

JILL ORR: RITUAL, RITES OF PASSAGE & NEURO-ANATOMY

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Jill Orr began her performance *Map of Transition* (1978/79) curled up under rice paper sheets, emerging to put on mask and costume prior to adopting frenzied, rhythmic movements, later removing the costume. She took seeds, plants and soil and arranged them in a circle on the rice paper, watered them and departed. Discussing this work, Anne Marsh's *Body and Self* (1993) emphasises the "political-ecological" connection "between ritual and the natural environment" in Orr's *arte povera* "binding techniques" and that it would be a mistake to interpret it "within the landscape tradition". However *Map of Transition* (1978/79) typifies other patterns underlying her work such as symbols and structures of shamanism, anthropology and neuroanatomical functions. As Eliade's research indicates, mystical writings refer to cosmic explorations and mapping the cosmos, in order to enter "a vast ... mental universe". Interestingly Orr similarly refers to "internal travel" through the "unchartered abyss", and suggests that *Map of Transition* (1978/79), is "the ritualization and initiation of the map making process" providing "the link between man" ... "and his ever changing environment". The script of this performance includes the following instructions :

To activate : shifting sands, grinding rocks, the time it takes:-
Requirements: six handfuls of red earth, six handfuls of purple earth, six handfuls of living seeds, one bunch of dried grasses, sensory perception.

In Eliade's terms the shaman is *carer* of the earth invoking "pastoral spirituality", or what Wasson terms a "nature-oriented religion". In shamanistic terminology, Orr's use of "Natural materials undergoing the life and death cycle, seasonal and environmental pressures" suggests processes of ritual transition,

where life and death are "two phases of Mother Earth". Indeed, Orr notes that *Map of Transition* is a rite of transition, of the life and death cycle. She begins wrapped in sheets of rice paper, emerging like a sprouting plant shoot as if imitating what Sullivan calls "the experience of the seed in the earth". Orr subsequently creates her map by manipulating earth and seeds, from little bound bags of rope and clay with small ceramic creatures suspended by cords, while her costume and mask of earth, grasses and twine reveal her as the healing spirit of nature, re-seeding and re-soiling. Concerns with environmental threats underlie much of Orr's ritualistic work.

Michael Taussig (1980) defines ritual action as that which "aligns human beings with the helping spirits of nature" aimed at enlisting nature's power in the cause of liberation of human beings in the cosmos where these principles "are created, renewed, and reformed" and Mary Douglas suggests that in certain primitive world views there is an interrelationship between self and the universe which is believed to respond to signs, symbols, speech and gestures. Similarly, Orr considers that this work was "the ritualization" of "the map making process" linking humans and the "environment".

Agrarian rites attempt to explain "The mysteries of life emerging from 'chaos'" by re-enacting "rituals" of the "sacred power of the earth". Traditionally "women were associated with rites of earthly fecundity", explaining their "prominent ritual role ... in agriculture". In Orr's agrarian rite, placement on the soil appears to represent healing powers, and resemble rituals of semidesert peoples, who concentrate "on the gaining of food". Orr, who originates in the country, has travelled to the desert, a place where food is hard to find. She is inspired by the red Australian earth, the heat, and spaces. Susan Power Bratton's 'The Original Desert Solitaire: Early Christian Monasticism and Wilderness' (1988) examines the "wilderness movement", central to the development of Western spirituality, and suggests that "the desert" is "conducive to spiritual" contemplation, "solitude", asceticism; developing a "wilderness ethics" and aesthetics obvious in Orr's use of soils, clays, plant fibres and seeds.

What does one of her critics make of her work? Christopher Heathcote notes:

Throughout the performances Orr's attitude is one of absorption. With eyes that are vacant and evasive, sometimes even closed, she looks engrossed in her own circumstances as if to deny an audience. At the same time the artist's deliberate stances ... affect the bearing ... of being observed, of a body that purposely exhibits itself ... In fact Orr's performances establish a fiction that (the) beholder does not exist, yet everything about these works posits a viewer.

Further on he suggests that in *Bleeding Trees* (1978) her performance is posed for the camera alone and indicates rather shallow reasons for Orr's manner. Assuming theoretical references, Heathcote notes that "while the Content may be admirable, the Form is sometimes lacking". While these are acute observations I shall argue here that it is also helpful to consider Orr's work in terms of deeper sources, looking beyond art history, the areas of anthropology and neuroanatomy.

Arnold Van Gennep (in *Rites of Passage* 1908 reprinted 1960) and Victor Turner offer models for ritualised "Social Drama", suggesting that "divination into the hidden causes" of social misfortune and life crises are used symbolically to resolve conflicts. Turner considers that rituals contain a "liminal phase", a "fructile chaos", striving "after new forms and structure", intertwining dance, body languages, song, chant, body painting and scarification, also found in Orr's performance art. For Turner, ritual trance provides a sacred liminal space and "its progeny, the performance arts ... derive from the ... liminal ... exploratory heart of social drama, its redressive phase", where group experiences are "refashioned".

