to be made by 'inactive' materials more often than not are thought to be alive. What is more, they are active performers in communication with humans. In almost all non- or pre-scientific societies, what in some contexts are understood as 'objects' are persons, subjects that have an effect on the world, on all our senses and the very body we dwell in. Statues of Hindu gods affect viewers through their gaze, Quechua sacred stones exude energies that bless worshippers, Siberian carvings manifest immaterial other-than-human beings that protect the hunters, and Amazonian masks reveal to human observers the invisible realms of spirits. Anderson's artworks not only embody the intangible, they act upon our senses in profound and affecting ways, and evoke and make visible the numinous through their presence almost through their own volition.

Every creative act is motion, but in Anderson's work motion is the core of her practice and not simply a set of procedures that generate an artefact. Gestures, motion and the dynamic movement of the body in space are signifying acts because they carry distinctive cultural signatures reflected in encoded messages, patterns and cultural structures that make us who we are as humans. Anderson's Body Itineraries, crystallised in copper wire, carry the signature of her own multi-sensory cosmology. As part of it, they function in a way similar to how South American Indian textiles work as memory storage for myths, stories and other narratives. Indeed, the idea of 'weaving memory into being', so central to the Amerindian cultures Anderson encountered in her travels, is no stranger to her, for her 'memorised objects' function as mnemonic devices that index the presences that populate her own stories. This mirrors the way in which Amerindian cultures bring into being mythical characters and protagonists of

prayers and invocations through the weaving process, the colours, designs and materials employed in the production of textiles. In more ways than one, both South American Indian weaves and Alice Anderson's performed objects and surfaces render the invisible visible. They are a manifestation of a repetitive process that generates a place for metaphysical presence.

Anderson's creative acts recover and store memories linked to stories, like Amerindian manufacturing processes do. As such they can be understood as 'technologies of the intangible', because they make visible spheres of experience for which Indo-European languages have no word. Her effort to find new artistic idioms that reconcile body, memory, experience and imagination brings together often incommensurable modes of being and dwelling in the world that anthropology is always eager to explore. So, anthropological analogies, models and comparisons are doubly apt to explain Anderson's rich artistic corpus. Her gestures imbue meaning into the world of the material, the quantifiable and the observable in the same way that rituals and artefacts give meaning to social and cultural life through the procedural conventions underpinned by formulae, codified motions, patterns and gestures. The ritual aspect of her work digs deep into the most human predispositions and this is what makes her art so captivating. Indeed, human inclination to ritual behaviour, anthropologists agree, is essential to life itself for it reveals our ability to reflect upon ourselves through symbolic action. Whether executed automatically (such as in manufacturing process) or self-consciously realised (as in ritual practice), all human actions are symbolic for they are signs that enable a direct dialogue between current life and lived experiences condensed in memories and stories. What these two dimensions have in common is reiteration, the fundamental principle of Anderson's artistic quest.

The reiterative weaving motions of South American Indians' crafts people reveal that there is no separation between the artisan, their cultural knowledge, their memory and their products. Similarly, Anderson's repetitive acts turn her into the very means of communication, the third element that connects intangible elements to tangible artefacts. They make her an instrument that almost alchemically transforms her person into a mechanical entity. Reiterative motions allow Anderson herself to become the shuttle that unravels the copper thread, weaving her memorial sculptural icons.

This is an act of transformation at once analogous and reverse to the process of making, in which objects come alive. Here the human actor turns herself into the medium. It is a process that requires a blurring between objects and persons, one that enables metaphysical communication between different realms of existence through the figure of the ritual specialist. As such it is fundamentally shamanic, a quality of Alice Anderson's work and performance. Her own mutation into an instrument of metaphysical communication, as in the case of Amazonian, Arctic, North American or Siberian shamans, is an example of the paradoxical conditions of the multiverse she inhabits. A time-place where an individual is simultaneously a person and a thing, she is in front of us and yet inhabits a different spatio-temporal dimension with the purpose of deploying messages from invisible registers of reality. In her rhythmical dances and compulsive reiterations Anderson's works create the conditions that allow a connection between the physical and the metaphysical, through her body and her creations. The trance-like state induced by Anderson's repetitive acts is nothing short of a shamanic séance during which the portal between the phenomenal world and intangible realities is opened through performative recurrences, physical endurance, sensory deprivation,

concentration and regularly spaced gestures such as tapping, winding, stomping and undulating. These are all actions that recall the monotonous spinning and swaying that induce shamans into alternative states of consciousness.

Anderson vindicates the need to materialise the invisible in an increasingly disembodied world. Whether it is reminiscences or stories associated with specific items or presenting the numinous through iconic creations, she operates in an animistic mode. In this manner she mirrors the prerogatives of peoples who render tangible, in man-made objects, the spiritual and imperceptible forces that imbue the cosmos with dynamism, movement and cyclical recurrences. If among traditional societies, seasonal rituals and patterned behaviours maintain an open connection between the material world of humans and the immaterial elements that populate their cosmologies, Anderson's rites, objects and drawings similarly ensure that her audiences engage all their senses with her own worldview, a multiverse in which art enables memory and the intangible to be more than visible, they are apprehended phenomenologically. It is with these deeply moving and profound acts of transformation that Anderson's works add meaning to our experience and, in so doing, perhaps make us a little bit more human.