INTRODUCTION

Pargament (1999) has described “spirituality” in terms of a quest for ideas or things that are sacred. Artists are renowned for their roles in revealing (and sometimes failing to reveal) the wonders of the sacred. In the work of the current author on spirituality, she raises issues about the roles of the arts in meaning-search and about the tremendous responsibility those roles bring to bear on artists and the Academy.

A Proposed Role for Artists in Finding and Interpreting the Sacred

Psychologist Kenneth Pargament (1999, p. 12) described “spirituality” as a “search for the sacred.” Photographer David Finn (2000, p.15) has said of his propensity to represent trees in watercolor: “As I have grown older, I have found more and more to admire, . . . Each painting is like a prayer in which I celebrate the remarkable gracefulness of the sturdy trunks, . . .” After losing her brother in World War I, Prussian-born artist Kathe Kollwitz wrote, “It is said that prayer ought to be a coming to rest in God, a sense of uniting with the divine will. If that is so, then I am—sometimes praying when I remember Peter . . . when I feel him in the way which I want to make outwardly visible in my work, then I am praying” (as quoted by Winkler, 1990, p. 41). And so it is that artists may communicate faith, spirituality, and information about things sacred or holy in their works. Artists’ works may reflect their spiritual journeys and may lay bare for art observers the underlying meanings of life.

Kollwitz said that the highest levels of meaning-search in life are “to develop divinity, spirituality” (as quoted by Winkler, p. 42). Beit-Hallahmi (1986), a scientist who studies the psychology of religion, has written that “Art is simply the most similar to religion among all spheres of human activity” (p. 1). Clearly, art and religion share resemblances as social institutions, as outlets for creative and emotive expressions, and as activities that engage mental processes like imagination and creativity (Pruyser, 1976). But more than that, the arts can help one express and communicate about that which Winnicott (in Fuller, 1994) called the “transitional” sphere where external world and internal representation meet to form concepts of the holy, sacred, and transcendent. Pruyster (1974; as quoted by Fuller, p. 280) proposed that it is in that mental and “transitional” space where “an infinite playful relation between mind and world” resides. Based upon the views of artists and of scientists who study the psychology of religion, then, it may make some sense to propose a role for the arts as outlets for expression concerning transcendent and religious experiences. One might go so far as to suggest a renewal of the ancient concept that artists can be soothsayers. That is not to say that religion is art, or that art is necessarily religion (Beit-Hallahmi, 1986); instead, art might be viewed as an outlet for the expression of ideas about transcendence—a way of communicating with others about transcendence.

David Wulff (2000) has described various transcendent experiences, religiously motivated or not, as common in being “mystical”. However, these same experiences may differ markedly, with respect to how they are interpreted. As one lives, s/he might encounter sacred ideas, experiences, objects, or people. This may occur by accident or through deliberate searches for the sacred (Seifert, in press). Such an encounter can impact one profoundly and might fuel a desire to represent ideas or objects through the arts.
A PROPOSAL FOR TRAINING STUDENTS

One might ask, how is it that the Academy can train artists to express notions of transcendence, the sacred, and the holy in their art? Does this necessarily require of the Academy attempting some sort of religious conversion of each student? Not necessarily. Perhaps there is a more practical solution: training students to explore notions associated with transcendence and the sacred in addition to training them in the techniques of art production. The Academy attempts to train art students to critique art, to know art history, to understand aesthetics and art theory, and to produce art objects. Why not include studies of philosophy, theology, and behavioral sciences within the context of a more liberal education?

In Winnicott’s (see Fuller, 1994) terms, the Academy might design to help art students explore the meanings of transitional objects and of transcendence. Apparently, the artist Matisse recognized that these kinds of exploration are a critical part of art production when he aimed to teach his students to represent their underlying emotions in their works. In the manuscript “Exactitude is not the truth”, Matisse wrote that the integrity of an art object does not rely on perfect reproduction of “natural forms”, but upon “the profound feeling of the artist before the objects that he has chosen, on which his attention is focused and the spirit of which he has penetrated” (as quoted by Finn, 2000, pp. 15–16). Matisse’s notion that students can be tutored to create art from the mental space between their private inner worlds and the external problem space (i.e., the object or scene to be reproduced in a painting, drawing, sculpture, etc.) is consistent with an idea that developing one’s understanding of the transitional sphere can help one to produce more profound art.

So, now, one must ask: With such a proposition before the Academy for educating art students about transcendence and representing the holy and the sacred in art, does the Academy become a religious institution? Certainly, this problem has presented in other fields, such as psychology, where attempts to understand religious beliefs and behaviors have led some scientists into active promotion of their own religious beliefs (e.g., into a “religious psychology”, rather than a “psychology of religion”; see also Beit-Hallahmi, 1986). Perhaps this trap can be avoided if the Academy attempts a truly liberal education of the artist, with exposure to world religions and to the broader spectrum of theological studies. As the student is trained to understand the many different perceptions of transcendence and of the sacred, then s/he can begin to understand the depths of experiences from which artists can derive their work.

The Academy might couple that education about philosophy, theology, and human behaviors with in-depth studies of particular artists. There are many artists who created work over the course of their lives and through whose work can be learned important lessons about life journey and discovering meaning.

A study of Kathe Kollwitz’s life work, for example, could be included in a seminar on artists’ expressions of transcendence and the sacred. The soulful nature of Kollwitz’s work across many years and the evidence of her own search for meaning in her artwork and published diary make her an excellent case study for those who wish to understand works of art within the context of the mental life of the artist who produced them (see Prelinger, Comini, & Bachert, 1992; Winkler, 1990). Kollwitz’s sketches, woodcuts, three-dimensional works, and her journal entries about them reveal critical relations between her sense of transcendence and her art production. Somehow, it seems very appropriate that she was once labeled the “apostle with the crayon” (i.e., by Lunacharski; as described by Prelinger et al., 1992, p. 82). For students, who are learning about representing transcendence and the holy in art, studies of the examples of other artists can be enlightening. If that were coupled with instruction about philosophy, theology, and behavioral sciences (as mentioned previously), students would be well prepared to launch their own searches for meaning—with at least one goal: to represent their meaning-searches in their works of art.
ABOUT THE ARTIST’S RESPONSIBILITY TO BE GENUINE

The Academy teaches art students that art created without thought is inane. As Matisse (see Finn, 2000) suggested, meaningful representations are not merely perfect duplications of external objects; they can be enlightened and improved by drawing upon one’s mental experience. The artist may not wish to acknowledge that this carries with it a certain, implied obligation to be true to oneself. This is an artist’s responsibility to him/herself and it carries forward to the art observer. If an artist betrays his/her own views and experiences in a work of art, then s/he has betrayed those who might observe the art object. In so doing, s/he has betrayed the very essence of truth and has defied the search for meaning. The work of art is deception. Thus, the Academy must challenge students to be true to self and, in so doing, to be true in creating art.