Writing in the *Rites of Passage* (1908, 1960) Van Gennep identifies three types of ritual transitions or rites of passage that marked a person's change of status in "life crisis rituals" from "birth to death". He suggests these rites were subdivided into rites of: separation, transition, and incorporation:

- 1) The first, (preliminal) rites of Separation are prominent in funerals, marriage, banishment, and excommunication.
- 2) The second, (liminal) rites of Transition are prominent in pregnancy, betrothal and initiation.

- 3) The third (postliminal) rites of Incorporation are prominent in marriage and baptism and the joining of a group.

Rites of separation often involve cutting something such as the hair, or changing clothes, breaking things connected with one's single status, closing the eyes, baring the waist, being washed, bathing or anointing oneself, covering with a veil, being pushed or mistreated, vomiting and passing over a threshold.

As I shall argue, images suggesting rites of separation from the profane world appear in many of Orr's performances. In *She Had Long Golden Hair* (1980) Orr's hair was cut by the audience, perhaps marking change in Orr's life and status. Male voices on a sound-track call "Wanna fuck? Ya need a man? ... witch, bitch, moll, dyke". Within this context the abusive words become a rite of passage of status reversal of "being pushed or mistreated", and a rite of separation as well as a feminist critique. Van Gennep considers that "sacrifice of the hair" separates one from the previous world; by dedicating the hair to the sacred world". Rites of separation can be seen in *Do You Speak?* (1980), where Orr tears her outer clothing prior to revealing herself in a state of ritual nudity.

According to Van Gennep, uniting ceremonies (like marriage) involve "a mutual transference of personality" by tying couples together with veil, garments or cords. In *Split/Fragile Relationships* (1980), Orr pulls on a rope attached to Chris Mearing's waist, suggesting this kind of rite. For Van Gennep, marriage records *transition* across age groups, marking sexual instruction and *erotic dances* as ritual separation and transition from the "previous life" as in *Marriage of the Bride to Art* (1994).

Initiation into the transition rites of social puberty involve cutting the 'umbilical cord' that separates childhood and sexual maturity by "cutting off the hair or mutilating ... the body" to "modifying the personality of the individual". Van Gennep observes how initiation rites "enacting death ... and resurrection" occur "among differing peoples" and that for magicians or shamans hybrid rites initiate them into a "sacred world", changing personality and simulating "momentary death". Orr's *Blinding Surface*, *Inside Jack's Head*, and *Response*, all of 1978, refer to life, death and resurrection.

According to *The Rites of Passage*, during rites of Incorporation, the initiate is "reincorporated into the sacred society" after a "transitional period", through tonsures, marriage, religious vows, binding together, drinking blood, anointing and ritual dances. As Orr notes, her work *Marriage of the Bride to Art* (1994) is "also about taking my place amongst the visionaries ... amongst the fathers of modern art ... Definitely a female rite of passage into becoming self-actualized".

How and why can Anthropological categories be applied to twentieth century performance art? The scientific research on ritual by Turner in 'Body, Brain and Culture' (1983) suggests that perhaps ritual originates in brain function rather than only cultural origins. Turner defined ritual as "a transformative performance revealing major classifications" and "contradictions of cultural processes" while illuminating the "interdependence" of bodies and environments, transforming life-crises through unifying symbols and reanimating, or handling "unmanageable power". Orr similarly refers to "a powerful energy" which comes "through the body". Neurobiological research led Turner to consider the relationship between animal and human ritualization. He also noted the work of the neuro-anatomist Paul MacLean whose work on the "archaic" structures of the human brain dealt with the limbic system as an "ancient part of the brain concerned with the emotions", developing his theory of the triune brain, possessing "three brains in one" although each brain section is "interlinked by millions of interconnections" with their "own sense of time and space". MacLean argues that "The first to evolve is the reptilian brain stem which is concerned with movement, 'instinctive behaviour', emotion, the "stream of movement, physiological functions", the "life control switch" that may explain the conflation of movement and emotion in Orr's best performances.

MacLean's concept of the "second brain", the *paleo-mammalian*, arose with the "earliest mammals" and is made up of the midbrain and limbic system "associated with sex, pain and pleasure", rage, fear and controlling responses to the environment. Orr's environmental work could be explained in terms of midbrain or limbic system responses. Neuroanatomist James Papez defines the midbrain as 'the stream of feeling', while the older 'level' is the stream of movement'. The third (or neo-mammalian) brain or cortex "corresponds to Papez's" concept of the 'stream of thought' ",

the "complex mental functions" as opposed to instinctive ... behaviour. Neuro-physiologist Barbara Lex notes that the left cerebral hemisphere is specialised for speech and processes information in an analytic, linear-sequential and temporal manner. In contrast, the right hemisphere mediates visuo-spatial processes, emotional and tonal perception and expression. The characteristic mode of processing of the right hemisphere is understood as "holistic" while "temporal capacity is believed absent". D'Aquili, Laughlin, Hess and Lex's models "attempt to link" the "ergotropic and trophotrophic systems within the central nervous system", explaining ritualistic and "meditative states".

