

## CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE ART AS A HERMENEUTIC PATHWAY TO TRANSCENDENCE AND HEALING.

**Celia de Villiers**

*Lecturer (Department Art History, Visual Arts and Musicology, University of South Africa and the Department of Visual Arts, University of Pretoria).*

**ABSTRACT:** The Romanian historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade suggested that the medicine man or shaman is a sick man who has managed to cure himself. Maintaining a so called ‘balanced’ identity has become the constant feature of our ever-changing contemporary environment. Some contemporary socio-political events, and technological advances have given rise to traumatic emotional feelings of ‘thrown-ness’ and being in situations beyond one’s control. By appropriating and traversing traditional boundaries between contemporary performance art, ancient rites, shamanic action and myths the contemporary performance artists, Yugoslavian Marina Abramović, American Matthew Barney and the South African Steven Cohen face and challenge converging idiosyncrasies. During harrowing mythopoetic public interventions they often set themselves up as scapegoats and shamans. Such mediation through the body as a cultural tool or code, seeks the transmission of personal convictions in an attempt at mirroring society for the sake of stimulating the re-consideration of conventional ethics and hegemonic attitudes. This hermeneutic search for hidden meaning and an interpretation of human existence beyond the superficial has become a resourceful construction for the selected performance artist’s millennial mythologies. The aim of this paper is to ascertain how these tactics facilitate performance artist’s encounter with the world. The artist’s resourcefulness is contextualised in terms of the Neuro-theological theories of Michael Winkelman, a behavioural scientist from Arizona State University. He has discovered that innate brain processes are directly affected by certain shamanic practices. It concerns the stimulation of neurotransmitters and their responses to spirit concepts and how they influence and manipulate individual and group psycho-dynamics, which confirms Eliade’s statement above.

**Keywords:** Shaman, shamanism, Performance art, contemporary, hermeneutic, healing, Abramović, Barney, Cohen.

The Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade postulated that the medicine man or shaman is above all, a sick man who has succeeded in curing himself.<sup>1</sup>

The principal aim of this presentation is to ascertain how hermeneutic strategies facilitate performance artists' encounter with the world and their drive towards wholeness. In relying on a range of props, dramatic devices and skills to encourage viewer participation, it becomes possible for the performer to pursue a whole range of communicative games with a variety of intentions. The same may be said of shamans who engage their audience and then manipulate their belief systems to achieve outcomes which are part of a shared belief system. The shaman becomes a middleman to encounter strangers in the otherworld. He/she is not the stranger. To suggest that performance artists are a species of shaman for the art viewing public as the artist Joseph Beuys did is to use the idea metaphorically.<sup>2</sup>

It is a valuable metaphor nevertheless, despite how outrageous it seems. The specific intention of shamans is therapeutic, whether they are New Age shamans or those who operate in historical communities where there is a consonance in the belief system and its expression.

By examining the appropriation of shamanic props and the artists' exploitation of the effect of shamanic rituals, the differences between our contemporary mindset and that of people who are using pre-industrialised concepts of society become marked. In this paper the artists' resourcefulness is contextualised in terms of the neuro-theological theories of Michael Winkelman a behavioural scientist from Arizona State University.<sup>3</sup> He has found that certain shamanic practices such as altered states of consciousness stimulate neurotransmitters in the brain, influencing and manipulating individual and group psycho-dynamics, which endorses Eliade's perspective.

I concur with Prof Stanley Krippner from Saybrook Graduate School in San Francisco who suggests that the term 'heightened states of awareness' may actually be a more accurate description than 'altered states of consciousnesses'.<sup>4</sup>

Maintaining a so-called 'balanced' identity has become the constant feature of our ever-changing contemporary environment. Socio-political events, and rapid technological advances have given rise to a traumatic sense of 'thrown-ness' and being in situations beyond one's control.

Performance artists Marina Abramović, Matthew Barney, and Steven Cohen have reinterpreted trends in contemporary society, in this way becoming extreme barometers of this era of the late twentieth and twenty first century. As the body has become a site of subjection, subjectivity and agency, and one of the primary concerns of postmodern politics, these artists have exploited their own bodies. Their multiple expressions of personae and masquerade achieved by performance props, serialised signs, external and physically invasive adornment, as well as synthetic prosthesis, are part of their satirical critique on their society and that of their viewers.<sup>5</sup> Such an example is Barney's satire with multiple allusions, mythological creatures such as Dionysus and Pan (see figure 1).

