

How and Why Do Contemporary Artists Relate to the Figure of the Shaman?

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Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the link between the contemporary artist and the figure of the shaman and to consider the potential benefits of fostering this link. This will be attempted through a comparative analysis of the common roots and similarities in function and role within society of art and shamanism in a broader sense and more specifically as these are found in the work of three contemporary artists. Art has been since the emergence of civilization, one of three fundamental constants in society, along with spirituality and science¹. Joseph Beuys described as “the science of freedom”² and it has been a focal point in every culture since the beginning of recorded history.

Chapter One starts with a quick historical overview of Shamanism followed by a distinguishing of five key elements of the practice. Then, referring back to the historical origins of artistic practice I will illustrate its original connection to shamanic practice, as an important tool for many of its goals and functions. Following this, I will consider the ways in which

¹ (history and economics emerging as separate contexts later on, as social structures evolve and complexify).
See Louwrien Wijers and Johan Pijnappel, *Art Meets Science And Spirituality In A Changing Economy*, (London: Academy Editions, 1990).

² Joseph Beuys and Volker Harlan, *What Is Art?: Conversation With Joseph Beuys* (Forest Row: Clairview Books, 2007), p 10.

the five elements of shamanic practice outlined before, could be said to manifest in artistic practice.

Even when it is not done consciously art can still be said to be inadvertently performing many of the functions of shamanism within contemporary society. This not an entirely new idea of course and there is a reason for this: the creation of art is linked to a really basic human need for processing the inner experience and expressing it outward; a need that can often be spiritual in nature.

In Chapter Two, the artistic practices of selected artists Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic, and Marcus Coates, will be examined through their performance works and connections made between their respective approaches and the key elements of shamanic practice most prominent in those works, as described in Chapter One. German artist **Joseph Beuys** (1921-1986), worked across many disciplines (from drawing and sculpture to performance and happenings) and was also an art theorist and pedagogue, associated with the Fluxus group³. Serbian performance artist **Marina Abramovic**

³ Fluxus was an international and most importantly interdisciplinary network of artists that was to be the radical innovation machine of the art world: their goal being to break boundaries between art disciplines, as well as between art and everyday life. See Rothfuss Joan, "Essay on Fluxux", 2005, accessed at http://www.walkerart.org/collections/artists/fluxus/artworks?has_image=false&gclid=CjwKEAajw86e4BRCnzuWGlpjLoUcSJACaHG55P_QhuABDIrKTZFCFRgg7tyeVn01iRzuZsW5hbQTXpBoCrsLw_wcB, 30/1/18

(1946-), who lives and works as an international nomad, with Belgrade, Amsterdam and New York (in chronological order) being the cities when she was based the longest. Her work deals with facing and conquering fears, transcending limitations of body and mind.

London born and based artist **Marcus Coates** is also an ornithologist and naturalist. Both those bodies of knowledge directly inform and inspire his work as he experiments with different ways to relate to animals/insects and natural elements.

Finally, I will contrast and compare their different approaches in the Conclusion and evaluate what the investigative process of this dissertation amounts to, on a personal level and beyond it.

Chapter 1

What is shamanism.

Shamanism⁴ originates in the depths of the Paleolithic Era of the Stone Age and it has changed little over the millennia. It is considered by many as the world's oldest religion⁵ but in nature, vastly differs from how we have been experiencing organized religion since the relatively recent beginning of recorded history, around the last 6000-7000 years, starting with the first empires since the time of the Sumerians. As a spiritual practice, it is based on direct experience and so can be said to go beyond the dogmatism that organized religions tend to promote and foster. It is also a pan anthropic phenomenon, emerging independently in all corners of the world. Local flavor and traditions may vary, but its main elements are the same, making its relevance more or

⁴ The origin of the word shaman is hard to pinpoint as one can find etymological roots in the languages of many Eurasian cultures: in Russian шамán (*šamán*), from Evenki or Tungus Siberian language, шамāн (*šamān*), самāн (*samān*, possibly derived from the root ша- ("to know"), or is a loan-word from Tocharian B *šamāne* ("monk") or Chinese 沙門 (*shāmén*, "Buddhist monk"), in the German *Schamane*, in Sanskrit from Palisamaṇa from श्रमण (*śramaṇa*, "ascetic, monk, devotee"), deriving from श्रम *śrama*, "weariness, exhaustion; labor, toil; etc.", which would make this a doublet of *Sramana*. See Wiktionary accessed at <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/shaman>, accessed at 6/2/17

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Introduction to Shamanism: Archaic Techniques Of Ecstasy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), xix.

less universal.⁶ We can distinguish the main elements as follows:

It is a method of directly accessing through **altered states of consciousness**, the source we all come from, the Collective Unconscious or the spirit realm in order to obtain information that pertains to healing, environmental and esoteric insight. The shaman is a “technician of ecstasy”⁷ who can reach what lies beyond the immediate and the everyday, tap into something deeper than the human self (or ego), seeing the underlying forces and energies that drive and affect it and uses that knowledge for healing or otherwise benefiting others. The gateway or the vehicle, to the sacred and other subtle realms the shaman travels through, is in fact the Imagination.⁸

Shamanism is based on **Animism**, which is the belief that every single thing in the universe is infused with a spirit; a consciousness with its own essence and right to exist. In this animated, soul-infused universe, the task of the shaman is to

⁶ Joan Halifax, *Shamanic Voices: A Survey Of Visionary Narratives* (New York: Arkana, published by the Penguin Group, 1991), p 3.

⁷ Mark Levy, *Technicians of ecstasy: Shamanism and the modern artist*.

⁸ Terence McKenna, “Imagination is a Portal” lecture, 00:00-00:49, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2tD8Tmr10M>, 5/5/17

connect through trance, intuition and imagination, to the spirits of nature and it's elements, the animals, the ancestors and forces that affect this reality. It does this to extract knowledge about the nature of the universe and illnesses of the soul and body alike (as both are parts of the same whole). It is a practice based on reciprocity and respect for all energies, especially those unseen but not unfelt, learning from all. It emerged from nomadic hunter-gatherer cultures and to this day has a stronger hold over those as opposed to agricultural ones, since in the former human diet consists of animals with souls that have to be appeased and mediated with by a skilled representative, the shaman.⁹ (fig 1)

⁹ Halifax, Joan, *Shaman, The Wounded Healer*. New York: Crossroad, 1982, p 9.

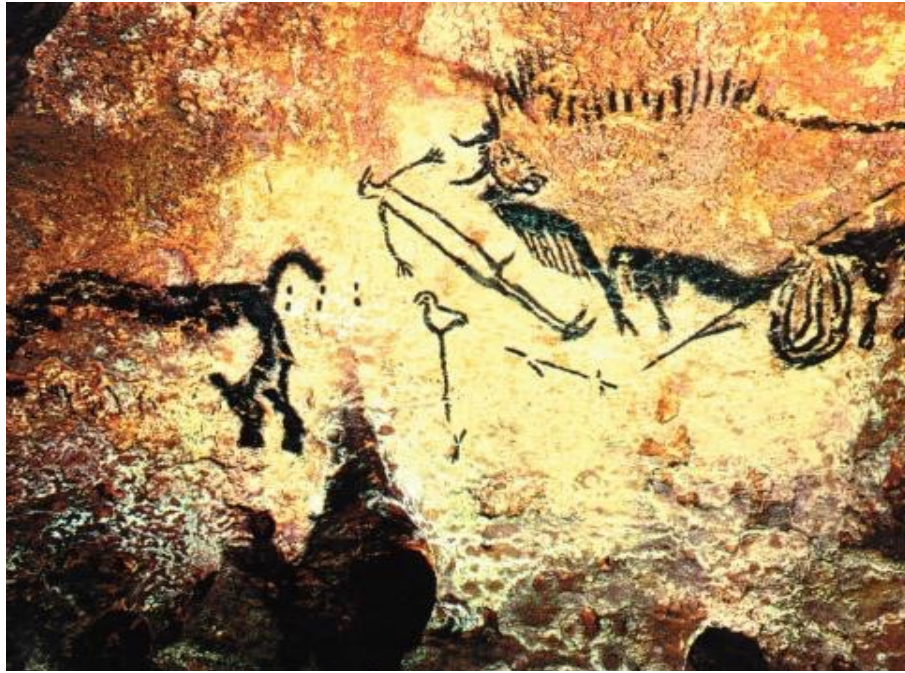


Fig 1: Cave Painting of Shaman in trance with wounded bison, Lascaux, France, circa 15.000-10.000 BC.¹⁰

Shamanism is focused on the **balancing of opposites**. Understanding the nature of duality that governs this existence, presenting itself in human life with contradictions, differences and conflicts (both internal and external) the shaman acts as a bridge between polarities, somehow harmonizing them in forming a poetic order out of the chaos of life. Such as the realms of the sacred and profane¹¹, ideas and matter, the living and the dead, sanity and madness, existential bliss and suffering, the male and the female, the

