

THE MAGICAL ACT OF DOING

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...the poet is the last person who is still speaking the truth when no one dares to...the first person to begin shaping the new consciousness when no one else has begun to sense it...these are two of the most essential human functions. Pound once said, "artists are the antennae of the race." whether or not we have an audience, this strong visioning and shaping of a master poem informs the conscience of generations to come. — Diane di Prima



Most people think the power or the effect of art comes from the seeing of the art. Thus the focus at least in western art has been doing work to be shown, to be seen by as many people as possible...or at least by someone else. This has caused the development of art as a product to be packaged and sold, to be created with at least one eye on what is sellable, the latest art trends, which is presently politically correct, what issues and styles are currently acceptable to the audience, to the galleries, to the art critics and experts. This blocks artists from doing their visioning and dreaming function, turning them into agents of the present order of things.

The dynamic of seeing art is not the fundamental dynamic of art. The doing of art is art's basic dynamic. The doing of art and having other people see the art work are two separate dynamics, events, rituals. The seeing of art is what the viewer or the listener does in her head. The doing of art is the ritual of creation, is what the artist does. In reality, this ritual has more to do with the act of doing than the act of creation. When a child first draws crazy lines on the wall, he is not trying to create something or express himself or show you something...but to do something for some effective purpose that our linear logic cannot grasp. The crazy person does his insane rituals, not to express himself but to keep the sky from falling to make pain go away. And it works. The sky does not fall down. Maybe it is because of the rituals of the insane.

The very act of doing changes the whole universe. This is a key principle of magic. By doing a ritual or by speaking a spell, you can effect change. Painting a picture, doing a dance, writing a poem, any act of art can be a magical ritual, the doing of which has nonlinear effects. Seen in this way, most acts of creation are private rituals done in personal caves. What we usually think of as works of art are aftermaths of art.

The cave artists operated in this magical way. Their art was not for looking at. This is why they did their rituals and paintings in very dangerously inaccessible, pitch black bowels of caves. The purpose of these paintings and rituals was to magically effect change in the world (the past, the present, and the future as well as the life after death...) or to communicate with the universal powers. This magical effect and these communications were caused by doing the art. The act of doing this magical art released an energy, some of which remained within these caves, making them "holy" or magical sites. The walls of a lot

of these caves have layers upon layers of magical drawings done by different tribes over time spans of hundreds or thousands of years. These tribes may have been drawn to these dangerously inaccessible caves by this special energy, released through the doing of art, stored in the caves, radiating out of the caves, and recharged by every new act of magic art done within the cave.

This magical action art is not the only kind of art. In the time of the cave art, there was body art which was meant to attract and turn on the opposite sex, and other kinds which were meant to strike fear in the enemy, etc. all through the medium of seeing, hearing, experiencing the art product. There were also arts of decorating, educating, and entertaining which used the medium of seeing/hearing/experiencing by a spectator. Moreover, the action art and the seeing art at times were combined.

The problem with our modern frame of art reality is not that we do art to be seen, but that we have forgotten (or have been made to forget by those who control what is to be seen and what is not) that the power of doing art is the main power of art. The private performance is a way to regain the magical power of the doing of art. Defining what is a private performance is an interesting way to enter the magic. I define it as a ritual that is not for an audience. It is something that has to be done, something you may not even want to do. One of the easiest to frame as a private performance is a shaman going to his secret spot to do rites nobody will see to open himself up for channeling visions that he cannot personally use or tell anyone about. We have seen other obvious private performances the child, the madman, the artist alone doing art. We can add things like doodling, singing in the shower, playing invisible drums to the radio when you are safe alone in your room. It is something that has to come out. It is something too silly, too taboo, too sacred, too intense, too raw, too vulnerable to be done in public, to be expressed. This may be where real art begins. This kind of doing by one person is clearly private performance. It has an element of secrecy and undercover. I can remember singing on my bed along with radio, quickly stopping when anyone opened the door, not wanting to be exposed, not wanting to lessen the magic.

This hidden ritual not only kept me from insanity (some people will say that makes it therapy, not art), but opened nonlinear routes of possibilities not only for me, but for everybody. The private performance gives the artist freedom from limits and shoulds and morals, so she can go beyond where the society or culture or the consciousness has reached, to connect to the universal power. By doing this she brings a new universal area into this reality.



In my work, I have been trying to discover how private performances affect the outer world. The most obvious and least controversial way in which they affect the outer world is that the doing of a piece that no one other than the doer will know about or experience psychologically changes the doing artist. By his relating to the outer world after the private event, the change is transferred to the outer world. In our culture which focuses on masses, on bigness, and linear cause effect process, this small, intimate, changing effect is usually dismissed as not meaning very much, not doing very much. In my work, I have been applying what I understand of the principles of quantum physics. Physicists have found that there are events that cannot be explained by normal linear ways of looking at things. Linear seeing turns out to be a small frame on top of a much bigger frame they call the chaos theory. In this what first appears to be a small event with little or no effects sets off a pattern of effect. This pat-

tern sometimes even fades or disappears for a time. Then it reappears, causing a wide reaching chain reaction, whereas an event that at first appears big and important usually, after a burst of energy, fades in effect. When seen in this light, the changing effect that is transferred by the artist from the private performance to the outer reality by his living in that outer reality becomes a very powerful source of change.