---

<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism archaic techniques of ecstasy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Translated from French by Willard R. Trask, 1972, pp.27-31.

<sup>2</sup> RoseLee Goldberg says of Beuys that he "[...] saw art as a tool for awakening both spiritual and political awareness". RoseLee Goldberg, *Here and now in performance arts since the 90's in The Artist's Body* by Warr, London: Phaidon Press Ltd: 2000, p. 246.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Winkelman, *Shamanism as neuro-theology and evolutionary psychology*. American Behavioral Scientist, Vol 45 No. 12, August, 2002 pp.1875-1887.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Krippner, *Humanities first healers: psychological and psychiatric stances on shamans and shamanism*. Revista de Psiquiatria clínica. 34 Vol. 1, 2007, pp.16-22. [www.hcnet.usp.br/ipq/revista/vol34/sl/en/16.html](http://www.hcnet.usp.br/ipq/revista/vol34/sl/en/16.html) (accessed on 17/07/2008).

<sup>5</sup> Cohen displays the Star of David and his circumcised genitals simultaneously; Abramović has used the Greek/Balkan pentagram, crucifix and archetypical images such as a Minoan mother-goddess and Medusa in performances expressing multiple belief systems that she experienced in her youth; Barney frequently borrows Jewish cultural and religious imagery, such as the tabernacle and scapegoat (fig11) as well as the icon of the American founders of the new Zion; the symbol of Mormonism and Free Masonry - the honeybee. He also uses the Manx triskelion, three armoured legs revolving around a



Figure 1. Mathew Barney, *Drawing restraint* (1993). Video still (Illustration: Spector, N. 2002, p. 22).

The artworks of three Performance artists will be analysed under the headings of Adornment, Props and Othering, Identity and Persona, Desensitization, Ritual and Liminal States (see figure 2).



Figure 2. The Yugoslavian Performance Artist Marina Abramovic, *Dragon heads*, Glasgow, (1990). Performance still, (illustration: Abramovic, M. 1998, p. 327). According to the researchers Winkelman and Krippner, dealing with challenges to one's survival stimulates bio-cognitive potentials and adaptations.

---

central axis, the medieval coat of arms of the Isle of Man, which is 'serialised' in reference to Barney's ancestral heritage as it re-appears in *Cremaster 4*.

The selected artists act out in ways which are, dramatic, shocking, extreme and haunting, reflecting the struggle of the many people in contemporary Western society who feel marginalized. Therapeutic shamanic psychosocial practices, which nonetheless belong to a profoundly different worldview than that which the three performers hold, are striking in their performances (see figures 3-6).



Figure 3. The American Performance Artist Matthew Barney. The Loughton candidate in *Cremaster 4*, (1994) Video still. (Illustration Spector, 2000, p. 59).



Figure 4. The South African Performance artist Steven Cohen, *Chandelier* (2002). Performance still. Steven overcame near-fatal illness in an isolation ward before becoming a Performance Artist specializing in mediation and socio-political commentary). Overcoming serious illness is often a pre-requisite for becoming a shamanic healer. (Illustration: De Waal, S. and Sassen, R., 2003, p. 70).



Figure 5. Shamanic intervention addressing gender marginalization, Steven Cohen and Regine Chopinot – *I wouldn't be seen dead in that*, Dance Umbrella festival, South Africa (2003). Performance Still (Illustration: De Waal, S. and Sassen, R., 2003, p. 75).



Figure 6. Christa Bauch as one of three Manx Faeries in *Cremaster 4* (1994). Video Still (Illustration Spector, N., 2002, p. 63).

The shamanic devices used by the artists' is part of the hermeneutic philosophy, embodying a retrospective search for hidden meaning and an interpretation of human existence beyond the superficial, and is a resourceful construction for the selected performance artist's millennial mythologies. The Phenomenologists Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur differ slightly in their postulations on intentionality, but all believed that experience in the world entails a process of uncovering truths. The German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer stated that: "Hermeneutics is a general doctrine of the art of understanding [...]. The real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable".<sup>6</sup> It is important to take particular cognizance of Dr Victoria Wynn Leonard's research at the School of Nursing, University of California.<sup>7</sup> Leonard points out that "Currently the hermeneutic approach is being taken up by researchers in diverse human science fields including nursing".