ABOUT THE ACADEMY’S RESPONSIBILITY TO FOSTER GOOD MENTAL HEALTH IN ART STUDENTS

In the behavioral sciences, religiousness is an oft-mentioned correlate of psychopathology (e.g., Maudsley, 1886; Schou, 1926; both, as cited in Thalbourne & Delin, 1999). It has been suggested that the positive relationship between the two makes religiousness a good indicator of pathology. In fact, some researchers consider religiousness (particularly mysticism) to be akin to psychopathology (e.g., Goleman & Davidson, 1979). It is a much debated topic in psychology and psychiatry, with other writers distinguishing religiousness from psychopathology (James, 1902; Meadow, 1984).

Perhaps, it is more useful to think of the apparent correlation between religiousness/spirituality and psychopathology in terms of specific measures, like poor life adjustment and dysfunctional coping strategies (Pargament, 1997). Some evidence indicates that psychopathology may be lower among religious individuals who practice positive strategies for coping and higher among religious individuals who engage in negative coping (see Pargament, 1997; Koenig, 1994). What are the implications of these theory and data for training artists to search for and represent meaning in their work? Perhaps the burden on the Academy is to be aware of the risks associated with opening minds to ideas about the sacred without also providing adequate supports for learning positive coping. When the Academy presents the idea of transcendence as a path to meaning and to better art production, the Academy shares the burden of responsibility for the emotions it may help awaken in the student. It is therefore incumbent upon the Academy to provide adequate supports for students to promote good mental health, effective coping, and positive life adjustment. The tragic cases of artists and writers, like Vincent Van Gogh and Sylvia Plath, who carried exceptional burdens associated with their creative genius and transcendent expressions, bespeak the need for mental health support for artists. The emotional weight of discovery may be too great for one who does not have access to those supports. If the Academy would open minds, then the Academy should share some responsibility for helping to maintain their good mental health.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: ABOUT “PROVING” RELIGIONS

At first blush, one might desire to utilize the arts and sciences to prove the existence of the sacred. However, Paloutzian (1996) has argued that science (namely, psychology) “cannot prove religion…any more than it can disprove it . . . “ (p. 46). And this must be true in the arts as well, Finn’s (2000) well-executed painting of a tree can no more prove the existence of the sacred in nature than disprove it. The sacred exists in the space between the solely inner world and the external reality. Thus, any attempts to prove the existence of the sacred that rely entirely upon the observable must be inadequate. While sciences and arts may not provide conclusive proof for the sacred or divine, they might be tools to understanding spirituality. Thus, an artist’s role might be to represent that which s/he holds sacred, so that others might
study it and advance their own searches for meaning. One role of artists is most certainly to assist others as they search for meaning and for the sacred; the intimacy between religion and art makes this so. As scientists struggle to find evidence for order and meaning in the universe, so might artists struggle—and in so doing—help humans discover meaning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. The current author must admit at this point, a conflict between her conceptualization of a liberal education and her own faith perspective. While her greatest desire for students is to help them overcome ignorance by learning as much as they can, her favoritism for her own faith perspective might lead her to hope that others would learn about it and favor it as well. Of course, this is the ultimate dilemma for an educator who designs to help students learn, but who is also, necessarily constrained (or alternately liberated) by his/her own world-view. There is no “value-free” delivery of knowledge as long as a human teacher is the conduit for that delivery. The teacher is necessarily tied to a world-view and may (deliberately or unwittingly) filter the delivery of information through that view.
2. Even if the artist’s goal is to deceive the viewer, this must carry with it some sense (on the part of the artist) of the truth behind the deception. Otherwise, the artist is also deceived!
Exploring the world of spirituality is like a huge forest made up of many different kinds of trees. Each tree has many branches and many of the branches cross and intermingle. There are many trees in which shamanism is the trunk and/or branches, large and small: the Judeo-Christian traditions in the west, the Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic in the east, and all the many indigenous and native traditions throughout the world, east and west, north and south.

This presentation centers on a contemporary flowering of hybrid trees with ancient roots, hybrid because the stock and sources come from a wide array of traditions and practices. This research focuses on the evolvement of three women artist shamans from our own contemporary American culture, since 1945. Their shamanic identification parallels the archetypal profile inherent in the transformative process seen worldwide and experienced since ancient times.

Shamanism is an ancient sacred tradition. An ecstatic religious complex with specific ideologies, shamanism persists through the millennia from Upper Paleolithic periods with Paleo-oriental influences. The term itself is derived from the Vedic sran+ “to heal one’s self or practice austerities.” Shamanism persists, if only in part with hunter-gatherer societies from Siberia, North and Central Asia, Africa, Oceania, Australia, the Americas, and North and Eastern Europe (Halifax, p.3). It is probably as old as human consciousness and transcends cultures, yet reflects the vision of society in human, natural, and supernatural interactions that are “born through profound life crisis” (Halifax, p. 5).

As an ancient phenomenon, shamanism is rooted in native animism with transcendence at its heart. The shaman is the intermediary between this world and the other, “between ordinary and non-ordinary states of reality” (Levy, 1988, p.54). “In short, some artists have assumed the ancient role of the shaman,” ‘the technician of ecstasy’ (Eliade, 1964, p.4) “a specialist in the human soul . . . healers, seers and visionaries who have mastered death” (Halifax, p.3), “whose job in tribal society is to have visions in a trance state and record these visions in poetry, song and the visual arts for the spiritual and therapeutic benefit of the community.” (Levy, 1988, p.54)

The shaman acts as a go-between, an intercessor between the worlds of the material and the spiritual. The shaman’s experience extends beyond the boundaries of everyday society. In many societies this role as seer and healer was recognized by members of the society as crucial to the health and well being of that society. “A.P.Elkin, for example, in Aboriginal Men of High Degree maintains that aboriginal shamans ‘have taken a degree in the secret of life beyond that taken by most adult males, a step which implies discipline, mental training, courage and perseverance. . . .’ In any event, shamans require an abnormal level of sensitivity to maintain contact with the spirit world...” “The shaman’s successful contact with the spirit world, the source of his or her visions, demands a contract with this world to act or express the information given, otherwise difficulties occur in the shaman’s personal life. One only refuses the call of the spirit world at great risk. To my mind the notion of the call in shamanism has a relationship to the artistic process. Artists are often compelled to express themselves and the failure to do so can bring about a crisis” (Levy, 1988, p.54).