But this is not the only source of power for change. Artists are surrogates of society who go into the reality of dreams and myths and universal truths. Private, sacred performances give the artists a bubble that is free of taboos and limits. Within this bubble the artist explores the world of visions and dreams. From this place, the artist broadcasts patterns of new possibilities through non-linear channels, through her body, back to the outer world. (modern physicists have described the sub nuclear particles as patterns of possibilities.) Some of these patterns of new possibilities are stored in the artist's body and in the site, to be released within time; but at the time of the magical private act, a large amount of these patterns of new possibilities are released directly into the outer world through nonlinear means, causing nonlinear chain reactions of change.

Both the direct broadcasting and the radiating through time of these patterns of possibilities are experiential mediums. These mediums are much less vulnerable to being co opted or mistranslated than are documentation or art products. Documentation and art products are linear mediums by which private performances have an effect in the outer world. This is because the broadcasting and the radiating of new possibility patterns are transmitted on physical, psychic, subconscious energy levels...rather than on intellectual, visual, political conceptual levels.

I have been experimenting with this nonlinear effect ever since, both in my private and public work. In my private work, it is the relationship between me and an active other within a special reality beyond the normal taboos and social constraints. Within this intimate reality, the active other cannot be seen as an audience.

I sometimes put ads in the straight casting papers for actors. The ultimate purpose for this is not to get actors for my work (although once in a blue moon I find an actor in this way). The ultimate purpose is to expose society to the magical alternative reality that this kind of work, the kind of person I am, and the kind of body I have, represent...exposing it one on one, personally. By this magical confrontation, seeds and time bombs are planted within the active other. She becomes a carrier of the magical virus. The straight actor probably will never do weirdness called performance (although that is always a possibility), but somewhere down the line, the seed will grow, the bomb will explode. When Annie Sprinkle and Veronica Vera turn an average person into a sex star

in their private studio, when Linda Montano teaches someone to be a saint at her retreat, when I train my Chero apprentices, we and our "students" become metaphors which open the possibility to society at large. By that average looking woman becoming a sex star, society is closer to becoming a sex star. By riding within metaphor reality artists reach the realm of myth, dream and the universals.

My "public" work is firmly rooted in my private work...so much so that it is not useful to try to divide it up in that way. When I do a public piece, I am not doing it for the audience. It is public only because an audience would add to the energy, or at least will not get in the way. Elements of my public pieces arise from the private, secret, intense roots. The purpose of the private piece is not to create these elements for the public pieces, but to do these elementary acts within a scared freedom. These acts then find their way into the public performances.



When the linear reasons are cut away from the rehearsal process, what are usually called rehearsals can be seen as private rituals, valid within themselves, whether or not they lead to public performance.

My public pieces usually have a private aspect to them. This was especially true seven years ago when I did free bi weekly performance series at the University of California at Berkeley. Although it was open and advertised to the public, usually only one or two people came. This forced these people to be an active part of the performance (even if they walked right out). This created a private space in which magic could happen. The acts performed there have found their way into my public pieces; the documentation of these pieces have gotten me grants and bookings. But these, as we have seen, are only linear effects. There were nights when nothing seemed to have happened. But years later, the people have come back to say the performance was a turning point in their lives. I have stopped trying to get a linear understanding of what happens in a performance, and rather just do, merely perform...and let the magic do what it will.

Public pieces can turn into private pieces. In my work, there comes a point, which is different for each person, where there is a change from passive audience to active participant. Even watching becomes an act of involvement and vulnerability. At this point, a large number chose to leave the performance, which is in itself a vulnerable act of involvement. This would turn the performance from a piece that my cast and I are projecting for the public to an act, a magic ritual which all of the people there are performing together.

In reality, a large percentage of my public ritual work is made up of private and secret sections. Some of these private, secret sub rituals take place before the performance, or within a hidden cave, locked box or vault, away from the experience and knowing of the audience. What happens within these secret sub rituals greatly influences what happens in the public performances, even though there are no physical or linear links between the public and the secret sub rituals. When the secret sub ritual fails to reach the taboo breaking intensity, the public ritual falls flat. Kristine Ambrosia has taken this aspect of the nonlinear principle further by performing secret rituals alone on a mountain top or in a hidden room while her public performance goes on many miles away.

Other sections of my public performance are private because they are only experienced within the mind and/or body of the person, or between the bodies of two people. I have several techniques I use to achieve this. For a large portion of the performance, the people are blindfolded and are directed not to speak. In this way, what she experiences comes without the influences of others. She is taken alone into caves without knowing what others have done

or how they have reacted. She is told she can do whatever she wants, but not to reveal what happens within the room. This creates a freedom from taboos and from outside pressures.