Reviewing the use made of adornment, masquerade and props in the Performance art of Abramović, Barney and Cohen, as well as their self-initiated Othering, shows that it is part of a discourse on postmodern signification politics which resonates with the self referential capability of transforming the self, others, society, morality and cosmology as performed by shamans (see figure 7). Winkelmann reiterates that shamanism and the mystical traditions also involve metaphors, ritual and symbolic traditions for the construction and manipulation of forms of consciousness and experiences of

<sup>6</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, in Polifroni, E. and Welch, M. *Perspectives on Philosophy of Science in Nursing*. Philadelphia: Lippencott, Williams and Wilkins, 1999, pp. 339, 344).

<sup>7</sup> Polifroni, and Welch, *Perspectives on Philosophy of Science in Nursing*. Philadelphia: Lippencott, Williams and Wilkins, 1999, p.323.

the self.<sup>8</sup> Performance artists and shamans understand how dominant social structures and social effects interact. Visual thinking and mimetic skills are fundamental to shamanic and Performance art practice and facilitate processes to heighten their conscious awareness. Winkelman has found scientific proof that heightened states of consciousness affect the paleomammalian brain to induce the everyday integration of information. Activities such as the Performance art under discussion are able to heighten the state of consciousness and produce limbic-cortical integration, inter-hemispheric synchronization and neuro-phenomenological relations.<sup>9</sup> It activates areas in the brain implicit in understanding socio-emotional dynamics, repressed memories, unresolved conflicts, intuitions and self-conscious awareness. This supports the hermeneutic theory.



Figure 7. Socio-political awareness, facilitated by ritual. The symbolic component of ritual attempts to facilitate change. Marina Abramovic, *Cleaning the house* (1995). Performance still. New York (Illustration: Abramovic, M, 1998, p.365).

### **Adornment and props**

Signification is created through appearances. Appearances are deceptive when the main component of the community has a particular style of dress (see figure 8). The attitudes exhibited towards the 'strange' or the 'odd' in contemporary society is a measure of the extent to which the Other can be accommodated into that society (see figure 9 a & b). Shamans and Performance artist manage their appearances. The shaman uses the strange or odd to deliberately mark the performance as belonging to another order of activity than the everyday. The commodification of the identity of the performer is an essential part of the political manoeuvring which the artists are engaged in (see figures 10, 11 and 12). In a traditional society the shaman's identity is not a consumer item – it is a genuine identity, authenticated by his position as healer, go-between among worlds, and person of spiritual power.

---

<sup>8</sup> Michael Winkelman, *The neural ecology of consciousness and healing*, Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 2000, p.45.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Winkelman, *Shamanism as neurotheology and evolutionary psychology*. American Behavioral Scientist, Vol. 45 No. 12, August 2002. <http://www.sagepublications.com>. pp.1875-1887.



Figure 8. Mythology and narrative to effect *communitas* and political comment. Steven Cohen, *Limping into the African Renaissance* (1999-2000). Performance Still. (Illustration: De Waal, S. and Sassen, R. 2003, p.51).



Figure 9a & b. Aimee Mullins in *Cremaster 3* by Matthew Barney (2002), invokes shamanic intervention mediation and activates shared healing, myth and the placebo effect. (Illustration Spector, 2000, unpaginated).



Figure 9b.



Figure 10. Marina Abramovic, *Biography*, Vienna & Antwerp (1992). Performance still.



Figure 11. Shamanic, Symbolic manipulation of the scapegoat. Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 3* (2002). Video still, (illustration Spector, 2000, unpaginated).



Figure 12. Shamanic intervention and mediation (Animal/Human rights) Steven Cohen - Flying at the zoo (1999) Performance still. (Illustration: De Waal, S. and Sassen, R., 2003 p. 54).

The purposeful use of hybridised, transformed, adorned and masked or naked bodies of the Performance artists is a way of marking strangeness, as there is no guarantee that in a completely secular viewing public there is a commonly shared idea about what would be strange/other. By making their bodies, as the cultural theorist, Michel Foucault says, an “inscribed surface of events”, rich in possible disruptions to the hegemonic minority reflecting the gender and class boundaries of contemporary culture, they can be sure to target as wide a section of viewers as possible for their activism.<sup>10</sup>

Shamanic appearance management is not designed to shock or alarm for its own sake, but to signify the possibility of an otherworldly journey or interaction. That it might be a species of entertainment, for the community is secondary to its primary purpose, to mark the shaman off from the rest of the community. The investment in the use of props to make strangeness and Otherness is part of the drama of otherworldliness as a spiritual activity.