“The shaman in tribal societies is often an extremely proficient artist in several media, including painting, carving, music, dance and storytelling” (Levy, 1988, p.54). In addition to their shamanic functions they may be poets, singers, artists, spiritual leaders, judges, politicians, psychologists, entertainers, psychiatrists, but above all “shamans are technicians of the sacred
and masters of ecstasy” (Halifax, p.4). Anthropologist Carleton Coon states, “Whatever else he may be, the shaman is a gifted artist.”

“Shamanism in the strict sense is pre-eminently a religious phenomenon of Siberia and Central Asia.” It is here that “. . . The magico-religious life of society centers on the shaman. This, of course, does not mean that he is the one and only manipulator of the sacred, nor that religious activity is completely usurped by him. In many tribes the sacrificing priest coexists with the shaman. . . . The shaman, and he alone, is the great master of ecstasy. A first definition of this complex phenomenon, and perhaps the least hazardous, will be: shamanism = technique of ecstasy” (Eliade, 1964, p. 4).

“Generally shamanism coexists with other forms of magic and religion.” However, although the shaman may be a magician not all magicians are shamans. We are not to synonymously equate the two, since there are definite and significant differences (Eliade, p. 5).

Shamanism exhibits a particular magical specialty” i.e. Mastery over fire, flight, etc. “As for the shamanic techniques of ecstasy, they do not exhaust all varieties of ecstatic experience documented in the history of religions and religious ethnology. Hence any ecstatic cannot be considered a shaman; the shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld” (Eliade, p. 5).

Similarly, relationships to “spirits” and possession by them differ and are not to be all equated with shamanism. “The shaman controls his ‘spirits’”… and as “a human being, is able to communicate . . . without thereby becoming their instrument” (Eliade, p. 6).

Although shamanism plays a major role in the religious life of many tribal societies it is not the religion of those societies.

Shamans are the ‘elect.’ And as such they have access to a region of the sacred inaccessible to other members of the community. Their ecstatic experiences have exercised, and still exercise, a powerful influence on the stratification of religious ideology, on mythology, on ritualism (Eliade, p. 7).

Shamans are distinctive in their own societies by their “vocations.” “They are separated from the rest of the community by the intensity of their own religious experience (Eliade, p.8). This seems to be a shared commonality wherever they are found and certainly including contemporary artist/shamans in our own culture. Thereby more appropriately grouping them within the mysticism that exists inside or outside of particular religious traditions. “This small mystical elite not only directs the community’s religious life but, as it were, guards its ‘soul’. The shaman is the great specialist in the human soul; he alone ‘sees’ it, for he knows its ‘form’ and its destiny” Eliade, p. 8). When the loss or disease of the soul, soul sickness, is not at issue a great deal of the religious life of a people goes on without him.

SHAMANIC POWER

Shamanic Power occurs in two primary ways:

1. “Hereditary transmission of the shamanic profession or destiny. This way often followed matrilineal lines of descent.
2. Spontaneous vocation, being “called” or through “election”. A predisposition to follow the sacred, dreams, visions, such as the vision quest, became an integrated rite of passage among many Native American tribal groups. Examples also exist where the will of the
community, “election” is the primary way or by a combination of the two ways listed above.

Again, the authentic initiation includes crisis, entering the realm of death, integrating experiences of sickness, suffering, dying, and death and having an intimate, mystical encounter with the realms of life and death that creates a fusion of these two realms. The knowing of the cosmic and physical world is thereby produced through the stages of death, resurrection, realization or illumination/rebirth, whether these stages occur literally or figuratively. This process, individual and personal, is as a religious experience and as such it is necessary that certain things take place (Halifax, p.4). Sometimes these components are carefully prescribed and instructed while at other times they are not. The critical elements which occur are as follows:

SEPARATION AND ISOLATION

Generally this is thought of as solitude in the “wilderness” (I prefer “nature” as a less euro-centric term). Nonetheless, being alone inside and out for the sacred learning to occur through physical and geographic separation from others.

SUFFERING AND PRIVATION

This includes body mortification and ordeals of great difficulty, dismemberment in all forms, such as through illness and/or accident. Disease or dis-ease transforms the liminal shaman by creating an opening to the transmission of special knowledge, especially the knowledge of healing.

PURIFICATION

In this final stage the initiate is reconstituted and experiences rebirth. Having undergone the shaman’s ordeal the rebirth may come from bone, seed, semen, crystal, diamond, all symbols of light and life. The microcosmic re-enactment of having re-entered the womb of primordial life enables the act of transcendence to occur. Having successfully experienced this process the shaman has the ability to subdue, control, direct, and appease the spirits by having undergone his own ordeal in the underworld. As Halifax states the shaman’s soul is joined to the spirit world and reborn as a “healed healer”. The Shaman “has integrated many planes of life experience: the body and the spirit, the ordinary and the non-ordinary, the individual and the community, nature and super nature, the mythic and the historical, the past, the present and the future. They become an intermediary of the realms a master of thresholds. Where the way is very narrow, exceptional balance is required.

METAPHORS

One of the most powerful and widespread metaphors to assist us in describing the linkage of opposites, above and below, and the flow between is the sacred tree.

The sacred tree springs from the roots in the underworld, intersecting into the physical plane and reaching to the heavens. A powerful center, the axis of the world (axis mundi) harmony and equilibrium at all levels grow from this, nature, culture, and super nature.

“The shaman is the bridge, the link, the mediator between the real and invisible worlds” (Chazot/Girolami, 1999/2000). Among the Huichol of western Mexico is a doorway, the Nierika, a cosmic portal between ordinary and non-ordinary realities it is a passageway and at the same time a barrier between the two worlds (Halifax, Prem Das). There are numerous
metaphors that the transcendent deals “with a shift in personal identity from the physical and temporal to the infinite and eternal, with mystical union or with nirvana” (King, 1998, p.22).

Roger Lipsey’s metaphor drawn from Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, indicates the “contrast between ‘eyes of flesh’ which perceive only the material world, and ‘eyes of fire’ which perceive only the spiritual. He goes on: ‘For such eyes (eyes of fire) nothing is lonely matter, all things are caught up in a mysterious, ultimately divine whole that challenges understanding over a life time…’eyes for art’ strike a balance between these sensibilities” (King, p.23)

Of course, one does not have to go far to find many negative disclaimers of shamanism and its role in societies. Oddly enough, one of the most critical accusations lie in those who will confirm that it absolutely ignores history and the past in its predisposition toward eclecticism. On the contrary, one only needs to look at the ritual, ceremony, and celebration found across continents to know that shamanism has been a long on-going process of assimilation and acculturation for centuries, if not longer. Modern shamanic artists are the first to acknowledge influences from many cultures across time and space, and by no means attempt to eradicate their indebtedness to the past. I contend, in contrast, that it is this very complexity and marriage of historic and cultural sources, that often frustrates those looking for neat compartments for answers.