¹⁰ Shaman in trance with wounded bison, possibly negotiating with the energies pertaining to the spirit of the dead bison. See Eric Edwards, *Prehistoric Art and Totemic Belief, Shamanism and Fertility Ritual*, 24/07/2013, accessed at <https://ericwedwards.wordpress.com/2013/07/24/prehistoric-art-totemic-belief-and-shamanistic-practice/>

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, Introduction to *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques Of Ecstasy*, Xii

self and the other, the conscious self and its shadow¹², the individual and the collective. With the “shadow”, I am referring to the Jungian conceptualization of the hidden parts of the self, rejected by the “ego” or the conscious self. It often includes “negative”, darker aspects of the self, though not exclusively. Any aspect of self not faced and thus not integrated, results in blockages, blind spots and imbalance of the total system of an individual or society, to varying degrees. What’s more, in terms of psychological and spiritual maturing, balancing the male and female energy within is a very important process. Jung spoke of this through his theory on the anima (female aspect within the male) and animus (male aspect within the female) aspect of the human psyche, which when not integrated hide in the Shadow, causing imbalance. ¹³ For a shaman, this balancing of opposites is an initiatory process that is required before ascending to full power. As a result, there are many accounts and depictions (in text art and oral tradition) of the shaman as a transgendered

¹² Steve Page, Introduction to *The Shadow And The Counsellor Working With Darker Aspects Of The Person, Role And Profession* (London: Routledge, 1999), p 2-4.

¹³ Steve Page, Introduction to *The shadow and the counsellor working with darker aspects of the person, role and profession* (London: Routledge, 1999), p 2.

entity, metaphorically or rather metaphysically, which often reflected also in their physicality. ¹⁴

Another focus is **transformation through/from suffering**.

To understand deeply the human condition, the shaman learns from *direct personal experience* and strives to transcend the obstacles, fears and blockages created by suffering, in order to heal the human psyche/soul. A spiritual death is necessary to move towards enlightenment, where old self essentially “dies” to create the new in a symbolic process of *Initiation*. ¹⁵

Art (music, performance, painting, dance, costume making, any and all forms of art available) is used as a tool by the shaman in two ways. One is to process and make sense of their experiences, visions, insights, ideas and then to communicate them to others in a way that other forms of communication never could, the other is to facilitate their ritual and healing practice, creating an immersive environment with the subliminal messaging and effects on the audience/patients required for the occasion. From the healing

¹⁴ Joan Halifax, *Shamanic Voices: A Survey Of Visionary Narratives*, p 22-23.

¹⁵ Joan Halifax, *Shamanic Voices: A Survey Of Visionary Narratives* (New York: Penguin, 1979), p 4-5.

of the psyche, the genuine exploration and fulfilling of human potential is made possible.¹⁶

The overall context of shamanic practice is that of **public service**. The shaman is tasked to use all skills, knowledge and methods described above for the benefit of their community, tending to the needs of the bodies, minds and souls of their members. This is achieved through direct healing or *energy work*, *ritual practice* and the *didactic power of Myths and archetypal stories* which act as guidance maps on how to live and understand the world. The type of society/ community the shaman historically functions within and supports is the tribe; a closely knit, self-sustainable and thus independent unit. The role of the shaman in their society other than healer of the body and the soul is that of a consultant, facilitator and guide to the ones in need or interest (instead of enforcer) a kind of “*sacred politician*”.¹⁷ Myths are integral parts of culture, so as culture itself evolves they have to do the same, or manifest themselves anew, so their lessons live on, which is important to maintain historical continuity whilst at the same time progress in relation to the

¹⁶ Claire Dunne, Carl Jung: wounded healer of the soul (New York: Watkins, published in association with the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, 2015), p 44 and p 83-85.

¹⁷ Halifax, *Shaman: The Wounded Healer*, p 5.

past.¹⁸ So as much as is connected to history and tradition, shamanism in essence is also greatly based on self-reliance direct experience and intuition. The development of “Intuitive thinking”¹⁹ is important for shaman and artist alike in how they are able to help their organically evolving communities and the individuals within them. Moreover, the material of one’s personal life to the full, can perform the same function of archetypal storytelling or myth, upon which another can project, get release and learn from.²⁰

¹⁸ Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, “The Power of Myth: The Hero with a Thousand Faces”, 00:00-2:37, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGx4llppSgU&list=PLePFb3rlFbw4G1aPfn-9HIH5epz0vFXKq>, 14/1/18

¹⁹ Ulrich Rösch, Foreword to *We Are The Revolution!: Rudolf Steiner, Joseph Beuys and the threefold social impulse*. Forest Row: Temple Lodge, 2013, p 2-3.

20 Joseph Campbell, “Myth As the Mirror for the Ego”, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgOUxlCCHoA&index=3&list=PLePFb3rlFbw4G1aPfn-9HIH5epz0vFXKq>, 4/2/18

Chapter 2

The Shaman in the Artist: Tracing common origins and parallels between artistic and shamanic practice.

“The prototypic figure for the artist (as well as for the scientist) is the Shaman...”

Terrence McKenna²¹

The first evidence of Art also has its origins in the Paleolithic: the first cave paintings and portable artifacts. Looking back to the origins of symbolic thought, at the first evidence of human culture, artistic practice emerged as manifestation of and a tool for, spiritual/ shamanic practice, different kinds of ritual (initiation, fertility, hunting, death etc), communication of ideas, education as well as decoration of utilitarian objects. The aesthetic was used in delivering its impact, for whatever function the art was serving. The effect of patterns and desire for symmetry is something most of the animal kingdom shares in varying degrees.²² In fact, most art

²¹ Terence McKenna, “The Shaman and The Artist” lecture, 00:00-00:30, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KB-nXSWr1Q>, 28/5/17

²² Zoï Kapoula and Marine Vernet, *Aesthetics and neuroscience: scientific and artistic perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), p 304.

was related to a cult or otherwise a specific aspect of spiritual practice. The cave paintings most likely were there to facilitate the initiations of boys into manhood and the world of the Hunt, and the little Venus statuettes with fertility and worship of the Goddess, something easy to imagine from their exaggerated forms.²³ (fig 2)



Fig 2: *Mother Goddess figurines of the Paleo and Neolithic periods, 28.000-15.000 BC.*

Defining art, its use and “purpose” has long been contested and there are as many answers as people interested

²³Edwards Eric, *Prehistoric Art and Totemic Belief, Shamanism and Fertility Ritual.*

in the question. Academic perspectives for example are not inclusive of aspects and uses of art related to spirituality or the reason behind the intense compulsion to make it. _

An example would be the definition given by my first university art-history teacher (also a curator) : ‘an Art object is a thing defined by it’ s lack of useful/utilitarian application’ and though many students (myself included, though part of me also could not deny the truth of his statement phrased as such) were indignant, though none was able to provide a coherent and irrefutable counter-argument.

Hand in hand with my old professor’s perspective, is the mentality of “Art for Art’s sake”. Seemingly devotional at surface level, it creates in fact a very isolated way for art and artists to operate, removed from a greater social context and sense of mission. It presents the idea of art being “useful”, in service of something beyond itself seem almost taboo. But most primitive societies, did/do not differentiate between art and other parts of human existence. Some (like the Maori) do not even have a name for it as it is woven into the fabric of life, not a specialized and separate segment reserved only for the few, irrelevant to the rest. ²⁴

²⁴ John Lane and Satish Kumar, *Images Of Earth And Spirit: The Resurgence Art Anthology*: edited by John Lane (St. Mabyon: Resurgence, 2003), p 8.

The tendency to create through transforming matter/ material, to decorate and beautify, to manifest the contents of the imagination, is a basic human instinct that attests to the human animal's unique search and creation of higher purpose. To transcend the familiar, the old, into the new and surprising, more beautiful, complex and refined. The very instinct to realize that potential presents itself as an emotional, mental and ultimately spiritual or existential need. Art can be, and is for many artists, analogous to spiritual practice, both in terms of creating and experiencing it. Further testament to this fact is Outsider Art perhaps more aptly named Art Brut (= raw art) by unorthodox French painter and sculptor Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) who said "a spontaneous outpouring from the wellspring of creativity is the mark of true art".²⁵ In the act of spontaneous and unconscious creation there seems to be a tapping into something deeper than the self and ordinary reality, which in itself is both fulfilling and even facilitate in psychological healing.

²⁵ Mainly referring to art created out of pure instinct and necessity by people who do not necessarily have conscious aspirations to become "practicing fine artists", most poignantly mental asylum patients. See *Turning the Art World Inside Out*, BBC Imagine, 2013, 16:33-18:24, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98RUUhVgLR0>, 17/1/18

The basis and driving force of artistic creation by shamans on the one hand, has to do with understanding of the mysteries of the universe and making sense of the shamanic experience (fig 3). On the other, with the manifestation of the visions, of the mind and its power, communication of emotion, or idea/insight as esoteric sacred teachings, or teachings about life in general, for the benefit of others.