The psychological states of narcissism and abjection which are revealed in much of the performative works of the artists are closely allied with issues about persona, gender and animal mutation (see figure 13). These are not the same issues as the shaman develops in his or her performance, which are aimed at assuring the viewers of the power invested in the person and the performance in order to assist the community in one way or another. Whereas the Performance artists ‘act out’ the unintegrated state of narcissism and abjection by means of which they can mirror their viewers’ states back to them, the shaman’s role is not a mirroring but separation of him - or herself from the community to take on the difficult tasks which need to be performed (see figure 14). Nevertheless, the close relationship between identity and persona is a figure used extensively in both

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, 1980, p.148.



kinds of performances. For shamans this may take the form of animism, a guardian spirit, or alternate experiential reality, which in the case of a Performance artist may be described as their alter ego. For the Performance artists, multiple personae enable them to reflect for their viewers innumerable states of mind, imagination, feeling, desire. The dressing up and changes of personae are often dazzling and fascinating. For the audience they give an opportunity to reflect on our contemporary *lebenswelt*. The shaman does not always expect exactly the same from his/her audience, but the adoption of changing personae and the use of a range of props is an important feature of shamanic performances.



Figure 13. Invoking Shamanic devices: Presenting a persona, animal familiars, flight and mythology. Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 5* (1997) Video still (Illustration Spector, N. 2002, Unpaginated).

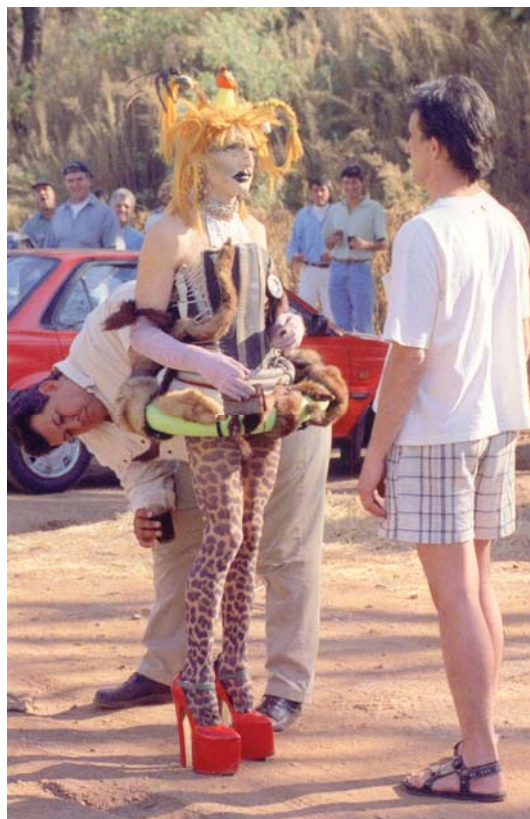


Figure 14. Steven Cohen, *Ugly girl at the rugby* (1998) applies shamanic healing practices such as social activism to mediate hegemonic prejudices and conflicting social relations. Cohen's abjection is also applied as a form of therapeutic de-sensitization. (Illustration: De Waal, S. and Sassen, R., 2003, p 47).

The contemporary Performance artists' personae are used in complex styles exploiting many kinds of dramatic devices, satire, parody and irony (see figure 15). Hybrid neo-Baroque and, neo-Gothic, carnivalesque fantasies and animism as used in magico-religious practice amplify their theatrical spectacles using Otherness as a camouflage (See figures 16 and 17). It is a type of urban armour and a negotiated exchange because the performers and the audiences have a shared reality, shared symbols, and shared expectations. These are subverted by the fantasy, artifice and exaggerated, shocking display of the satirical dramas enacted which assist mediation.



Figure 15. Marina Abramovic, *Cleaning the mirror, 1&11* (1995). Performance and video stills. Abramovic applies shamanic techniques such as Othering, cognitive reversal through her own agency, a subjective experience, soul flight and vision quests (Illustration Abramovic 1998, p. 243).



Figure 16. Spirit allies and communication with animals are part of traditional shamanic practice. Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 5 Water Sprites* (1997) Video still. (illustration Spector, N. 2002, Unpaginated).



Figure 17. Animal totems and animal metaphors and journeys to lower and higher realms of existence are central to shamanic practice. Steven Cohen, *Fashion Mule* (1998). Performance Art, Greyville Race Course, Durban, South Africa (De Waal, A. & Sassen, R., 2003, cover page).