The semantics of the word, spiritual, is another major target for a massive amount of discussion, pro and con, in terms of its usage and application. A position I begin with is that it need not be a dualistic opposite, either/or with secular or religious, but rather is a broader term in encompassing three major human expressions: religious, occult, and transcendent. Contemporary writers and critics continue to put forward new categories and theses in the discussion of the spiritual. Measurable quantification continues to be used as a popular argument for spirituality’s lack of credibility. Recently, issues of politics and economics have been introduced into the discussion to bring spirituality into further question. Certainly by many the manifestation of contemporary shamanism is similarly dismissed as being categorized as anything from charlatanism to mental disorders and psychoses (Brown and Levy). Coleman states, “Those who bring nothing but doctrines, dogmas, and propositions to the dialogue situation will fail to promote the solidarity, brotherly love, or spiritual union which Tolstoy asserted was the true value of art and which must be the true end of authentic religion” (Coleman, 1999, p.304). “All art is religious and all religion artistic, concluding that at the very least both are essential aspects of the human condition. They are universal, pervasive and interacting forces” (Coleman, p.25). Some of the considerations of common denominators between art and religion are “their audio visual emphasis, their coalescence of the universal and the particular, the transcendence of time and space in art and religion, and their demand for a personal total response of the whole individual” (p.40).

“Both art and religion seek to transcend both subjectivity and objectivity, and thus achieve that union of which harmony is the consummate expression and illumination of their manifold affinities” (Coleman, p.99). Because the “aesthetic and the spiritual are both wide-ranging, deeply human and universal categories, it is not surprising that there are manifold relations between them” (Coleman p. 183). In religion and art, spiritual and aesthetic, we are left with the crucial questions of the nature and role of faith. By nature the creative process is in the spiritual realm, a faith process, not knowing what comes next” states Liz Vail, (Wasko-Flood,1986, p.20).

Also, I would add that in practice, or experience, “you are either in, or you are not there at all” (Salomonsen in Wallis). As we return to shamanism and especially neo-shamanism, such techniques that imply direct observation from the outside, detachment and objectivity are impossible ideals or perhaps more so self-fulfilling prophecies. One cannot sit on the edge and take notes because being present necessitates taking part” (Wallis, p.254). This raises the
tangential fear of going native, a long-standing dilemma within the study between western and non-western societies. However, by the researcher ‘holding the high ground’ it may be a failure to take the spiritual realities of its subjects seriously and denying the people’s equality with ours. Engagement rather than detachment may open the possibility to deep insight and the best description possible, especially in shamanism, which is committed to an experiential spirituality that depends upon personal and individual insight. Through this way it may be where one is able to exchange the notion of “irrationality” for “multiple realities” (Wallis p. 255). While this is not the focus of this paper it intends and serves to contextualize that the subject of shamanism is heavily loaded and often called into question by many investigative critics across numerous disciplines.

SHAMANISM IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Since the 1960’s, with the emergence, growth and development of the Feminist movement and its ultimate crossing into all disciplines, early on shamanism was given voice in the arts. With the coalescing of civil rights issues, the art forms of the time, the availability of new research on goddess traditions and women shamans it reemerges as a vital subject. Joan Halifax’s works, The Wounded Healer and especially Shamanic Voices, A survey of Visionary Narratives is especially important in this regard. It provides first hand voices of living women shamans from around the world, but especially in the Americas, as dynamic and vital voices of the female shaman. In the United States, Rosie Plummer (Paviotso, Pyramid Lake, Nevada) and Brooke Medicine Eagle (descendant of Chief Joseph, Nez Perce - Daughter of the Rainbow of the Morning Star Clan) are two excellent examples. “Follow the instructions communicated in the dream by the spirit beings who bestowed power on the healer (power to doctor)” states Plummer (Halifax, p. 195). Brooke Medicine Eagle (Nez Perce and Sioux) intones the importance of “uplifting, balancing, surrendering, receptive, allowing, nurturing, building a rainbow bridge from tribal to dominant culture and back again, to help heal the earth.” She continues, “The Indian people are the people of the heart. In the philosophy of the true Indian people, Indian is an attitude, a state of mind: Indian is a state of being, the place of the heart. To allow the heart to be the distributor of energy on this planet: to allow your heart, your feelings, your emotions to distribute your energy: to pull that energy from the earth, from the sky; to pull it down and distribute it from your heart, the very center of your being- that is our purpose” (Halifax, p. 91). This is a truly succinct statement of the shaman and always with the centrality of the heart. From my own experience all Indian people I have known refer to themselves as being soft-hearted, of a good heart, the drum itself signifying the heart beat of the nation.

The Language of the Goddess by Marija Gimbutas is perhaps one of the strongest works with its extremely detailed documentation through text and imagery of major symbols and their accompanying forms found in sculpture, ceramics, painting, and on-site ceremonial centers and structures. The common feminist elements of nature and body imagery, emphasis on prehistoric spirituality, goddesses and rituals emerged. Depicting ancient rituals, many feminists sense the power of art connected with religious liturgy. But perhaps rather than duplicate these, they have chosen to reinvent and invent their own, thereby healing the split or dualism between sacred and secular. The visual language of primordial images can often serve to unite opposites of life and death, ordinary and extraordinary. Many women found integrating the whole could best be created through community and was found to be satisfying and valuable work. That there is a great deal of work to be done to last a life time and enable them to apply their art to pursuits they believed to be larger than art for art’s sake (Wasko-Flood, p. 20-21).

In the past decade with the rise of the ecology-environmental movement many voices have converged (ecofeminism, ecoaesthetics, ecopsychology). In The Reenchantment of Art, Suzi Gablik, 1991, she equates the metaphysical with the ecological. She argues that the artist must transform personal vision into social responsibility and articulates a new set of values for art,
based on a sense of community, an ecological perspective, and a greater emphasis on spiritual renewal. While extending these ideas through lectures, a non-polemic way to reach her goal and in keeping with her ideals resulted in her writing, Conversations Before the End of Time: Dialogues on Art, Life, and Spiritual Renewal, 1995. (Tromble, p.18) Three resources that excellently address this convergence from differing points of view are the following:

The Aesthetics of Environment, Arnold Berleant 1992
Spirit and Nature Why The Environment is a Religious Issue. 1992
The Voice Of The Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology. 1992

In Spirit and Nature, Audrey Shenandoah (Iroquois) states, “Change in the individual has to come from a feeling for the earth.” Also, in the same text, Sallie McFague discusses “the convergence of ecological and feminist modes of thought. Her theology shifts the emphasis from dualism to holism, from authority and hierarchy to participation and community...Failure to see our ecological place is the cause of the planet’s woes. The central calling of all religions should be a unifying planetary agenda that stresses peace, justice and the integrity of creation” (Rowe, p.86).