Fig 3: *Cave painting depicting a shaman's spirit-state, origin unknown. circa 15.000-10.000 BC.*



Many contemporary artists are still driven by the very same forces. The artistic impulse has also an inherently prophetic quality; an ability to reach beyond time, something observed by both

Abramovic ²⁶ and the founder of analytical psychology Carl G. Jung. Jung, beyond a psychiatrist/psychoanalyst was a polymath, studied in anthropology, archaeology, literature, philosophy and religious studies, all of which informed his

²⁶ Johnny Adams on Marina Abramović: "I've always been a soldier", June 13, 2012, accessed at <http://the-talks.com/interview/marina-abramovic/>, 22/1/18

work on the human psyche. He is renowned for his work on the collective unconscious, which he explored through experimenting with himself and patients, analyzing archetypal symbols within dreams and artistic expression alike. He realized that *art was a medium through which the contents of the unconscious were spontaneously expressed as well as, a therapeutic tool.*²⁷ He was an artist himself and though never claiming the title of “artist”, he produced a series of complex illustrations for his Red Book manuscript, precisely for the function of making sense of esoteric visions and revelations (that came to him in a few intense years of his life), in ways that written language fell short of.²⁸ (fig 4, 5)

²⁷ Whitney Flanigan, *Jungian Analytic Art Therapy*, 22 October 2012, accessed at <https://prezi.com/qgcnvlhrcvxx/jungian-analytic-art-therapy>, 16/1/18

²⁸ A personal work that was kept private until recently, when it was fully digitized and published. See Professor Sonu Shamdasani, *Liber Novus: Jung's 'Red Book'*, UCL Centre for the History of Psychological Disciplines, London.



Fig 4: *The turning back of Atmavictu*, p 119.



Fig 5: *Philosophical Tree*, p 131.

The Red Book, by C.G Jung.

Beyond the motivations behind art-making, an artist's and a shaman's journey through life shares more common ground. Firstly, the gift bestowed upon both can be undeniably intense, often manifesting early, in childhood through puberty. When accepted and committed to, through initiatory ordeals or rites in case of the shaman and art school or a firm decision in the case of the artist, it comes with the responsibility of how best to use it. Unfortunately, contemporary cultures have grown poor in symbolic ritual and rites of passage, greatly contributing to disempowerment²⁹,

²⁹ Fran Parker, *Walkabout And Other Rites Of Passage*, by MyPassionIsBooks, January 4, 2011, accessed at <https://mypassionisbooks.wordpress.com/2011/01/04/walkabout-and-other-rites-of-passage-by-fran-parker/>, 1/2/18

but all obstacles an artist has to overcome can act in effect (unconsciously or consciously) as initiatory ordeals. Learning from direct experience, particularly through *suffering*, lies at the foundation of both shamanic and artistic practice. It comes in many forms: trauma, depression, oppression, addictions, reckless or self-harming behaviours etc. All that today classifies as “mental illness” or insanity, approached through a different perspective, can become a medium for learning and (spiritual) growth, consciously channelled into creative potential. The “link between creativity and madness” has long been noted by artists and art scholars alike.³⁰ In this respect, the artist’s and the shaman’s life journeys are parallel, as the whole coming-of-age-and-maturing-into-a-shaman process is very much the same: you only learn to be a healer after being broken/wounded yourself ³¹. Marina Abramovic clearly states in her Artist’s Life Manifesto: “the artist should suffer”³². Only the wounded can learn how to heal and that is a fair (and also inevitable in this context)

³⁰ Joseph J. Schildkraut and Aurora Otero, *Depression And The Spiritual In Modern Art: Homage To Miró* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), p 2-13.

³¹ Claire Dunne, *Carl Jung: Wounded Healer Of The Soul*, see title.

³² Marina Abramović, “An Artist’s Life Manifesto”, 02:39-03:00, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTH4wYhWH54>, 7/9/2017

price.³³ Walking the tightrope between sanity and insanity, chaotic despair and numinous bliss is not something one outgrows, but learns to do more efficiently and with more grace, throughout their life and practice.

An excerpt from “The Power of Myth”, a conversation between American journalist and political commentator Bill Moyers and mythologist, writer/lecturer and researcher of comparative religion Joseph Campbell, illustrates the connection between shaman of old and the artist of today; how the latter acts as a manifestation of the former in contemporary society:

[MOYERS:] Who interprets the divinity inherent in nature for us today? Who are our shamans? Who interprets unseen things for us?

*[CAMPBELL:] It is the function of the artist to do this. The artist is the one who communicates myth for today. But he has to be an artist who understands mythology and humanity and isn't simply a sociologist with a program for you.*³⁴

³³ *The Story of Carl Gustav Jung*, hosted by Laurens van der Post and John Freedman, BBC Time Life Video, 1972, 39:58-40:14, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vl7CXyle7Jk>, 4/1/17

³⁴ Joseph Campbell, Bill D. Moyers, and Betty S. Flowers, *The power of myth* (Place of publication not identified: Turtleback Books, 2012), p 122.

One of the main art forms developed through and used by shamanic practice, is that of **performance**. Within the contemporary art history context, performance seems a relatively “new” and newly popularized art form. However, in the larger scope of human history, is as ancient as shamanism, used by shamans and similar practitioners in ritual practices the world over.

Ancient Greek “drama” for example, which led to the development of everything we know today as theatre performance, had this very goal: putting the viewer indirectly through the ordeals of the characters, thus achieving “catharsis” (a cleansing of the soul and relief of its burdens) in order to keep citizens and thus society, mentally healthy. It was both medicine for the soul and pleasure for the senses. the two were inseparable and this was equivalent to shamanic practice, incorporated within a social institution. Today, performance is the closest thing there is to rituals or rites (outside of organized religion context) if done with that awareness and many performance artists consider the performing state a hallowed trance. This played a big role in my choice of case studies, all of which were/are focused on performance and research shamanic practices, nature-worship rituals for inspiration, guidance and learning.

The definition given by M.Abramovic is:

“Performance is a mental and physical construction that the performer makes in a specific time and space in front of an audience and then an energy dialogue happens. The audience and the performer make the piece together”.³⁵

That collaboration is the same principle Marcel Duchamp identified, about how an artwork is completed in the mind of the observer ³⁶ even more integral to live art thus stressing its importance. It requires the direct involvement of the audience thus transporting them into the trance state the artist is in, coming out the other side of it transformed (hopefully for the better) as the artist is definitely transformed; one of the key functions of shamanic practice as described above.

Similar to shamanic practice, art practice can and does (to varying degrees) operate within a social service context as well, either consciously or inadvertently. Unlike the locally

³⁵ Marina Abramovic, “An art made of trust, vulnerability and connection”, Ted talk, accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4so_Z9a_u0, 29/3/17

³⁶ Moira Roth and Jonathan D. Katz, *Difference, Indifference: Musings On Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp And John Cage* (Amsterdam: G B arts international, 1998), p 73.

based tribe however, the community an artist now operates in, is the international community with an active interest in the arts and as far as the art itself (or documentation of it) can reach. The contemporary artist is called upon to take on a large part of the traditional duties of shamans for their community. For example, bringing awareness, pointing out wrongs and finding creative ways to possible solutions. thus facilitating social healing and the reach for the inner self that is greatly needed by most yet remains elusive. Art can help to free the mind of it's culturally inherited restrictions, of blockages so ingrained in the collective psyche that are considered the norm and facilitate breakthroughs towards what Terrence McKenna aptly called Novelty.³⁷ It can also help restore a sense of "magic" over the banality of predetermined, societally enforced life-paths. Through personal experience and investigation of one's own consciousness and creative potentiality, enables one to tap into the collective consciousness. As Irish poet and occultist W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) describes appropriately:

"I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we
have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the
evocation of spirits (though I do not know what they

37 Terence McKenna, "Novelty Theory explained in seven minutes ", published on 17 July 2013, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vP5OCPNfjg>, 14/2/18

are), in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed and I believe I that the borders of our minds are ever shifting and that many minds can flow into one another and create and reveal as it were a single mind, as single energy... and that our memories are part of one great memory, the memory of nature herself.”³⁸

This directly relates to Carl G. Jung’s theories on the collective unconscious and how it functions ³⁹. The aim of this would be a remedy against the adverse effects of materialist-reductionism and nihilism on the psyche and the existential boredom that comes with taking life and everything in it for granted, that a lot of the developed world experiences today. Focusing only on material needs and affairs, neglecting the spiritual aspects of the psyche, results in a kind of mutilation Jung observed, as he found the spiritual to be an integral part of human nature.⁴⁰

³⁸ William Butler Yeats, *Essays and introductions* (New York: Collier Books, 1968), p 28.

³⁹ C. G. Jung, W. S. Dell, and Cary F. Baynes, *Modern Man In Search Of A Soul* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2017).

⁴⁰ Claire Dunne, *Carl Jung: Wounded Healer Of The Soul*, p12-13.