### **De-sensitisation and ‘stress immunisation’**

When artists transcend the ordinary boundaries by presenting their bodies as primal material to engage in violent and painful spectacles, what occurs can be described using psychological discourse for example the symbolic near-fatal experiences and re-birth experiences of Abramovic, Cohen and Barney can induce changes in psychodynamic processes (see figure 18). Pain is viewed by these artists as a source of information for the resolution of abstract problem solving. If this hermeneutic methodology of self-examination and introspection is successful for viewers, then it is not in vain that the artists have exhibited their bodies, put them through terrible pain, apparently confronted their own abjection and sacrificed the innermost parts of themselves to mirror the unrest in the psyche of their society.



Figure 18. Pain as a source of information. Marina Abramovic, *Spirit House* (1997). Performance still (Illustration: Abramovic M., 1998, p. 385).

Isaac Marks the author of *Fears Phobias and Rituals* says therapeutic exposure is an accepted treatment for anxiety as it brings about de-sensitisation and a form of *stress immunisation*.<sup>11</sup> It has been shown that self-exposure to fear cues and painful situations are almost as helpful as therapist-aided exposure. If this is true, the artists might be said to be acting out a version of what we believe is a ‘stress immunisation’, on the larger scale than ordinary people can usually do (see figure 19).

---

<sup>11</sup> Isaac Marks. *Fears, Phobias and Rituals*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 460-463. (There is another whole school of thought which strongly disagrees with this idea).



Figure 19. Steven Cohen, best dressed woman (1998) Performance still. (Illustration: De Waal, S. and Sassen, R., 2003, p. 16).

Marks<sup>12</sup> argues that when coming to terms with fearful emotions, animals make use of ‘displacement’ activities such as preening, grooming or comfort movements applied to the surface of the body to reduce anxiety. By the same token humans use displacement activities by resorting to surrogate or fetish devices – among others amulets, symbolic codes and technological fantasies (see figure 20). Ricoeur,<sup>13</sup> Winkelman,<sup>14</sup> and Krippner<sup>15</sup> who have researched the value of imagery and symbols agree that visual symbols tap into “pre-verbal and pre-conceived mental templates and meaning attribution” and that they are a part of management disciplines that assist in making the ‘life-world’ more endurable. Such universal symbols facilitate neuro-pathways underlying the spoken language. They reinforce visual and auditory perception, providing the biological basis for a patient/viewer to transact emotions through symbols and metaphors.

---

<sup>12</sup> Isaac Marks, *Fears, Phobias and Rituals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p.14.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*: Chicago:University of Chicago press, 1984, p.68.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Winkelman, *The neural ecology of consciousness and healing*, Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 2000, p.17.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Krippner (2007) Krippner, S. 2007. Humanities first healers: psychological and psychiatric stances on shamans and shamanism *Revista de Psiquiatria clinica*.34 vol. 1 pp.16-22.



Figure 20. Marina Abramović, *Lips of Thomas* (detail) (1975) and repeated in *The Biography* (1992). Performance Art, Hebbel Theatre, Berlin, Germany (illustration: Abramović, M., 1998, p. 394).

### **Ritual and transcendence**

A significant part of the performances of Barney, Cohen, and especially Abramović is a certain trance-like state they enter during performances.

Together with their use of ritual, myth and metaphor, there appear to be strong resemblances to the liminal states which emerge in the rituals of shamans.

Performers, shamans, everyone goes into liminal states at some time or another, as liminality means to be a state of segregation, to be disconnected from the usual interaction with one's exterior world. It arises as a subjective realisation that something meaningful in one's existence has been extinguished or separated from previous relationships and roles. Sometimes a liminal phase is merely the repression of fear that something vital is absent. Thus a liminal period in a person's life eventually means the crossing of a threshold or margin, a movement of an individual from one mental/physical state of being to another. In terms of the phenomenological, Bourgeois and Schalow<sup>16</sup> postulate that "it is a decisive catalyst prompting a certain responsiveness to its own Being as care. [...] The radicalisation of everyday comprehension of self is fostered by anxiety".

There is a difference between shamans who by their use of liminal states and the props and mechanisms of dramatic theatrical rituals and acts heal their community and the Performance artists' use of liminal states. Communities for whom shamanic practice is embedded and who are involved in its symbolic, psycho-dramatic transactions experience catharsis and eventual integration. It is a more accountable or measurable form of healing.