In addition another influence that factors in to this milieu is The New Age movement and its many and diverse dimensions. One in particular is the Shamanic Consciousness Movement, also associated with this is neo-paganism. All of these elements converge here in the present time to increase the complexity of this topic (Hanegraaff, 1998).

From these many diverse sources a strong pattern has emerged since the 1960’s and the subsequent decades as we moved into the 21st century. Now we find these concurrent directions to be, often mutually supportive, and in many cases their various activist causes have moved from the fringe or margins of society to the mainstream. Generally, these forces share two identifiable elements, the embracing of the nonmaterial and a sense of interconnectedness. As Judith Antonelli’s essay states, “Spirituality a worldview based on energy, a perception which includes the nonvisible and nonmaterial.” Spiritual art “is the bridge between the material and nonmaterial worlds.” (Ostheimer, p.12). Artists, and in particular women artists, have witnessed through an immense amount of work, that they have reached audiences that could not have been imagined even a decade ago. Although their artistic expressions have changed over this time, their underpinnings have strengthened and increased their impact. This speaks to their diligence, perseverance, continuity, commitment and devotion to making a difference.

I have selected three contemporary American women artists who embody these elements and even more specifically are heir to shamanism in varying degrees. They are all engaged in healing--water, people, the earth, and the planet as a whole. This paper provides only an introduction to the nature of their work and its importance.

BETSY DAMON

Betsy Damon is perhaps most identified with “her incarnation of The 7,000 Year Old Woman, a piece she performed publicly on May 21, 1977, in the streets of” New York. (Recovering Her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess) As one of the major directions in Performance Art of the 1970’s private ritual was publicized. In this performance she was covered with small bags of pigment, standing in a circumscribed circle of powdered pigment ‘a female space in a hostile city’. From this place she slowly removed the bags, ‘the burden of time’ and distributed them to male and female onlookers. She noted girls often treasured the bags, while boys threw them at each other. “In this feminist giving process, Damon hoped to rediscover the part of herself she did not know--‘her woman line’--and simultaneously to communicate it to others” (Lippard, p. 167).
Several gallery exhibitions and workshops, one in Soho that I had the good fortune to attend followed this event. In the Soho exhibit small delicately pigmented bags were suspended from strings on supports. These bags were vessels for communication, messages or gifts to be delivered or exchanged by the participating audience. Notes of prayers, hopes, dreams, a flower could be given or taken using these “little sacks”.

In her Blind Beggarwoman series Damon “collected stories and secrets orally, making herself a repository of a new female history” (Lippard, p. 167). In the 1980’s Damon made her first trip to China as part of her research of sacred water sites. The relationship of water quality to Chinese life and culture has long been a spiritual one. The Fu and Nan Rivers of Chengdu, the capitol city of Sichuan Province, have been its continued life for over 2000 years. Only in recent decades has it become degraded. One example of the visual impact of her initial work there was the cleaning of the polluted waters, vividly demonstrated by Damon’s ritual washing of white silk in the dirty water. As a result of her early visits there Damon conceived of the project of the Living Water Park, invited by the Director of the Rivers’ Renovation Bureau. She designed and directed the construction in collaboration with scientists, planners, and landscape architects. It mobilized all of these people working around the city separately to work together. The fountain surface is designed from a microscopic photograph of water. Flow forms are in the shape of birds and the ginkgo leaf, symbol of the city, to recall life coming from water. Damon stated, “My role was to bring forward what is innate in Chinese ontology and build a contemporary language related to water cleaning.” The $2.5 million project was initially begun in 1996 and completed in 1998. The work has been heralded in Environmental Design and published in greater detail in their publication Places, Winter 2000.

Again, Betsy Damon was in China for an extended period from the fall of 2000 helping people revitalize their communities through creative water projects. For her project in the city of Behai, on the South China Sea, she designed a system to restore an endangered Mangrove Estuary. It includes an environmental education center as well as an integrated treatment system for the estuary. These projects are collaborative and she works with a bioremediation specialist from MIT. Her work has now given rise to projects in multiple cities in China, including Beijing, and Hangzhou, which are embarking on their own projects. She continues her collaboration in China and the United States. Exhibitions in the United States have documented this work and often are accompanied with her own fiber hangings, tanka-like pieces in aesthetic and presence.

Currently, Betsy Damon is founder and Executive Director of Keepers of the Waters--Environmental Solutions and Cultural Possibilities. This organization is headquartered in Duluth, Minnesota, near where Damon resides in St. Paul, Minnesota. Duluth is one of the primary sites in the United States, along with Portland, Oregon, Flagstaff, Arizona, and Bellingham, Washington, which are pioneering water quality projects. This organization brings together “the fields of art and science, to help communities focus on water quality concerns in a unique and visionary manner” (Keepers of the Waters Newsletter, Fall 2000).

Involved with watershed issues that address the oceans, lakes, rivers, and aquifers, their efforts cross the disciplines and include biology, environmental education, writing, landscape gardening, engineering, graphic design public art and community organizing. This grew out of her experience in the deserts of Utah and her decision to devote her life to water. She chose to not criticize but to provide a dynamic alternative. Damon states “Changing a static system takes time. I found that it always works much better to not get involved in critiquing that system. Instead, invite people out of it”....”You get to be the hopeful contradiction to that (discouragement and despair). It invigorates people to understand water. It invigorates us on a heart level. You all know that and you don’t even have to say it” (Keepers of the Waters Newsletter, Fall 2000). In Fall 2000 at their first leaders training workshop, Damon stated that “The biggest question that guides me is how can I hold up the largest vision while at the same
time doing what’s possible and practical at that moment?” (Keepers of the Waters Newsletter 2000)

From an etic (outside) viewpoint she is called an ecofeminist and environmental artist. This seems insufficient. I would contend that her work is an extension of her own personal individual spiritual journey that she embarked upon over thirty years ago. If we compare this journey to a shaman from a tribal culture, certainly the context is different and with those differences it is difficult to know where another’s spiritual journeys led them. What happened to them after 10, 20, or 30 years on a shamanic path. The center of Damón’s work remains healing. In her specific case, a monumental challenge and task of healing the waters of the world. However well she succeeds she has definitely found a way to make a difference.