Furthermore, the figure of the shaman serves as a good role-model for the contemporary artist because he/she may be a specialist in the arts of ecstasy and trance, but also a *generalist*. Delving into many disciplines, practices and bodies of knowledge enables one to make new connections between them, combining them creatively, into a holistic system of understanding.⁴¹ This enables both a fuller personal experience of life as well as an optimum contribution to society. Fine examples of multi-disciplinary intellectuals (polymaths) in history make aforementioned Carl Jung and the obvious Leonardo Da Vinci - an embodiment of the renaissance concept of “homo universalis” - and most alchemists of that age.⁴² One of the fundamental alchemical principles “**solve et coagula**” is a formula required for a wholesome practice and can be applied to art and culture itself: “Solve” means deconstruction, the reductionism necessary to tackle complex issues step by step, which as one can observe from recent history, aids the evolution of technological progress. But this is only half the process. “Coagula” is the synthesis of the isolated pieces again into a coherent unity, now much better understood due to the deconstruction

⁴¹ Joan Halifax, *Shamanic voices: a survey of visionary narratives*, p 3-4.

⁴² Arthur Greenberg, *From alchemy to chemistry in picture and story* (Hoboken: Wiley-Interscience, 2007), p 98, 125, 381, 327, 625.

process.⁴³ It is also an example of a method for balancing opposites, one of the key elements found in shamanic practice as described in Chapter One.

Having explored the common ground and parallel development of shamanic and artistic practice, I shall be examining further how the three chosen artists apply a shamanic function and quality in their practice for the benefit both of themselves and their audience.

⁴³ D. Vylenz and M. Winkler, *The Mindscape of Alan Moore*, Shadowsnake Films, 2005, 50:50 - 51:50, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moRkHk-q9Rg>

Chapter 3:

How and why are elements of shamanic practice integrated in the work of artists Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic and Marcus Coates.

Before going into specifics I will first outline some general common ground between the respective practices of these artists. They all use the body as a medium and platform for expressing ideas, working with the voice, movement, repetition and exertion, working with its limitations and potential. They also work with the potential of the mind, thought and imagination, their limitations and projections. The body is at the same time a pan anthropic symbol, the home and vehicle we all have. They bring an awareness of mortality in their work in a way that attempts to lead to empowerment. They approach core human issues about spirituality, sense of purpose, love, fear and death and the value of experiential learning, which attests to their sense of responsibility akin to that found in shamanic practice. Finally, another common feature is that they endeavor to reach a broader audience beyond the relatively niche confines of the art world.

Joseph Beuys

Joseph Beuys was remembered for his ideas more than any specific artwork. He stood for a broadened definition of Art⁴⁴, proclaiming that “every man is an artist” whilst considering his teaching as his “greatest work of art”⁴⁵. His intent was to instill a sense of responsibility in everyone, to consciously engage in what he called “Social Sculpture”⁴⁶. He often related everything his work and theories back to sculpture, using sculpture as a metaphor for plasticity, so with the term Social Sculpture he meant to show how the forming and reforming of society can be a creative, and even artistic enterprise, in which everyone should take part.⁴⁷ Beuys was a good example of a **generalist**, deeply interested in philosophy, anthropology, anthroposophy, religious studies and natural sciences, all of which inform his work, giving it a larger scope and breadth of relevance. Interestingly enough, he was considering becoming a scientist or medical professional

⁴⁴ Beuys, Joseph, and Volker Harlan, introduction to *What Is Art?: Conversation With Joseph Beuys*, East Sussex: Clairview Books, 2010. ix

⁴⁵ Mark Levy, *Technicians of ecstasy: Shamanism and the modern artist* (Norfolk, CT: Bramble Books, 1993), p 235.

⁴⁶ Beuys, Joseph, and Volker Harlan, introduction to *What Is Art?: Conversation With Joseph Beuys*, ix

⁴⁷ Joseph Beuys and Volker Harlan, *What Is Art?: Conversation With Joseph Beuys*, p 1.

before deciding to become an artist, as he felt he could accomplish more in his life in terms of social change that way. He researched ancient mythologies/traditions and the natural sciences alike, his “actions” (what he called his performances) were often symbolic rituals aimed at teaching and social healing.

At the base of his practice lies a personal myth, analogous of a **shamanic initiatory ordeal**. He was a pilot in the II World War and in 1943, he crashed in the Crimea region between German and Russian fronts and was rescued by nomadic Tartar tribesmen, who covered him in animal fat and wrapped him with grey felt to insulate him and help him his body heat regenerating. He uses this story and relates himself to a shamanic figure in order to create a meaningful metaphor:

“My intention is obviously not to return to such earlier cultures but to stress the idea of transformation and of substance. That is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development, his nature is therapeutic.” ⁴⁸

From his initiatory ordeal, the mythological and symbolic significance of his use of the materials of fat and felt becomes

⁴⁸ Mark Levy, *Technicians of ecstasy: Shamanism and the modern artist* (Norfolk, CT: Bramble Books, 1993), p 234.

clearer. Fat is symbolic of energy storage and felt of protection, being simultaneously representational of connectivity and order emerging from chaos; a network of strands that is random but the more it is agitated the stronger it becomes. Copper is used for its conductive and healing properties, but also symbolically represented the **feminine energy** due to its receptivity. In his speeches, writings and overall philosophical stance, he stressed the fact that a big part of modern society's destructive and oppressive tendencies was caused and perpetuated by the systematic suppression of the feminine, the energy, values and priority systems that come with it: thinking of the future, of progeny and maintaining a stable nurturing environment for them and for all, in a humane, economical, ecological, non-territorial way. He advocates that **re-empowering the feminine energy** in the world is vital for social healing to take place⁴⁹ and with good reason. After centuries of perpetual patriarchal domination, which came as the "antithesis" stage in terms of the Hegelian Dialectic, ⁵⁰ if one considers the "thesis" stage to be the Goddess worship of antiquity, there needed to be a

⁴⁹ Rooney L. Kara, *Process 1971-1985: The Art of Joseph Beuys*, exhibition catalogue, Rooster Gallery, 2014, p 5-6.

50 Claudia Merrill, "Hegel's Pendulum Swing Theory", July 7, 2007, accessed at <https://www.claudiamerrill.com/blog/hegelpendulumswingtheor>, 20/1/18

rigorous re-empowering of the feminine again in order to finally arrive to the “synthesis” stage which would be the harmonious balance of the two within society.

The two “actions” bellow, I feel best represent the complex way in which his practice links to various elements of shamanism. It is worth noting that in both of those he was sectioned off in a completely separate space to the audience, who could only view the actions through glass windows (in the first) and metal fencing (in the second).

With **“How to explain pictures to a dead hare”** (1965), performed in his first solo exhibition (fig 6), came his wider recognition in the art world. He spent 3 hours prior to letting the audience in already communicating with the dead animal, sinking deeper into the performing trance-state. To facilitate and maintain his trance state he used the tapping of the iron sole tied to his right foot on the floor. The hare is Beuys’s personal totem animal, one he most identified with and a symbol of immortality/rebirth. Being dead however, it also signifies the damage caused by mankind upon the natural world and the life forms that share it. He hints at the need for healing this damage and returning to the interconnectedness of the fabric of life through the merging of honey and gold on his head. Honey is the product of an ideally collaborative

super society, the bee hive, and the gold an alchemical symbol of pure consciousness. The two substances bond together to form a revitalising agent against the deathly and sterile qualities of human thought, which can be both the greatest asset as well as the downfall of the human species.⁵¹ All his “explaining” to the dead hare was of course void of words but eloquent in symbolic gestures, in an attempt to go beyond the limitations of language and human intellectualism.

“I think nowadays, there’s a deep misunderstanding amongst people that art should be understood through logical sentences. The work of art enters into the person and the person internalises the work of art as well, it has to be possible that these two completely sink into each other ... Art enters into the person and the person enters into the work of art, no?”⁵²

Fig 6: Joseph Beuys, *How to explain pictures to a dead hare*, 1965, Gallery Schmela, Düsseldorf, Germany, photographed by Ute Klopheus.

⁵¹ Mark Levy, *Technicians Of Ecstasy: Shamanism And The Modern Artist*, p 239- 241.

⁵² Olivia Laing, *Fat, felt and a fall to Earth: the making and myths of Joseph Beuys*, The Guardian, last modified 30 January 2016, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jan/30/fat-felt-fall-earth-making-and-myths-joseph-beuys>, 19/1/18



In his action “I like America and America Likes me” (1974), he flew to New York and wrapped in his signature grey felt, driven in an ambulance to the Rene Block Gallery. He remained enclosed in the space

with a wild coyote for 3

days, then exited the country in the same way, never setting foot on it’s soil. The coyote, an important totem animal for Native American cultures (especially the Pueblo), is a trickster and transformer spirit, intelligent, resourceful and playful, a symbol of a shift in balance. It also managed to not only survive the ruthless systematic extermination program waged by the US state, but even thrive in spite of it. Their co-existence for three days, was a gradual familiarizing process.