The difference between rituals performed in a homogeneous community and those in the "global village" is enormous. The for instance, some communities do not exploit technological and multimedia effects. They are unconcerned about trade and economic policies which underpin global trade. Their belief system is profoundly different from the audience of the Performance artists under discussion. Healing rituals which take the shaman into a trance-like state usually happen in a community context. The loss of a sense of community in the global village is one of the Performance

---

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Bourgeois and Frank Schalow. *Traces of Understanding: A profile of Heidegger's and Ricoueur's Hermeneutics*. Amsterdam: Rodolp Berlinger and Wiebke Schrader, 1990, p.83.

artists' disadvantages, as they have to re-create a community of some kind (see figure 21). Barney uses film, which separates him completely from the community. Cohen goes into places where he marks with the greatest emphasis the fact of his not belonging to the community (see figure 22). Abramović uses viewers dedicated to her performances as the community she engages with (see figure 23). None of the communities of the artists is their own. Abramović for years had no fixed abode. The communities created by the artists are made to serve a purpose which is different from that of the shaman's community.



Figure 21. Apart from adornment and costumes ascending and descending are devices used extensively by shamans and Performance Artists for entirely different reasons to those of Matthew Barney. Barney also has the best technology available to create these effects for his global audience, whereas shamans rely entirely on the imagination of their communities. Matthew Barney (1997) *Cremaster 5*. Video still, Budapest (Illustration: Spector, N. 2002 p.422).



Figure 22. The harmonizing of social structures are shamanic ideals, Steven Cohen's ironic performances subvert these ideals Steven Cohen, *Jew* (1998) Performance still. (Illustration: De Waal, S and Sassen, R., 2003, p. 16).



Figure 23 a & b. Site specific reconciliation, Marina Abramović (2005) *Spirit Cooking* Johannesburg Art Museum. Photograph by Abrie Fourie, *Arthro* 2005. (Accessed on 29/11/2006).

## **Audience: The psychology of ritual healing and identity**

Society has always engaged in rituals, collectively and individually. Performance artists exploit this part of human behaviour for their own ends in performance. In keeping with the theories of Arnold van Gennep,<sup>17</sup> healing through ritual for humans is described by Cooper and Thalbourne, of the School of Psychology at the University of Adelaide who maintain that providing sufficient levels of activation are reached, during ritual, subliminal consciousness can become a supraliminal consciousness and the chances of healing oneself during a liminal state are good.<sup>18</sup> Winkelman explaining the benefits of community ritual, says, “[...] it represents the importance of the roles of symbolic processes and social others in synchronising human psychobiological functions [...] and elicits the body’s serotonergic upload and immunological systems”.<sup>19</sup> This involves opioid substances, endorphins and the so-called pleasure pathway of the brain.<sup>20</sup> Certain types of cathartic rituals for healing and transformation have additional benefits, in that “psychodynamics are set in motion - re routing the viewer back to his/her own domestic site where identities were first formulated”. It provides fluidity between what individuals would like to be and what they are.<sup>21</sup>

## **Differences in conceptualising what has to be healed in a community**

The desperate need to pin down an identity arises as Lasch says from, “feelings of an amorphous futile existence” which have created a need for “defence against anxiety and guilt” amongst modern Westerners.<sup>22</sup> The sense of a futile existence does not seem to be one of the most prominent psychological ills of societies employing shamans as the go-betweens in their experience of this world and the other world. However a Performance artist’s hermeneutic reappraisal of his/her individual situation and sense of perception facilitates understanding.

Davey the author of *Art, Religion and the Hermeneutics of Authenticity* highlights the special importance of such a hermeneutic analysis, because, “a present withheld is its implied anticipation of a future disclosure of its content”.<sup>23</sup>

As creative beings the artists display the possibility of a power to destroy and re-build themselves. Such an exercise is a symptom of the particular society in which we live, in which there is the need for such acts to offset the sense of powerlessness many feel. It is through the agency of fantasy, the media, theatre, spectacle and the commonplace tropes of Otherness that it can be achieved.

---

<sup>17</sup> Arnold van Gennep. *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge. 1960.

<sup>18</sup> Gemma Cooper, and Michael Thalbourne,. *McClenon’s ritual healing theory: an exploratory study*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 2004, p.142.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Winkelman. *Shamanism and cognitive evolution*. Cambridge Archaeological Journal 12 Vol. 1, Cambridge: Mc Donald Institute for archeological research: 2002, p.1880.

<sup>20</sup> David Barlow and Mark Durand explain that the benefit of the serotonin released from the brain into the body. The immune system is the body’s means of identifying foreign material entering the body. Opioid-releasing neurons are nerve cells which release endogenous opioids and endorphins that play a role in the brain’s pleasure pathway, controlling the experience of reward. David Barlow and Mark Durand, *Abnormal psychology*. Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1999. p.G-14.