Turner defines an ergotropic system (the sympathetic nervous system) as nervous energy processes: arousal states, "fight or flight responses", heart rate and musculature affecting "behaviour through arousal" and activity such as 'warming up' and 'getting high', processes suggested during liminal rites of transition. The trophotrophic system (the parasympathetic nervous system) engenders "inactivity", sleep, "cooling down" and "trancelike states" suggesting that when either system "is hyperstimulated, there results a compensatory overshoot into the opposite system, from "driving behaviour" employed to facilitate ritual or meditative "trance" with rebound occurring from "one system to the other". Rhythmic, ritualistic activity "aided by sonic, visual, and other kinds of 'driving' or stimulation may lead to the *unio mystica* or "union of ... opposites" which explains Orr's descriptions of herself becoming "transformed" or "breaking through". Driving techniques also facilitate right-hemisphere, resulting in gestalt, timeless, nonverbal experiences, creating a sense of "ecstatic union" possibly from parasympathetic overshoot or sympathetic activation. A.J. Mandell describes this as "the primary religious experience", - a neurochemical state of "hypomania ... blissful, empathic ... creative". Turner considers "that *ritual* is often performed to resolve environmental problems by means of motor behaviour, involving repetitive, driving stimuli, strongly activating the ergotropic system" that subsequently interacts with cultural knowledge.

D'Aquili and Newberg (1993) consider that spontaneous religious experience and Near Death Experience operate from reverberating circuits that rise from the bottom (of brain or brain stem) up to the top (cortex). Similarly, Michel Jouvet (1975)

suggests dreams originate and flow from the brain stem through to the cortex. Alternatively, during meditation brain circuit changes move from top (cortex) to lower brain. Turner also considers that the ritual process tends to 'come up from below', in gestures, music, drama, singing, and dancing — all techniques used by Orr. Dancing is a repetitive driving technique facilitating ritual, synchronising the "muscular activity" of body, "brain and nervous system". This paper suggests Orr's performances involving rhythmic movement (she is trained in ballet, yoga and meditation) enable her to create ritualistic states. Evan Zuesse's "Meditation on Ritual" (1975) discusses the ritualised body, easily related to performance art, noting that "while myth is something that is *said*" ritual "means *Doing*" or symbolic *action*. Every gesture engages our bodies, "ritual is body-language", revitalising ritual structures, both formal and spontaneous.

For Turner, the ritual process constitutes a threshold between secular and sacred living, creating a separate liminal sacred space and time. Zuesse considers that ritual's "prestige of the body" conveys the "highest symbolic truths" engendering an explanation for the body and its place in the universe and sacramentalizing and raising acts to consciousness by "lifting them through to the sphere of the ultimate". Through these bodily actions "time is given shape", creating a "becoming" exhibited in the body's embrace of the universe. Rhythmic action marks out rhythmic space and time, enabling entrance into Sacred Time which is also described by Eliade as circular; rejecting and suspending linear time. It would seem that Orr's manipulation and knowledge of her body and brain enable her as mystic or shaman to access sacred knowledge in order to enter sacred time.

We could now reinterpret Christopher Heathcote's review of Orr's *Bleeding Trees* (1978), describing her "closed eyes" that establish "a fiction that (the) beholder does not exist" - as a *rite of separation* rather than a "pretence" for the camera. There is perhaps another reason than one of pretence - that Orr's behaviour reflects shifts from rite of separation (eyes closed) to rite of *transition* or *incorporation* with her surroundings (eyes open). Similarly the same process can be seen in *Map Of Transition* where Orr's hiding under the rice paper resembles a *rite of separation*, prior to the frenzied movement of the *transitional stage* and the removal of her mask prior to arranging and watering the seeds, as a

rite of incorporation. While Heathcote notes that "the Form is sometimes lacking" it would seem that Orr's performances rather reflect ritualistic structure and anti-structure, allowing for spontaneous action emerging from the subcortical neuroanatomical systems, sometimes unsuccessfully, giving credence to Heathcote's observation. Orr notes, "In the performance I have usually structured in areas where the improvisation is placed." She recalls:

This is where you have no idea of what will happen, but ... simply let go into the movement - This allows a powerful energy to come through the body and this is the communication.

However, she found *Gaia Versus the System* (1990), using a pre-written collaborative script "failed". She adds:

I spoke and 'acted' the parts ... there was nothing automatic in it ... I had almost structured myself out of the piece, so much so that my individual spirit could not fly.

Orr writes that *Blinding Surface* "was an extraordinary performance - I had broken through something and was "transformed". Orr's statement that her "flow and energy, often quite frenetic" that takes over "by-passing the mind" indicates that she understands in non-scientific terms that she is by passing the cortex in order to access the subcortical brain structures of limbic system and cerebellum. She wonders whether the "flow and energy ... comes from myself, or 'somewhere' else I do not know ... I let something happen".

Importantly, Turner considers that "the ritual process" is *transformative performance*, which tends to 'come up from below' in gestures, drama, singing, and dancing. Perhaps similar functions occur in Orr's work. Charles Green, in *Art Monthly* (93-94) discusses how critics of Orr's performances fail to "explain why ... works such as Orr's *Bleeding Trees* are "amongst the most haunting, powerful images". It is hoped that this paper with its emphasis on neuro-anatomy and anthropology provides an answer to some of Green's concerns.

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