At first wary, Coyote⁵³ tore his felt cloak to shreds (fig 7) but by the end it had grown comfortable, even playful. ⁵⁴



Fig 7: Joseph Beuys, *I like America and America Likes me*, Rene Block Gallery, New York, 1974.

Beuys repeated intermittently a specific sequence of symbolic gestures and movements, using his shepherd's staff and grey felt, thrice hitting a metal triangular percussion symbol (fig8) and so on, manipulating the pace and passage of time, always holding eye contact with Coyote. Other sometimes he simply sat and communicated with it in words or thoughts and energy.

⁵³ I write Coyote with a capital C as in this case it is not about the individual anima personally. The animal in the room represent a symbolic and energetic principle with its own character, personality and history and it is treated by Beuys as such.

⁵⁴ Strauss, David Levi., and Hakim Bey. *Between dog & wolf: essays on art and politics in the twilight of the millennium*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2010.



Fig 8: Joseph Beuys, *I like America and America Likes me*, Rene Block Gallery, New York, 1974.

This action was done with a symbolic healing in mind.
Beuys said

“I believe I made contact with the psychological trauma point of the United States’ energy constellation: the whole trauma with the Indian...”⁵⁵

He referred to the persecution of the Natives populations and all their culture stood for and dominating the nature and animals they used to protect and revere. To this day there is still continuing assimilation, destruction of cultural heritage,

⁵⁵ Mark Levy, *Technicians Of Ecstasy: Shamanism And The Modern Artist*, p 241- 244.

segregation and inequality.⁵⁶ Much work remains to be done but the action of Beuys remains a beacon pointing forwards, as both inspiration and reminder.

All such symbolic actions we done as part pedagogic exercise part ritual intended to send its intentionality outward in a ripple effect and in doing so, would hopefully aid in the healing of collective trauma.⁵⁷ At the same time, they were very abstract and perplexing for most audiences of his time, in particular in the USA where he was hardly noticed, presumably also because his broadened art practice was uncategorizable in relation to the major art waves of minimalism and conceptual art sweeping the USA at the time.⁵⁸ Being challenging, unorthodox and mystifying, in conjunction with having a strong social message, was what made his work compelling and stand the test of time.

Beuys was ever the teacher and beyond the classroom he frequently gave passionate talks and lecture tours presenting

⁵⁶ David Levi. Strauss and Hakim Bey, *Between Dog & Wolf: Essays On Art And Politics In The Twilight Of The Millennium* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2010).

⁵⁷ Saul, Jack. Introduction to *Collective Trauma, Collective Healing: Promoting Community Resilience In The Aftermath Of Disaster*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), p 3.

⁵⁸ Claudia Mesch, Introduction to *Joseph Beuys: The Reader* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), p 15.

his ideas. It was one of the overarching principle of his life's work around social healing, progress and reform. Education and healing are pre-requisites for both social and personal progress. He was also founder of Germanys' Green party, approaching politics as yet another part of his overall creative practice; a tool for much needed social healing and rebuilding, after the devastation of World Wars and the war in Vietnam. In a way he was embodying the aspect of the shaman that acts as "sacred politician"⁵⁹ and teacher, trying to form a system of: education-through-art and art-as-education. He envisioned and advocated for an idealistic evolution of society where art and creativity was the capital (fig 9).⁶⁰ Idealism no matter what its' faults, plays an important function in both the individual and collective psyche. Through reaching for the ultimate ideal, gets one a lot closer to it than striving for any "realistic" compromise ever would.

⁵⁹ Claudia Mesch, Introduction to *Joseph Beuys: The Reader*, p 21.

⁶⁰ Wijers, Louwrien, *Art Meets Science and Spirituality In a Changing Economy*, p 1.

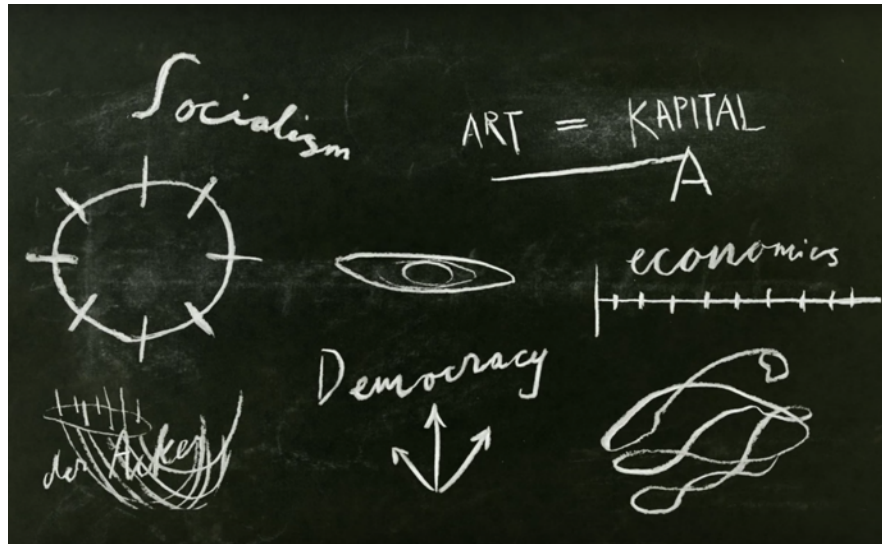


Fig 9: Notes on a blackboard from a lecture by Joseph Beuys. Still from
 “Who is Joseph Beuys”, 2016.

With “7000 oaks”, shown in Documenta 7, 1982, Kassel Germany, Beuys invited volunteers to become active participants in creating positive urban change by planting - and after 10 years re-planting- 7000 oak saplings. Symbolically, oak is the Druids’ most holy tree, protector of the forest and gateway to the Otherworld.⁶¹ In this way Beuys was forging a link between the past, that informed the present and carried it into the future, with the growing of the oaks, ⁶² as well as experimenting with implementing his ideas on “social sculpture”.

⁶¹ Freeman Mara, *Tree Lore: Oak*, The Order of Bards and Druids, accessed at <https://www.druidry.org/library/trees/tree-lore-oak>, 7/1/18

⁶² Modern Art Oxford. Talk 1974, video lecture, 19 59:20-1:00:36, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=et89i3zq6JQ&t=2132s>, 5/1/18

The project “**Art meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy**” was conceived by Louwrien Wijers in meetings with Joseph Beuys (who unfortunately died before it’s realization) and the 14th Dalai Lama, between 1978 and 1982. It brought together scientists, artists, spiritual leaders and economists to discuss how re-connection and synergy between these fields, (the fundamental constants as mentioned in the introduction) can provide a more holistic vision for re-structuring contemporary society. An awakening of a not necessarily “religious” but spiritual and compassionate nature, could potentially put us again in accordance and harmony with the universe we live in, ourselves and each other. ⁶³

Helping to bridge the gaps between science, spirituality and how creativity is perceived, were scientists Francisco Varela (biologist, neuroscientist), Fritjof Capra (physicist), and Rupert Sheldrake, whose work and findings show the world

⁶³ Louwrien, *Art Meets Science And Spirituality In a Changing Economy*, p 7-13.

view of *animism* to be in accordance with science.⁶⁴ A view gaining increasing support from those within the scientific community unbiased by the dogma of materialist-reductionism. The work of R.Sheldrake on morphogenetic fields for example is pioneering in researching the nature of consciousness, reconnecting the field of science with a sense of the spirit within all things.⁶⁵ Beyond that even in the Contemporary Art world, through the effects the Internet has had upon our culture, this Animistic Worldview is making a resurgence in ever more unexpected ways that can be easily shared and spread.⁶⁶ Moreover, even after all the devastation of cultural, artistic and spiritual heritage, there is a resurgence and revival of native traditions and spiritual practices the world over, inspiring more and more

⁶⁴ See "Crisis of Perception", *Art Meets Science & Spirituality in a Changing Economy*, with Francisco Varela, Mother T. Bielecki, part 3 of 5, 1990, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Womauwdyjl8&feature=youtu.be>, 10/3/17 and "The Transforming World" (Rupert Sheldrake, Sogyal Rinpoche, Lawrence Weiner), *Art Meets Science & Spirituality in a Changing Economy*, part 4 of 5, 1990, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNkLOcKqh0Q>, 10/3/17

⁶⁵ Sheldrake Rupert, *Morphic Resonance and Morphic Fields - an Introduction*, accessed at <https://www.sheldrake.org/research/morphic-resonance/introduction>, 15/11/17.

⁶⁶ Will Rinehart, "The Enchantment of Code and the Rise of Technoanimism", Medium, Last modified January 18/2017, accessed at <https://medium.com/@willrinehart/the-enchantment-of-code-and-the-rise-of-technoanimism-2eff5850c960>, 25/1/18.

contemporary artists who in turn might also be discovering more about their own roots through this process.