<sup>21</sup> Kathy O Dell. *Contract with the skin. Masochism performance art and the 1970’s*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1998, p.14.

<sup>22</sup> Lasch, C. *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1991, p.36, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Davey. *Art, religion, and the hermeneutics of authenticity in Performance and authenticity in the arts* by Kemal, S and Gaskell, I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp.66-94.



Through a close look at what the artists satirically say about us as performers in the world, we come to a different understanding of that world and ourselves.

## Conclusion

Winkelman's research has shown that shamanic practice activates what he calls "neurognostic interpretive structures" to achieve psycho-physiological integration.<sup>24</sup> At the date of writing, there is very little research available to prove that the same is true in Performance art. Shamanistic practices in the hands of the performance artists Abramovic, Barney and Cohen are embedded in contemporary experiences, understandings, and beliefs. However, there are ample indications that the performances described here may well activate the parasympathetic nervous system encouraging slow wave synchronisation of the frontal cortex, interhemispheric integration, mental and emotional integration, insight and transcendence in the same way as shamanic acts. Winkelman's research on the neurological bases of shamanic practice suggests that shamanism, humanity's most ancient spiritual, religious and healing practice, has achieved a dramatic modern resurgence as people attempt to fulfil spiritual needs<sup>25</sup>. In the publication *Neo hoo-doo art for a forgotten faith*, the editor Franklin Sirmans confirms that artworks such as the ones discussed above that simultaneously deal with the sacred and profane are usually "subversive works that often unearth rich unexamined aspects of the past that have spiritual resonance in the present"<sup>26</sup>.

The author of *Dreaming with open eyes*, Michael Tucker (1992:99), agrees that the call of the shaman [Performance artist] is visible in contemporary art. He suggests that:

It is a call to take wing beyond the familiar look and sound of things. At the same time it is a call to dig deep in to the ground of being. [...] In beginning to surrender our boundaries, our sense of belonging in the world may both deepen and broaden us. Such a call requires us to summon a participatory courage and open mindedness [...]. Ultimately, however, it is a journey, or path of enormous heart, shot through with the healing spirit of shamanic vocation and wonder.<sup>26</sup>

## Bibliography

- ABRAMOVIĆ, M. *Cleaning the house*. London: Academy Editions, 1995.
- ABRAMOVIĆ, M. *Artist body*. Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1998.
- BARLOW, D.H. and Durand, V.M. *Abnormal psychology*. Pacific Grove Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1999
- BARTELOS, G. *The Cremaster Cycle* by Spector, N. Cologne: Museum Ludwig, 2002.
- BOURGEOIS, P. and Schalow, F. *Traces of Understanding: A profile of Heidegger's and Ricoueur's Hermeneutics*. Amsterdam: Rodolp Berlinger and Wiebke Schrader, 1990.

---

<sup>24</sup> Michael Winkelman, *The neural ecology of consciousness and healing*, Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 2000, p.2.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Winkelman, Shamanism as neurotheology and evolutionary psychology. *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 45 No. 12, August 2002, p.1875.

<sup>26</sup> Sirmans, F. *Neo Hoo Doo Art for a Forgotten Faith*, New Haven and London: Yale University press, 2008, p.12.

<sup>26</sup> Tucker, M. *Dreaming with open eyes*. San Francisco: Aquarian/Harper, 1992, p.99.

Note: A summary of this paper was presented at a conference at the University of Stendahl in Grenoble, France in 2010.

