



On the notion of existence

I saw a vase drawn on page five of Mike Kelley's *Existence Problems*. The glimpse of a seemingly dormant memory: the vase is mentioned as archetypical object of existence in countless ancient philosophical Indian texts. This is certainly due to its common presence and clear functional purpose; it is also more specifically considered to be a particular type of object. In Sanskrit this object is called *vikāryam*, it involves the appearance of a new quality in the matter which is subjected to that transformation. Just like in the example, he transforms gold into a bracelet, in the same way he transforms clay into a vase. It is an object which exists only in its final phase – after the transformation of the original matter – but also all along the action involving its creation since the intention is present in the maker from the very start. In Kelley's letter, the vase is represented as falling off a surface, he wonders what is being displaced by that vase taking up that space, he calls it 'the living dead' and wants to knock it off. I won't *be* any longer.

This is not it. A few years back I translated a late medieval Indian commentary about the notion of action and, in particular, that of existence as action. The author says that the verb 'to be' (*bhū-*) is employed in the sense of 'existence' (*sattā*) and that this existence can be explained as 'the fact of carrying one's own self' (*ātmabhāraṇam*). I was, again, struck when, in his letter, Kelley writes of 'self perpetuating' when he is concerned with proving his own existence through the mirrors which are the others. What is existence if not the the continuation of one's self?

While I can't neglect that the starting point of Kelley's reasoning is an ontological (and visual?) one, I for once want to enjoy the freedom of not making any specific point. The ancient Indian philosophers in question were considering the linguistic aspect of it all but I can't help but notice a similarity between the dialectic tools that both they and Kelley employ while demonstrating what existence is. Indian philosophers distinguish between general and specific actions, the first being actions such as doing and being, and the second such as cooking or walking. When someone asks 'what is he doing?', the answer cannot be 'he is existing'. Not because existing is not an action – the philosophers have proven that existence is the action par excellence because presupposed by any other action. But it is not a particular one, such as the one expressed by 'he cooks' etc. One asks for the specific, unknown activity of something whose existence is, on the contrary, already known, and not at all for the known existence of someone. For this reason, one cannot reply 'he is existing' since existing is also a general action just like doing. Kelley unconsciously (?) makes use of this meant-to-be flawless question-answer method in his letter:

hi 1) fine, what have you been doing?

2) not much. Just hanging around yea, just being here

1) just existing

2) yes, I exist

me too

There is only one exception, according to the philosophers, for which one is allowed to answer 'he exists' to that question, namely if one is concerned with the disappearing of one's self, through death. If existing is understood as I am still alive, I have not disappeared yet, I linger. Is it possible Kelley had this in mind while questioning existence? And don't we all.

This unrequired comparison finds its reason in a simple appreciation for common and time transversal mental human categories.