Marina Abramovic

Marina Abramovic was also guest speaker in the fifth and final panel of *Art Meets Science & Spirituality in a Changing Economy*.⁶⁷ She researches Buddhism, eastern philosophies and the mindset and approach to life of other indigenous cultures, particularly ones with a still flourishing shamanic tradition. In travels to the east spending time with Tibetan monks and the Australian Outback with Aborigines she learns about their traditions mythologies and practices, drawing strength and inspiration. Then returns to the 'westernized world' as a cultural and spiritual bridge, weaving all she learned into her work, for the **benefit of the public** there.⁶⁸ Informed by her research she also created the "Abramovic Method"; a collected set of meditation and discipline techniques appropriated for the western world, aimed at clearing and focusing the mind, tuning it back into presence of the body. A more rigorous form of this method she uses in

⁶⁷ "The Shifting Paradigm", *Art Meets Science & Spirituality in a Changing Economy*, with Marina Abramovic, Fritjof Capra, Raimon Panikkar, part 5 pf 5, 1990, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O383LOPbALs>

⁶⁸ Marina Abramovic, *Cleaning the house* (London: Academy Editions, 1995).

educating young performers, preparing them to be receptive, open and more capable of challenging, long durational performance work. In many of her performance works she dissolves boundaries between herself and audiences, allowing for both spontaneous and deliberate interaction, making the work increasingly participatory.

Her most recent works are more based on meditative practices and energy-work rather than anything traditionally thought of as “art”.

Much of her work is based on tense **polarities**. She has two distinct and contrasting approaches to altered trance-like states in performance, in undergoing voluntary ordeals that test and push the limits of the body and the mind, in an effort to gain control of mainly the latter. On one side (in her earlier works most often) she uses extreme physical pain, even risking her own life. The element of danger and imminent physical harm is also a method of bringing both herself and audience immediately in the present, in a shared state of mind. A very effective one too as it triggers the fight-or-flight response in the mind and body in an inescapable, primal way.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Marina Abramovic et al., *Objects, performance, video, sound* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1995), p 21.

The other method is stillness through inaction, or repetition, which over long duration pushes through the threshold of boredom and exhaustion into a meditative trance. This coupled with the audiences' involvement makes for a rather intimate experience. In the first method she is active and in control of her actions, in the second she is in a state of passivity, vulnerability and surrender. In both however, her mission is to be in control of her mind. Moreover, both methods of ordeal through pain or exhaustion and stillness or long duration repetition, have been widely used to access trance and altered states for millennia.

One of the polarities most prominent in her earlier works, was that between the consciously presented **self and the Shadow**. **"Rhythm 0"** (1974) (fig 12), was an experiment with which to shed light to shadow aspects of a "normal" public, comprised of regular gallery-goers and people randomly invited from the street. Providing 72 objects on a table, she instructed the audience to use them on her in any way they wanted, declaring herself an "object" and assuming full responsibility, for six hours. The objects were clash of potentially harmful and benign; perfume, rose, razor, ax, bell, grapes, olive oil, feather, whips, chains etc, and a pistol with one bullet.



Fig 12: Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 0*, Studio Morra, Naples, 1974.

The actions of the audience at first were timid and reserved, things progressively escalated and became more and more violent. Her clothes were cut off, her body drawn on, her neck cut with the razor to drink her blood and the gun but in her hand, finger on the trigger and held to her head.⁷⁰

The piece received much negative criticism (in a way understandably so, considering it's passive-aggressive methodology), but was definitely successful in what it set out to do: to reveal the dangerous and destructive, shadow aspect of human nature when freed consequence. For the integration of the Shadow Self one must face both the darkest parts of themselves and the darker aspects in others. Especially an

⁷⁰ Marina Abramović and Chrissie Iles, *Marina Abramović: objects performance video sound* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1995), p 46.

artist, in order to challenge and ultimately benefit others through their work.

Another dichotomy found in her work is that of **Apollonian and Dionysian** elements. These terms are used by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to describe two different facets of Greek culture and art (particularly drama), applicable to art of any time. The Dionysian stands for ecstatic and primal revelations, hedonism, the unleashing of the unconscious; it can be frightening, mystical, chaotic. Apollonian stands for higher order prevailing over chaos (that is the Dionysian); the intellectual and “nobler” aspect, morality and mathematically harmonious aesthetics;⁷¹ it counterbalances the Dionysian, making it more coherent and bearable for the human psyche to face. “**Lips of Thomas**” (1975) (fig 10, 11) is one of the pieces that best illustrates this merging of this polarity in her work.⁷² She sits naked at a table, slowly consumes a kilo of honey, drinks a whole bottle of wine, breaks the glass with her hand, proceeds to cut the communist star on her stomach with a razor, whips herself until she can no longer feel pain

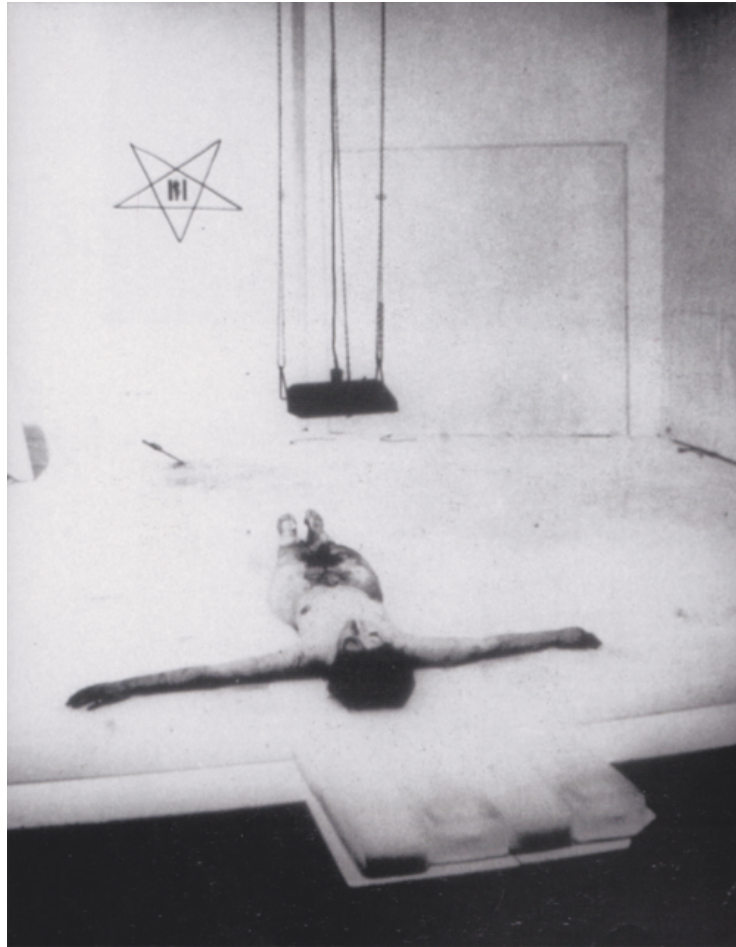
⁷¹ Amalia Pedemonte, Greek Mythology / Philosophy: “The Dichotomy Apollonian -Dionysian, according to Friedrich Nietzsche”, accessed at <https://aquileana.wordpress.com/2014/07/10/greek-mythology-philosophy-the-dichotomy-apollonian-dionysian-according-to-friedrich-nietzsche/>, last edited 07/10/2014.

⁷² Marina Abramovic et al., *Objects, performance, video, sound* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1995), p 45-47.

and finally lies on a cross made of ice with a heater pointing at her stomach, accelerating the bleeding. She remained there for over half an hour before the audience intervened pulling her away.



Fig 10, 11: Marina Abramovic, *Lips of Thomas*, Galerie krinzinger, Innsbruck, Austria, 1974.



In the **“Relation works”** (1976-1981) with Ulay, they merge **male and female energy** in an effort to transcend gender and ego identities, transforming into a greater androgynous whole they call “that self”, or “the Other”. Through this process, they often create an image where they face each other like a mirror, or face outward from a shared inner core. They push against their mental and physical limits, drawing energy from each other and the audience to go beyond them, embracing a paradoxically harmonious friction. One of their earliest such pieces is **“Relation in Space”** (1976), where they repeatedly

crash into each other like planets pulled by an ever intensifying gravitational force, representing opposite energies that meet each other on equal footing.⁷³



Fig 13: Marina Abramovic and Ulay, *Relation in Space*, Venice Biennale, 1976, Duration 59'37".

In “**Rest Energy**” (1980) however, their fusion is contrastingly directional. Stretching a single bow and arrow between them⁷⁴ with the arrow pointing at Abramovic’s heart. The bow and arrow has a symbolic significance in itself as both the artists are Sagittarius and born on the same exact date. Two microphones on both their chests transmit the

⁷³ Marina Abramovic, *Marina Abramovic: Fondazione Antonio Ratti* 2001 (Charta, 2002, p 32.