- COOPER, G and Thalbourne, M. *McClenon's ritual healing theory: an exploratory study*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide 2004, p139-149.
- DAVEY, N. Art, religion, and the hermeneutics of authenticity in *Performance and authenticity in the arts* by Kemal, S and Gaskell, I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 66-94.
- De WAAL S and SASSEN R. *Steven Cohen*. Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing.
- DIAMOND, E. (ed). *Performance and Cultural politics*: London: Routledge, 2003.
- DUFFY, J. 2001. Illness, ritual and liminality in the Post-Nouveau Roman. *The Romantic Review*. Vol. 96. No 2. Columbia: The Trustees of Columbia University: [Sa] 207-231.
- ELIADE, M. *Shamanism archaic techniques of ecstasy*. Second edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Trans. from French by Willard R. Trask, 1974.
- ELLIOT, D. Iles, C. (ed). *Marina Abramović: objects performance video sound*, Oxford: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995.
- FOUCAULT, M. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, 1980.
- FRIEDMAN, H. *The self-healing personality*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991.
- GADAMER, H. *Warheit und Methode* Tübingen, translation Mohr. *Truth and Method* ed G Barden and J Cumming, London: Sheed and Ward, 1975.
- GADAMER, H. *The enigma of health – the art of healing in a scientific age*: Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1996
- GALLAGHER, S. *Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*. In Busch, T.W. and Gallagher, S. (eds). 1992. *Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*. Albany: State University of New York: 5 Albany: State University of New York, 1992.
- GOLDBERG, R. *Here and now in performance arts since the 90's in The Artist's Body* by Warr, T. London: Phaidon Press Ltd 2000, p.246.
- HEIDEGGER, M. *The question concerning technology*. New York: Harper and Row, 1977.
- ILES, C. (ed). *Marina Abramović: objects performance video sound*, Oxford: The Museum of Modern Art.(Catalogue for an exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 9 April – 2 July 1995).
- KEMAL, S and Gaskell, I. (ed). *Performance and authenticity in the arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1999.
- KLEMM, D. *The Hermeneutical Theory of Paul Ricoeur* London: Associated University Press, 1983.
- KRIPPNER, S. *The epistemology and technologies of shamanic states of consciousness*. Journal of consciousness studies, 7. San Francisco, 2000.
- KRIPPNER, S. *Humanities first healers: psychological and psychiatric stances on shamans and shamanism*. Revista de Psiquiatria clinica.34 Vol. 1, pp.16-22, 2007. [www.hcnet.usp.br/ipq/revista/vol34/sl/en/16.html](http://www.hcnet.usp.br/ipq/revista/vol34/sl/en/16.html) (accessed on 17/07/2008).
- LASCH, C. *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1991.
- LAUGHLIN, C. *Shamanism as neurotheology and evolutionary psychology* by Winkelman, M. American Behavioral Scientist, Vol 45 No. 12, August 2002: 1875-1887. Sage Publications, 2002.
- MacQUARRIE, J. *Martin Heidegger*. Virginia: John Knox press, 1968.

- MARKS, I.M. *Fears, Phobias and Rituals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. New York, 1987.
- PONTY, Merleau. *The Merleau Ponty aesthetics reader: philosophy and painting*. Evanston: Northwest University press, 1962.
- O'DELL, K. *Contract with the skin. Masochism performance art and the 1970's*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- PEJIC, B Abramović, M. 1998. *Artist body*. Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1995.
- POLIFRONI, E and Welch, M. *Perspectives on Philosophy of Science in Nursing*. Philadelphia: Lippencott, Williams and Wilkins, 1999.
- RABIL, A. *Merleau Ponty: Existentialist of the social world*. New York: Columbia, University press, 1967.
- RICOEUR, P. *Time and narrative*: Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1984.
- RICOEUR, P. *The Hermeneutical theory of Paul Ricoeur*. London: Fordham University press, 1989.
- RICOEUR, P. *The unity and rupture of existence in Traces of understanding: A profile of Heidegger's and Ricoeur's hermeneutics* by Bourgeois, P. L. and Schalow, F. Würzburg: Köningshausen and Neumann, 1990.
- SALIM K. and GASKILL I. *Performance and Authenticity in the Arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- SIRMANS, F. *Neo Hoo Doo Art for a Forgotten Faith*, New Haven and London: Yale University press, 2008.
- SPECTOR, N. *The Cremaster Cycle*. Cologne: Museum Ludwig. *stage*. Sunday Independent 22 March 1998: [Sp] 2002.
- TUCKER, M. *Dreaming with open eyes*. San Francisco: Aquarian/Harper, 1992.
- Van GENNEP, A. *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge, 1960.
- VISCHER, T. *Cremaster I Matthew Barney*. Basel: Museum für Gegenwartskunst, 1998.
- WALSH, R. *The world of shamanism, new views on an ancient tradition*. Woodbury Minnesota: Lwellyn Publications, 2007.
- WINKELMAN, M. *Neural ecology of consciousness and healing*, Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 2000.
- WINKELMAN, M. *Shamanism as neurotheology and evolutionary psychology*. American Behavioral Scientist, Vol 45 No. 12, August 2002. Sage Publications: 1875-1887. <http://www.sagepublications.com>, 2002.
- WINKELMAN, M. *Shamanism and cognitive evolution*. Cambridge Archaeological Journal 12:1, Cambridge: Mc Donald Institute for archeological research: pp.71-101, 2002.