MARY BETH EDELSON

Mary Beth Edelson is another artist who is conscious of assuming the shaman’s role. After the death of one of her children, Edelson was given the following advice by her friend Laura Gregory: “Based on the way your work has changed in the past in relation to major changes in your life, I want to project what you think would possibly be a change of a similar magnitude, and how your work might change as a result. Do a piece that develops in that event.” “This was a painful suggestion,” says Edelson, and “while trying to avoid thinking about it I had the following dream: I was cleaning my place, it was a mess--there was a large fireplace in the room with a roaring fire--I threw everything into the fireplace to get rid of the mess--the more I cleaned the messier the room got--I began to throw chairs and tables into the fire--a large bear came into the room--and I threw her into the fire. And then in horror, as I watched her burn, I realized what I had done--this beautiful wild beast was burning--she was holding a cub in her arms. Suddenly I realized that the bear was me and that the cub was my child, but I also knew in that moment that the love that the mother and child shared was so great that it transcended the flames.” This dream resulted in the Fire Altar, a ring of fire resting on a while baked-enamel kitchen table. According to Edelson, “the table served as both a familiar object and an altar. I thought of the fire as the instigator of transformation of sacred and profound change” (Edelson, p. 59).

Following Edelson’s initiatory dream she completely changed her mode of work. After 18 years of painting she began creating ritual objects and rituals as a way of empowering her and other women. Edelson recounts: “In my early performances, I tried to re-create the liturgy of the feminist movement as I perceived its evolution through the ‘70s. Briefly, the liturgy presents our move from isolation to our earliest attempts at communication through our anger, rage, and protests, and then to our community, celebration and the grounding of our activism, basically the story of how we came together. When the liturgy is chanted, we seldom break into words--the communication is made through sounds. From releasing our anger, we gain control and find ourselves. As we define ourselves, we discover our commonality. Through these processes, we are able to reassure and enjoy each other, we unleash our sensuality and begin celebrating. The liturgy or ritual performance, mirroring this process, ends with celebration, our emergence and the beginning of a new culture. I believe some transformation on a small or large scale should be experienced during the performance. Unless that change happens, the performance is not successful” (Edelson, p. 59).

In 1977, Edelson journeyed to a cave in Grapceva, Yugoslavia where worship of the Mother Goddess was enacted during the Neolithic period, and performed a ritual of purification and meditation. She gives the following account of her experience: “Aware of the privilege of having the cave to myself, I felt like the center of the universe. My mouth was actually inhaling the cave, all of it and breathing it out again. The cave contracted and expanded with my rhythms, and shimmered on its way back and forth. I made a pact with the cave: it would tell me some of its secrets in exchange for my rituals, rituals that it had not seen for millennia. I in
Edelson’s account of her experience brings to mind the ancient Chinese proverb, “When a question is posed ceremoniously, the universe responds.” Indeed, this is the essence of shamanism (Edelson, p. 60).

Edelson’s piece, Speaking Bitterness, is meant to be a participatory ritual. “We are asking you to speak your bitterness in the hopes of getting rid of it – or lessening the bitterness through making a formal end to those feelings in public… What seemed to happen was that I never intended to do performance, but at certain times I felt it was imperative to act things out—mostly for clarity and to intensify the statement. What I was really looking for was ritual that came from our culture, not a stagnant procedure, but a spirited heightening of our collective energies that we created together and made up as we went along. (Mary Beth Edelson discussing her 1981 performance with Cheryl Lynn Bruce, Speaking Bitterness: a purification rite for deep winter, HP #14, 1981.) [1988, Spring-Summer, #4-42, High Performance, p. 39]

“In the ‘70s I presented a powerful, autonomous female who created and performed her own rituals, overthrowing contemporary stereotypes right and left—especially that women in Western culture cannot or do not take their spiritual destiny into their own hands. The process I used to define spirituality in feminine terms was activated by and through creative ritual as direct access to metaphysical experience. My rituals also provided resistance to the mind/body split, by acknowledging sexuality in spirituality, thus reconciling the experience of a united spirit, body, and mind. These rituals symbolized the stories of our lives, our history, our transitions, our needs, and the healing of our wounds, in psychological, political, and cultural terms. This does not fulfill any male stereotype about women that I have ever heard of, but instead overthrows and revolutionizes powerful, heretofore unspoken, stereotypical assumptions that women do not originate their own spiritual processes, let alone create a new form for these processes, applicable to their own lives (1989, April, New Art Examiner, p. 36).

Two of Edelson’s other major works from this time and particular sensibility are Memorials to the 9,000,000 Women Burned as Witches in the Christian Era and Your 5,000 Years Are Up! She goes on to write in a response to Thomas McEvilley’s criticism of her work, “I have moved on from that work and the positive metaphor of Goddess (my use of Her was not meant to be taken literally) that helped me through a passage to selfhood that was otherwise locked because there were no other positive authentic female models of “enablement.” My work since the early ‘70s include that photographic work and the later work in which my body is covered, installations, conceptual pieces, artist’s books, sculpture, ritual performances, paintings, and my recent drawings and on-site wall paintings. My work is not freeze-framed in the ‘70s, as your presentation implied. During the ‘80s, Goddess, spirituality, nature for me have evolved to ecofeminism and participation in the activist Green ecology movement which interprets ecology in the broadest terms to include human liberation, and economic and social agendas as inseparable from the liberation of nature. All of these elements—Goddess—spirituality—nature—ecology—became contributors to an overarching concept called “new paradigm” thinking in which the properties of the parts can be understood only from the dynamics of the whole…–and this is where I place my art as we approach the ‘90s” (Edelson, p. 38.)

Her more recent work and exhibitions have often found critical responses to her continuing efforts to marry form and content. The following review excerpt is an example.

For the most part Edelson uses symbology in an evocative and informed way. One can be sympathetic and even encouraged by her positive and hopeful attitude, but it is hard to see how this new work functions beyond a reworking of hackneyed symbols. As such, one is left with the question of how such work, limited to proffering iconographic solutions, illustrating current events, or...
recording personal dream imagery, can make any real changes to the issues that are referred to because of the unconscious narcissistic constraints placed on the form of the work (Faust, p. 102).

“As the artist explains in a catalogue interview accompanying the show, Universal Pictures, this generalist philosophy is “a broader analysis [that] crosses disciplines and attempts to be nonhierarchical, ecological, oriented toward networking, and shift[s] from the idea of domination and control to that of partnership and nonviolence, while being flexible enough to continually make new interpretations” (Dolan/Maxwell, p. 43). “In the absence of a standardized and universally understood visual vocabulary, any attempt at a universal art by the artist will be subject to ambiguities and subjective interpretations” (Costa, p. 102).