As we have seen, the secret, hidden quality has always been an aspect of the kind of art we have been talking about today, one of the reasons to use secrecy is to draw a circle around the magic work that protects it from the prevailing taboos, morals, and judgements. This is especially important for a student just starting out, who cannot distance her artistic self from social pressures. But this circle or secrecy is not just for protection. The shaman did her art within secrecy because this focused the energy released by the act back upon the act. This feedback cycle intensified the power of the act. A good example of this is when Barbara Smith sat nude on a comfortable mat for a night in a room. Men could come in one by one, and do whatever they wanted with her, but what was done in the room could not be revealed. For years after, rumors of what happened in that room grew up wildly, continuing to release imaginative energy. Smith has done public performances in which she had tantric sex. But on deep levels, this may be much less powerful than the performance in which she may have just sat on a comfortable mat. The magical trigger was the public secrecy.

All the qualities and hidden channels of effecting, healing, changing, dreaming, myth giving powers that we have seen in private performances are also present in public performances; but in public performances layers of seductions, limitation, consideration, taboos, morals, ways of being politically correct are laid on the art and the artist by the powers either of the establishment of the “alternative” power systems of the present society or both. When I do a public piece, I am not swayed by how many people come or how many walk out, because I am still functioning, and rooted, in the channels of magical change that I became aware of by doing private performances. This rooting in private rituals gives the artist freedom from, and weapons against, the corrupting concerns of money, fame, competition, good taste, acceptance, and the search for an audience. This freedom is important in shamanistic art, which is art that acts for nonlinear change, because, by bringing new dreams, new myths, new visions into society from the universal underworld, it will radically change society. By being linked to a power system, be it establishment or alternative, the artist is trapped in a basic conflict of interest, because she has aligned herself either with protecting the social system or with a certain manner of change, when her true job is to carry the new visionary myths from the gods into this world through her body.

When the artist is rooted in private rituals, it becomes clear that she is not an agent for society, or some political movement, or the art galleries and art “experts”, or even for her own individualistic imagination. Instead, she is an agent of the gods, of dreams, of visions and myths. This causes reactions in society, especially when the piece is public. Karen Finley is criticized for limiting her audience because she offends them by her words, anger, nudity. An artist who is rooted in the private channels is not affected by this attempt to curb the power of the art by strapping it to audience acceptance and agreement. The power of a Karen Finley is the taboo breaking energy she releases into society. This societal pressure to tame art down, which usually sounds very reasonable and comes even from liberal sources, is very hard for the artist to resist who is not familiar with the hidden channels of change.

Another example of society’s attempt to rechannel the change coming from shamanistic art is what an “art expert” told me “your work is...not art...(because) it doesn’t address the concerns...(which are a) part of the current art dialog, whether it be mainstream or ‘alternative’...curators and presenters are (not) obliged to show it.” She went on to say that I should stay “in (my) own sphere”, and that I don’t need the public channels that galleries represent. Which is true. But galleries and the people who think what is in galleries is the full range of art need the artists, not the reverse. The magic of private performance is needed to expand the narrow, shallow river of “the current art dialogue,” controlled both in content and depth by the art experts. Fortunately, there are galleries which are willing to go into the magical unknown represented by private performances.

Another way society tries to deball the magical power or private performance is to co opt it by absorbing it back into the normal reality. What happened to Paul McCarthy is a classic example. Paul is, or was, the best of the modern shamanistic performers.

In the ‘70’s, he did performances in run down motels. He transformed into a rubber masked trickster who called forth realities of vomit, of messy meals of dog food, mayo and catsup..., of wearing women’s clothes...of hard ons dangling out of girls’ underwear fucking dolls, tubes up asshole and down throat and up the nose..., of fucking alone in a motel bed in mayo..., of walking bloodied barefoot on glass. Friends watched via video in another motel room. But most ran out in shock. This shock is a special kind of shock. It is not the shock of when a youngster uses obscenity or when a guy exposes himself. It is not a reaction or an aggressive act. It is more like culture shock. It is a reality shock. It is when two different realities come together, collide, and combine. This happened around Paul’s pieces. Most people could not handle it. But the shock released incredible amounts of uplifting energy.

By the early ‘80’s, Paul had been discovered by the art scene. He was invited to the S.F. Art Institute to do a performance. The big hall was packed with students. Paul did his rituals, which in the past would have cleared the room, shocked and physically disturbed most people; but this time, the audience laughed and clapped at everything this clown did. They even drank catsup with him to show how hip they were. There was no shock, no magic, no colliding of realities.

Paul stopped, defeated. He was cut off from his private, magical roots by being transformed from an outlaw magician into a hot artist. He told me the day after he felt the loss of the magic but did not know how to get it back. After a few more performances, he stopped performing...which is a great loss to us all. He was defeated because he underrated not only the importance of his private magic, but how much it threatened normal reality.