⁷⁴ Andrea Wrobel, “Review: Marina Abramovic and Ulay’s Rest Energy (1980)”, *Performance Art/Reviews*, last modified 7/6/13, accessed at <https://andreawrobel.com/2013/06/07/marina-abramovics-rest-energy-with-ulay-1980/> on 13/2/18.

sound of their intensifying heartbeats, creating and projecting the soundscape created by their shared trance state itself. Dynamics of vulnerability, surrender and trust, persists throughout her life's work.



Fig 14: Marina Abramovic and Ulay, *The Other: Rest Energy*, ROSC Festival, Dublin, 1980. Duration 4'10''.

“The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk” (1988) with Ulay, was intended to be a trial at the end of which (meeting in the middle of the Great Wall) they would marry. In the eight years it took to get permission to proceed, their relationship had disintegrated so instead of marrying they made their official

split. Using the Great Wall of China as a stage for their ordeal, Marina walking from the Yellow Sea and Ulay from the Gobi Desert (fig 15), reflects an awareness of the power of the place in terms of landscape and in relation to the world, history, symbolism and most of all energy:

“... the idea was that the Great Wall had been mapped out over millennia of its building by *feng shui* experts, so if you followed the wall exactly you would be touching the serpent power-lines that bind together the surface of the earth. It was a macrocosmic version of the *Relation Work* in which Marina and Ulay had slithered about the floor with serpents, trying to attune their energy.” ⁷⁵



Fig 15: Marina Abramović and Ulay, *The Lovers, The Great Wall Walk*, 1988, film still.

They insert themselves as foreign elements into unfamiliar territory, committing to walk alone for three whole months, absorbing and adapting to the surroundings. In itself this was a transformational process similar to initiation and coming of

⁷⁵ Marina Abramović and Chrissie Iles, *Marina Abramović: objects performance video sound* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1995), p 50.

age trials like the Walkabout of the Australian aborigines or the wandering into the desert of the Pueblo Indians, in order to undergo a transformation towards self-reliance, in one of nature's harshest environments. Doing this with the intention of a ceremonial goodbye (fig 16), marking an end and new beginning, adds another layer of transformation undergone.



Fig 16: Marina Abramović and Ulay, *The Lovers, The Great Wall Walk*, 1988.

This piece is a good example of how she uses her own personal story as an archetypal one, attempting through the total transparency of the highly personal to become universal; a mirror on which the audience can project. Through her own transformational and liberating experience, she endeavors to serve as proxy in helping others also liberate themselves from

fear of loss, pain, suffering or crippling mental impulses.⁷⁶

This is one of the fundamental ways through which art becomes public service.

The idea behind **“The Artist is Present”** (2010) is the amalgamation of an accumulated body of research and intuitive experimentation by Abramovic and all who have come before her who worked with meditation and the energy generated by total mind/body presence, using it to connect to another being. It is also a natural progression of one of her last of the works with Ulay, **“Night Sea Crossing”** (1981-1987) (fig 17).⁷⁷



Fig 17: Marina Abramovic and Ulay, *Night Sea Crossing*, 1981-1987.

⁷⁶ Marina Abramović, “An Art Made of Trust, Vulnerability and Connection”.

⁷⁷ Interesting to note the re-occurring contrast of red and blue as their colours of choice in dress in *The Lovers* and the particular *Night Sea Crossing* performance, as well as it’s reversal; a continuous play of opposites.

Mutual eye gazing has been a method used in both meditation practice and energetic healing work for a long time. It is a potentially very intimate and ego-dissolving practice, where one recognizes the other as inseparable from the self and thus being opened to greater awareness.⁷⁸ Doing this with someone one already familiar - like in “Night Sea Crossing” with Ulay, is easier. From the private and contained feedback loop with Ulay and in “Artist is Present”, doing this with strangers, created the premise for an openness of wordless understanding and flowing of unconditional love between artist and all of those that sat opposite.

Their experiences ranged from awkward (in those with the most resistance) to deeply emotional and profound (fig 18) as many people in a fast-paced, capitalist city like New York had never had a comparable experience before. The artist was turned into a conduit channeling this energy from the public and sending it outward again like fountain. The ceremonial context of performance provides makes such a

⁷⁸ Xisha Ma, *Popular religion and Shamanism* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p 247-248.

thing possible as she admits such things to be an impossibility in her everyday private life.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Derek Peck, *Marina Abramovic and the Institute*, Film, 2013, 05:55-09:02, accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Sq2tK8Q07o, 23/1/18



Fig 18: Marina Abramovic, *The artist is present*, MoMA, 2010.

Marcus Coates

Marcus Coates, explores the possibilities of the imagination as a tool in consulting the unconscious and other-worldly realms, leading to transformational experiences and creative solutions to lives problems in a non-rational way.⁸⁰ He focuses on how humans related to and can learn from animals and nature, exploring the concept of anthropomorphism. Other than using/wearing taxidermied animals (or parts of them), as a simple way of **communing with animals**, more interestingly, he delves into behavioral animal mimicry. He imitates bird calls and other animal noises and in more surreal ways, approximations of animal mannerisms, using crude costumes and props, covering himself in shaving foam to transform his body, tying himself to trees and carcasses in the wild etc. Through his performances often practices what one could call “urban shamanism”, visiting communities in crisis and through shamanic journeying, attempts to offer practical answer to their problems. He also creates interactive, participatory group performance works that require (appart

⁸⁰ Claire Levy and Harriet Smith, “Marcus Coates’ School Of The Imagination and Sociological Imagination(s), *Streetsings*, Goldsmiths University of London, Centre for Urban and Community Research, Last modified 28/6/14, accessed at <https://cucrblog.wordpress.com/2014/07/28/marcus-coates-school-of-the-imagination-and-sociological-imaginings-by-claire-levy-and-harriet-smith/>, 10/2/18.

from other performers of various disciplines) the public's collaboration in the spirit of community bonding.

Specifically, in his multi-screen installation “**Dawn Chorus**” (2007) (fig 19), he goes to great lengths with the aid of technology to re-imagine and appropriate dynamics of the lives of birds unto humans, creating this hybrid state of being between the two, neither one nor the other but paradoxically more than either one alone. He explores anthropomorphism (an instinctual human tactic in relating to the world and animal species) to the extreme, he observes that although inherently flawed in relation to “objective reality”, it is nevertheless useful. Through the power of projection, the observer sees the things they need to see, thus gaining the insights most relevant to them.⁸¹



⁸¹ Marcus Coates et al., *Marcus Coates* (London: Koenig Books, 2016), p 8-9.

Fig 19: Marcus Coates, *Dawn Chorus*, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, 2007. Photo credit: Collin Davison.

In 2003, he attended a shamanic journeying course and noticed how similar it was with his performative experiments in becoming an animal. He also realized the common ground of social responsibility between the artist and the shaman ⁸². This sparked his “urban shaman” projects like “**Journey to the Lower World**” (2004) (fig 20), where he visited the residents of Sheil Park estate tower block, awaiting demolition in Liverpool. Coates was one of the artists in residence of the “Further Up in The Air” programme. and in attempt to offer help, worked himself up into a trance, taking a journey to the Otherworld where he contacts animal spirits asking for guidance for their benefit.



⁸² Marcus Coates et al., *Marcus Coates*, p 4-5.

Fig 20: Marcus Coates, *Journey to the Lower World*, 2004.

Another such project was “**Vision Quest: a Ritual for Elephant and Castle**” (2011) which resulted in a full length documentary at the end of a four-year local residency. He spent weeks getting to know the people getting displaced, communing with the demolition rubble, the dirty pavements and garage doors of the area and so on (fig 22).⁸³

“More than anything I was trying to understand what was happening here. ... It’s a very political thing. I’m optimistic about change. I think everyone acknowledges there needs to be change here. But I’m pessimistic about what’s going to be lost here. By spending time here, I’m valuing things now that are perhaps being overlooked a bit. The idea of mixed communities and the idea of historic communities here: I think that’s a really essential part of Elephant & Castle. It’s going to be very sad if that’s totally lost. In a way that’s the basis of the future of the Elephant & Castle. You can’t just reinvent a society. You can’t reinvent a community.”

⁸³ Marcus Coates, April 2012. See Charting the Elephant, *Vision Quest: A Ritual for Elephant and Castle*, Marcus Coates, accessed at <http://chartingtheelephant.com/projects/vision-quest-ritual-elephant-castle/>, 8/11/17

In collaboration with the band “Chrome Hoof” at the Coronet Theatre in elephant and castle he performs a shamanic ritual/rock concert to a wider London audience (fig 21).



Fig 21: Marcus Coates with Chrome Hoof live at The Coronet, *A Ritual for Elephant and Castle*, 2009.



Fig 22: Marcus Coates, *Vision Quest: A Ritual for Elephant and Castle* by, 2011.