“By the mid 1990’s Combat Zone empowered women through direct action. This center became a meeting place for those in need of information or counseling. In addition to various advocacy services for adult, teenage, and homeless women, the center offered self-defense workshops as well as “gender-sensitivity” sessions for men in an effort to curb the incidence of domestic violence. These programs were presented in combination with general information services offered through on-line computer networking, video displays, books, and posters. Combat Zone can be viewed as part of a larger feminist art project, past and present, that supports such grassroots actions as public demonstrations against rape and domestic violence--those orchestrated by Suzanne Lacy and other since the ’70s, for example, or the exposes of the art world posted on the streets by the Guerrilla Girls. Part of Creative Time’s continued support of alternative public art projects, Combat Zone helped to reassert art’s potential for creating a dialogue with the public on critical issues” (Gookin, p. 93). Her “most extensively reproduced and critically debated poster, Some Living American Women Artists/ Last Supper is one of the iconic feminist images in the art of the early 70’s.”

Perhaps, more familiar of late is the photo still from the Hollywood movie, Gloria, where Gena Rowlands’ character holding a revolver, from the movie is silk-screened onto sheets and pillowcases of a double bed, in an installation from 1992. An entire series of film stills, including Thelma and Louise, followed with images of women assuming or “assimilating the most extreme forms of masculine violence and aggression to the detriment of her own femininity” (Edelson catalog). These are produced most often as silkscreen prints on chiffon with mixed media. They become a major component in the Rescripting the Story: Mary Beth Edelson 1970-2000, traveling retrospective-like exhibition. The exhibit includes work from all the periods beginning with the Story Gathering Boxes, begun in 1972 and an ongoing project. It is perhaps the most reminiscent of Betsy Damon’s early work in that gallery goers participate by writing their own real stories and leaving them in the story box for others to read. Their participation not only bridges the gap between the viewer and the artwork, but also welcomes them into the art making process. Rescripting the Story also serves to document a good deal of the range of feminist art throughout this time period. Not that her work is intended to stand for it all, but she does examine many of the persona of women during this time as seen in religion, politics and popular culture. Visually the mass media representations of women beyond the stereotype, such as Gloria, are visually the most powerful and provocative. Edelson’s work continues to be critically examined across women’s studies, photography, psychology, and theology. She remains, of the three artists profiled, perhaps the most closely identified as a producing visual artist.

DONNA HENES- URBAN SHAMAN
(MAMA DONNA)

Since the 1970’s she has been making Celestially Auspicious Occasions. With ecological consciousness and world peace as her central themes. “In 1980 she conducted a 3-week ritual healing residency with the patients and staff at the Manhattan Psychiatric Center. Her diary
documents the process of this extraordinary project. Her notes and musings explore the realms of sanity, insanity, creativity, and spirituality as they are perceived and handled by many cultures.” This resulted in the publication of Dressing Our Wounds in Warm Clothes.

Another of her installation events, Esteemed Offerings for a Positive Public Spirit followed and drew international response to an altar with her tending a fire three nights and two days in New York.

In 1985 the Christmas Tree Show in the Brooklyn Arts and Cultural Association, transformed her years of collecting discarded skeletal white trees into an installation of sculptural theatre. Noted as one of the two strongest works in the show.

In 1988, during the Blue Moon, the second full moon in a month, she transformed with a month long installation the Islip Art Museum grounds and held several participatory events, culminating in closing ceremonies on May 29 and 30. She predominantly works in fiber, creating webs, in this case with dark blue, red, and white ribbon, incorporating music, both acoustic and electric and dance. Part of the ritual event included everyone receiving a bit of bluing used to whiten clothes and clean air. “We women should use our clean-up energy on the planet.” Then initiated a discussion of clean houses, mothers and Earth. In the shamanistic tradition said Henes, “people are encouraged to finish their own dreams, vision, sense of worth. My job is to facilitate that” (High Performance #44, winter 1988 p.79).

Perhaps, one of her most well known performances is Chance for Peace, Chant for Peace. Today, she continues to remind everyone to do his or her little peace.

In 1996, she published Celestially Auspicious Occasions: Seasons, Cycles, and Celebrations. This chronicles “seasonal rituals from around the world and the natural phenomena that inspire them.” The book is “a fascinating cross-cultural exploration of the seasonal rites and rituals inspired by these heavenly events” (Henes, 2001).

Reverence To Her: Part 1 Mythology, the Matriarchy, & Me is a CD celebrating “the glory days of the Great Goddess in cultures around the globe and through the ages.” It is a “spoken word celebration of the stellar and earthly goddess in all of us. A three part exploration of the feminine in myth, religion, and archetypal psychology” (Henes, 2001).

For approximately the past three years, 1998, she has produced and published her own quarterly newsletter Always in Season—Living in Sync With the Cycles. This emanates from Mama Donna’s Tea Garden and Healing Haven in Exotic Brooklyn, from where she works in ritual consultancy, holding public healing circles, the next one to be held Oct. 24, 2001, and a wide range of ceremonially and celebratory activities to further the cause of world peace. She just returned from an extended pilgrimage—Walk Your Talk in Quebec, Canada.

In one of my more recent correspondences with her she shared this Urban Shaman’s Prayer, “All these days after the blasts there are still immense clouds of smoke coming from lower Manhattan. I keep looking for the towers that I used to be able to see from my window. I cannot compute that they are not there. Last night (Sept. 19) the sky was crystal blue, the buildings were lit with thousands of twinkling lights and backlit with a billowing mass of white smoke. It was breathtakingly (can I say) beautiful. What happens when so many souls leave their bodies at once? The glow from their combined spirits was electrifying. May it purify our intentions and power our resolve for peace” (Henes, 2001).

CONCLUSION
When I began this inquiry into contemporary women artist shamans I had hoped to find the answers to many esoteric questions I had about how shamanism has lived on within the lives of these three women. I discovered that this initial intention involved more knowing about and collecting information that would give me the answers. Instead, what I found was that all of them are highly engaged in action, doing things in the world to make a positive difference, to make life better for people and places. Their spiritual journeys and searches led them to applied and practical applications of healing and transformation for themselves and others. Ultimately, they all became very much about and in community. I see each of them, in their own way, as models for spiritual growth, human development, local and global action in their and others’ communities. Is this really that far from the shamans of ancient times or tribal cultures?

NOTE

1. Here is one definition of new paradigm: “A constellation of concepts, values, perceptions, and practices shared by a community, which forms a particular vision of reality and a collective mood that is the basis of the way the community organizes itself” (Fritjof Capra and Jay Ogilvy, “Paradigm and Paradigm Shifts,” Revisions: The Journal of Consciousness and Change, volume 9, no. 1, p. 14).

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At a time of globalization, fusions, and flattening of knowledge, when to be connected and cool equals being everywhere at once without being anywhere, when to earn money becomes the ultimate goal, the filament of life clings to the superfluous and even to the absurd. We may find ourselves burying certain values in order to adopt others which are quite different from ours. For many through, this is recognized as a comfortable zone to exist: speed becomes synonymous of progress; all should succumb to efficiency, to lightness. To function within the superfluous is very in. It is a way of being in the world where the search for meaning is not a concern.

Paradoxically, our times is also inward-looking, characterized by introspection, remembrance, reconstruction and feeling. There is search for inner, personal direction, a movement towards self-reflection that, simultaneously, makes of the mirror the favorite metaphor of our epoch.1

Our dynamics is that of bouncing between essential ideas full of intentions as, for example, concerns with ecology, equality, the charging of war criminals, and the politically correct, the gratuitous, futile and vain expressions, recognized in the actual syndromes of narcissism, over-consumption, the importance of wearing designer clothes, and so on.

As we all know, the movement of life is very intense. Therefore, it becomes imperative to know how to filter, to select, and to condense the informations received by our senses. In this way, one is able to identify the essence of one’s existence, in order to articulate it into meaning.

To question or not to question, this is the question.

A few years ago I started a collection. Following in the steps of Polish/French film director Agnes Warda—do you remember her latest film The Gleaners—I glean images. But unlike her, instead of collecting slices of the outside world and then putting them together as a film to make sense out of them, I isolate pieces that ALREADY carry encoded messages which only the collective mind is able to unravel.

My collection is composed of shapes that have a resemblance to forms we know, that we encounter in nature or in man made objects. At first they seem “mysterious”, coded, as if we could almost know what they stood for. These almost-recognizable images represent the structure of things, an attempt to touch the basis, the essence of our surrounding world.

Ripping off the superfluous or, on the very contrary, concentrating on what is beautiful in things, has proven to be a very rich experience. On the viewer, I impose the task of decoding these forms, of reconstructing their meaning. These dubious, clean-shaped symbols I end up with, seem to activate people’s imagination and also to establish zones of common knowledge. It became even more fascinating to detect the emergence of a collective consciousness due to the fact that many viewers would identify certain images in a very similar way.

slides 1 to 20: “Codes”

Historically linked to ritual sacrifices, a great number of symbols have lost their meaning throughout the changes of times but still persist in our societies. The symbol, an element that contains multiple meanings in search of the essential, is in itself stability in movement. It moves from one generation to another via the cultural consensus of a people or a nation. When values
fade in favor of globalization, homogeneous knowledge, and the razing of traditions, what is left is an empty shell of meaning that once was. A *déjà vu*. We are SURROUNDED by forms that float, that we allow to “decorate” our environment without being able to trace their origin.

Many of these enigmas in my collection that at first glance seem to be empty shells, acquire new meaning when activated. Some of them, while contemplated, will call for the same interpretation while others will have their meaning vary from one viewer to another. In this way, meaning emerges and is renewed constantly.

Like chips of a computer, each image is a carrier of information of the world. Once assembled in groups, these forms generate vital energy: they seem to turn into new symbols and signs, formal structures of essential ideas and wonderful vain expressions of beauty.

*slides 20 to 33: “Cardinal Points”*

Just an interesting observation from Emmanuel Kant, the well known philosopher: he wrote that if we would live on a desert island we would let down the decorations: no ornament or sign at the entrance of our hut, no tattoo on our skin . . . it would not be necessary to communicate whatsoever . . .

But we do not live on a desert island . . .

The dynamics of our times mentioned in the introduction of this paper is very present in my works. At first glance, they are associated with ornamentation. The parts that compose the works are playful, colorful, repetitious, and GLORIOUSLY geometric. However, as soon as one moves beyond appearances, the works become enigmatic organisms.

Artists are trained TO SEE what they look at. In this manner, through repetitive gesture, like a ritual, I started to take down these shapes that are everywhere. One after another, daring to grasp the structure of things, the essence of what holds the world . . . the divine unity of things, of images, of man made artifacts, I now note perfect, pure forms.

Pythagoreans worship the beauty inherent to perfect form. Order and proportion is what matters. Plato greatly admired Pythagoras . . . He promoted the idea that a few basic ideal shapes underlay all the myriad . . . shapes of the visible world. At the core of his philosophy there was a set of true circles, perfect spheres, symmetrical cubes, and equilateral pyramids. The platonic ideal of perfect forms . . . advanced the notion that the cosmos consisted of these ideal forms that represented Truth, Good, and Equality . . .

Searching for essences, I initiate not a return to something ancient, but perhaps a continuation of something that was interrupted or forgotten in art. It is like when you are in the process of remembering a song and while you try to sing it, since you do not remember the words anymore, you make up new ones . . . In this way, I dive easily into harmony and order, rhythm and symmetry, beautiful proportions, and finally, into the DIVINE mathematics.

Is there anything more pleasant than constructed harmony? Harmony is a result of the fundamental repetition of a work and its subdivisions. *Harmonia* is the link between the whole and its parts. In Latin, beautiful is called *formosus*. FORM! The beautiful, synonymous of form . . . This is what my latest work *Composition for one thousand codes*(1999-2000) is about: the relationship of form to beauty, which addresses itself to sight and intelligence as well.

*slides 34 to 40: “Composition for one thousand codes”*
Summarizing, in my work as an artist, the records of visual traces of our collective memory, the signs and symbols that surround us are appropriated, compiled, transformed, schematized, digitalized, and organized to form large wall installations. Ambiguous, allowing for polysemic reading, they make us question the cultural codes they embody. Here we are confronted with the images that form us, inform us, and that organize our thinking. These include medieval coat-of-arms designs, images taken from Brazilian folklore, diagrams from a Monet landscape, pieces of machinery and even road signs. These multi-coded images can lead us through a city or guide us on a spiritual voyage.

I consider my work to be gratuitously elegant, superficial, easy and light as well as loaded with meaning. Influenced by Plato’s idealism, I want my work to be both beautiful and a meditation on beauty.

In my personal view, art is not life, with all my respects to Joseph Beuys. My work attempts to synthesize the objectified pleasure of the beautiful, the seductive, and the journey to meaning. I am amazed at the ease I find working on a computer. Away from constructed time my thoughts are anchored beyond somewhere. . . . Through a movement which seems of progressive nature, gestures are repeated, one after the other as the infinite oil pastel lines in the past. I practice this ritual with fresh concentration, a sort of detached attitude but at the same time with devotion and intense passion.

Some may call it obsession. But I believe that this, THIS is the experience of the divine. Thank you.

NOTES