In such works, he welcomes the humor and the oddness of the situation. In a clash between traditional shamanic methodology and post modernism the he illustrates the irony of the fact that how far society has come from the original shamanic perspective is exactly what makes one such as himself, resort to calling it back by whatever means necessary. This paradox of attempting to merge shamanic traditions of the past (or the far-away) with the everyday reality of South London, is beautifully illustrated for example, by Coates repeated running and crashing into at a garage door in a scene of **“Vision Quest: A Ritual for Elephant and Castle”** (2011) feature film. But nonetheless it is a paradox marked by genuine efforts to help.⁸⁴ To what extent he achieves this with such projects is hard to verify, but going past the possible incredulous disbelief of first-reactions, his empathy, commitment and heartfelt interest are visibly moving and his sound advice, evokes respect and proper consideration as he goes to such lengths to deliver it.

“ ‘It's an earnest thing for me. I agree, the incongruity of these situations can seem ridiculous.’ He refers to the horse's head, from a knacker's yard in Staffordshire, and the silver suit, from an east London

⁸⁴ Marcus Coates et al., Marcus Coates (London: Koenig Books, 2016), p 8.

clothes shop. 't seems facile, but eventually something serious seems to comes through.' ⁸⁵

His most interesting and (verifiably) beneficial project, in working directly with people in my opinion is the “**The Trip**” (2010). Through Serpentine Gallery’s project *Skills Exchange: Urban Transformation and the Politics of Care*, Coates asked St. John’s Hospice patients “What can I do for you?” deciding to fulfil the death wish of patient Alex H.⁸⁶ He was to make a trip to the amazon on behalf of Alex, with his eyes and mind in order to bring back through his imagination, a memory to transplant into Alex’s own imagination; the seed of one final transformation before death. This challenge of the imagination was important to both Coates and Alex as well as the fact that Coats was to face his basic human fears (fragility of the body and the unknown) through this journey. Coate’s instructions were to be an observer, meet with the local tribes to find out if they were fulfilled with their life and

⁸⁵ Tom Lamont, “Marcus Coates: 'Eventually something serious comes through'”, *The Guardian*, 8/04/2012, accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/apr/08/marcus-coates-artist-elephant-castle>, 13/2/18.

⁸⁶ Marcus Coates, Janna Graham, and Lucia Pietroiusti, introduction to *The trip* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2011), p 5.

spirituality, to understand what they had in common how they differed to people in the “developed world”.⁸⁷

Upon his return, without no documentation but his memories and a recording of a sacred song recounting the Huaronani tribes’ cosmogenesis myth, Coates took Alex on his long awaited trip. He conveyed the sights and all he learned from the Huaronani tribesmen, discussing insights on their shared experience through the imagination. Alex, who died soon after this exchange, was as fulfilled by the proxy experience as humanly possible considering it was not directly his own. He told Coates he would often go down the Amazon river and into the jungles (in his imagination) when the need arose.⁸⁸ This project was a good example of the potential for public service through the creative potential of the imagination.

⁸⁷ Marcus Coates, Janna Graham, and Lucia Pietroiusti, *The trip*, p 16-17.

⁸⁸ Marcus Coates et al *The trip* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2011), p 77.

Conclusion

The decision to examine how and why the figure of the shaman relates to the contemporary artist in this dissertation, resulted from my own motivations in my practice, which were progressively inclined towards spiritual and esoteric inquiries in relation to psychology. This is a perpetually growing intuitive research. The motivations shared by many artists I respected, to create art for more than its own sake and to link it with spiritual processes led to this connection, which led to the discovery that shamanic traditions share a close historical and evolutionary link with artistic practice. Art and culture are both cumulative and collaborative process and it is beneficial to artists and audiences alike to make that process a conscious one. Learning from the past - both distant and recent - and those who have already led by example, is important for contemporary artists in order to be able to contribute, with work through which both they as individuals and their audience will benefit the most from. ⁸⁹

⁸⁹ *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* 10, 12:00-14:47, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFCYciS4tGY>, 18/1/18 [-ology meaning “the study of” and “field of medicine of” respectively of the psychē (Latin), ψυχή (Greek) meaning the “soul, breath and animating spirit”].

Chapter One introduces shamanism, placing it within a historical framework and outlining five fundamental elements requisite to the practice. The ancient and still-evolving connection between art and shamanic practice as well as their shared functions within society were outlined and expanded upon in Chapter Two. Art originally and spontaneously emerged as a tool for communication beyond the limits of spoken - and later written - language and for facilitating transformation and thus healing, in the personal and social psyche alike. These functions of communication and transformation remain as applicable to contemporary society as they were at the time of art's inception. They both feature into the entire process of creating art, from its conception, to the moment it is perceived by another.

The job of an artist who is aware of this social responsibility, is largely dictated by the needs of their surrounding culture and community; much like the shaman's. Jung in his work "Modern Man in search of a Soul", –ascribes much of the turmoil and malaise in the psyche of modern western mind to a lack of the freedom of genuine and personal spiritual experience. Art can help facilitate an approach to the spiritual that takes into account the subjective nature of the experience of reality and individual growth (see process of individuation mentioned earlier). Time

and time again, I found a tendency in the work of artists and other thinkers, to relate art with the essence or elements of shamanism. The urge to re-imagine it within this context, in a way that is relevant to the needs of the modern and then post-modern world, is based on a desire to aid in personal and social transformation. The ones I chose to analyze further in Chapter Three are only a few among many.⁹⁰

In Chapter Three, the artists Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic and Marcus Coates are examined through their performance and “action” works, to determine how and why they relate and connect to shamanic practice. Apart from the similarities of these three artists’ bodies of work, it is also interesting and useful to observe their differences. Coates and Beuys, are linked by their emphasis on the natural world and the animistic perspective. They relate to animals as totems and spirit guides, learning from the qualities imbued into these animals by mythology and in using their animal carcasses or body parts, they endeavor to familiarize themselves with death in order to better appreciate and connect to life itself. Both consciously approach the shaman’s societal role through their work, through embodying it as a symbol. They both engage with audiences but Beuys does so

⁹⁰ In Mark Levy’s *Technicians of ecstasy: Shamanism and the modern artist*, 1993, a total of twenty-seven artists are being discussed on the basis of their work relating to shamanism and it’s functions/elements.

more through his teaching and lecturing while Coates does so more with his interactive performance works and practical workshops (see the School of the Imagination project). Beuys behaves in an unapproachable and distant manner during the ceremonial actions **“How to explain pictures to a dead hare”** (1965) and **“I Like America and America Likes me”** (1974), discussed in Chapter Three. He is in a way more serious, formal and solemn than Coates. He also seems to adhere to specific and regimented repetitive patterns; more Apollonian in nature. Coates on the other hand, is much more informal and direct in engaging with audiences and the communities he attempts to help through his works. He is chaotic, messy, comical (even slapstick), preposterous, outlandish and absurd, more Dionysian in his approach (though his version of the Dionysian looks very different to Abramovic’s) in **“Journey to the Lower World”** (2004) and **“Vision Quest”** (2011). He also delves a lot deeper into making a difference in one single person’s inner life with **“The Trip”** (2010). This arguably makes him more approachable and relatable to whereas Beuys is more removed from reality in his almost messianic aura.

Abramovic primarily focuses on the clash and balancing of opposites in human nature more so than nature itself, in all the pieces discussed. Unlike Coates and Beuys, she does not directly or deliberately present herself as performing a

shamanic role in terms of embodying its mythical meaning; instead she alludes to it through her approach to the elements of shamanism in her work as well as her research. Going first inward, from the personal to the universal she uses a lot more than the other two, her personal life's story as well as her own body as her material. She pushes the limits of her body in terms of pain (Dionysian element) and the limits of her mind in terms of discipline and focus (Apolonian) to greater extremes than the two male artists. Directly working with the energy of sheer presence in **"Artist is Present"** 2010 and **"Rhythm 0"** (1974), she is by far the more intense in terms of inciting visceral emotional responses and even shock from audiences than either Beuys or Coates. For this reason, she could be considered the more formidable of the three in a certain respect. She often takes more personal risks, setting a high standard for challenging herself and her capabilities while undergoing intense transformational ordeals. Through her obsessive determination, she hopes of setting an example for a similar commitment for others.

The extent to which art is effective as a tool for personal and social psychic healing is not something quantifiable by any available means, but it is something that can be felt on a personal level. It also seems proportionate to an artist's personal commitment to this mission and the lengths they go

to achieve it. As Marcus Coates puts it “I like the idea of an artist trying to come up with some answers rather than posing more questions” ⁹¹. Marina Abramovic and Joseph Beuys seem to share this perspective and through their life’s work have endeavored to bring positive transformational change to both themselves and the audience.

Ultimately, the work of the artist is to inspire, through leading by example, a fuller way of life. If all humans are artists as Joseph Beuys has claimed, then their greatest work of art must be themselves; the life they lead and the mark it leaves on the surface of the earth and the collective psyche. Thus, the spiritual duty of the artist, as it echoes that of the shaman, becomes ultimately the spiritual duty of the *human*.

⁹¹ Tom Lamont, “Marcus Coates: 'Eventually something serious comes through'”, *Art Observer*, The Guardian, 8/4/12, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/apr/08/marcus-coates-artist-elephant-castle>

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