

A GLIMPSE *of the* CONCEALED

This book could not have been written without an 'alliance' of many years standing with the artist Pé Vermeersch. I was first touched by the *epiphany of the sublime* in her choreography *Blondes have no soul* in 2003. What became a repeated revelation has had a profound and lasting impact on me. Great art is the site of knowledge, insight, and *science* that are entirely its own. The artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger explores the wordless and conceptless 'knowledge' of great art in her publications. There is a phallogocentric misconception, deeply embedded in Western culture, that 'knowledge' is inherent to 'science', while 'sensitivity' (an extremely wide spectrum in which all sorts of things have been placed) is inherent to art. Science and art can both embody and convey knowledge, both can spring from intuition. And both sensed that what was essential to them was parallel: that they both - albeit in entirely different fields (artistic/textual) - felt and elaborated the same 'approach to things'; like two rails on the same track, which never touch yet lead to the same destination. Ever since that realization, an exhaustive and endless process of reflection has been pursued on either side and in

both directions. I have 'learned' from Pé the artist (not necessarily via words, and more than can be readily summarized here), because a knowledge, a 'science' dwells in great art that can be deeper/work more deeply than 'text-science', a knowledge that takes shape in the aesthetic work, beyond any verbalization. I should also add that Pé is one of the very few artists with the ability to develop a profound, *verbal* reflection on art - in general and her own - without robbing it of its intuitive, creative power, as occurs when one involuntarily 'applies' one's own concepts to one's own artistic creation (a phase that often marks the end of artistic creativity). From the outset, moreover, I have viewed Pé Vermeersch (as well as Bracha Ettinger, say, or Akira Kasai) as an *essential* artist; by which I mean one who is socially and historically *necessary* (bearing in mind that I am first and foremost a historian with an indelible awareness of the *longue durée*), even if her or his work is not immediately known or recognized more widely. Pé has therefore been this book's muse and co-creator, which ought to be read not as some metaphorical or romantic tribute, but as a just and heartfelt acknowledgement.

Paul Vandebroeck
with an essay by Pé Vermeersch

A GLIMPSE *of the* CONCEALED

body
intuition
art

This book is dedicated to:

my mother, **Margaretha Libbrecht** (*Steenokkerzeel, 3 December 1925*),
she truly is what her given name means

my little sister (actually my big sister), **Gabrielle Vandebroeck** (*Leuven, 10 April 1949 - Leuven, 18 April 1949*), almost unknown in the world of people, but not in the other one

my daughter **Marmer-Montserrat Vandebroeck** (*Kortrijk, 23 December 2008*),
the radiant little star that lights my way

PREFACE

The Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen - KMSKA) with its rich collection of paintings, sculpture and works on paper from the 14th to the end of the 20th century, is the only museum in Flanders that is recognised as a scientific institution. It not only carries out art historical research but also on the history of the museum and the collection, preservation and presentation of art. In addition, the museum also has attention for cultural-anthropological research. The scholarly research results in exhibitions that are both thematic and monographic, relating to ancient and modern art to contemporary art.

An exhibition is usually the result of many years of research, thinking, reflection, consideration and testing beforehand. Contacts with people who are both like-minded and thinking differently contribute to the further development of an exhibition. There is the germination of the idea or subject that then grows, is pruned and reaches maturity. While an exhibition is for a particular duration and after it ends the artworks and objects are each returned to their owners or curators, there is the permanence of a publication. A catalogue or book is the paper reflection of scholarly research. Sometimes this can be a lifework. A *Glimpse of the Concealed. Body, intuition, art* of Dr. Paul Vandenbroeck, curator and academic researcher at the KMSKA since 1980, is one of these. This weighty book is published in response of the exhibition *Encounters/Ontmoetingen. About art and emotion*. that the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp is organising in partnership with the MAS|Museum Aan de Stroom. A subject the curator Paul Vandenbroeck, in connection/reflection with choreographer, visual artist and dancer Pé Vermeersch, has worked on since 2004. It is about the universal experience that art produces, from antiquity to the present, regardless of the 'pur-

pose' or the 'use' and the form of expression. The exhibition must, in the first instance, be felt and experienced, dance is an essential part of this.

The benefit of the publication is that everything that cannot be included in the exhibition - for whatever reason - can be shown in the book. In addition, the research is expressed here into words. It is about therapeutic ritual and artistic creation, time and body, life and death, the sacred and the sublime, expressionism, realism and abstraction, black/white and colour, form and style, the indescribable and the nameless, the look, the evil eye and staring, sense, meaninglessness and meaning, matrix and metamorphosis, art (painting, sculpture, drawing, weaving, embroidery, assembling, dancing...), gender and style, energetics and aesthetic creation ... Essential to that is the body and the experience of the body and this is globally, across boundaries.

It is not an easy-to-read book; it requires attention. The content makes you think, gives insight, brings a different view on creation, production and creativity and to art and artistry (or what is usually understood by it). It takes courage and daring to put this out as a museum. We do that because the KMSKA surprises, enriches and connects.

We want to thank the MAS|Museum aan de Stroom for the enthusiasm which made the exhibition possible and that provided a platform for it. In addition, our gratitude goes to the publisher BAI for the faith they have placed in this publication which is again beautifully produced.

DR ELSJE JANSSEN

Director of Collections
Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp

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CODA. PÉ VERMEERSCH. INVITATION TO THE EXPERIENTIAL JOURNEY

AFTERWORD I THE PROJECT THAT MARKED THIS BOOK

Time, body, aesthetic opening
Mental time and physical time

AFTERWORD II



Bracha Ettinger (°1948)
Mamemento fluidus - MaMedusa (2015)
 Video still
 Tel Aviv, Braverman Gallery



Tessa Farmer (°1978)
The Coming of the Fairies (2011)
 Mixed media
 London, Danielle Arnaud Collection



Bracha Ettinger (*1948)
Ein Raham - Crazy Woman (2015)
 Video still
 Tel Aviv, Braverman Gallery

Introduction

1 | 'Appearances are a glimpse of the concealed' (Anaxagoras, B21a)

This book 'revolves' around an in-between that can only be experienced intuitively. Between the fingertips of Adam and God, for instance, in Michelangelo's celebrated fresco in the Sistine Chapel, or two not-quite-touching triangles in bakhnoug weaving from Tunisia. There are plenty of examples¹ of the non-space across which the spark of inspiration can leap, of the seemingly impossible and paradoxical situation in which creative energy is released and gives shape to what is so ardently desired, yet is essentially unnameable. The tension in this in-between space - a tension that can not/must not be released - is that of transfer-in-the-borderspace. Inspiration flows from a dimensionless non-space, a receptive state full of paradoxes that are a source of creation and freedom.

Figurative art's basic principle of representation and symbolic substitution renders it unable to depict this zone of creation; it can, however (depending of its quality), embody it and allow it to be sensed. Non-figurative art is, perhaps, better suited to the evocation of such a dimension. This book includes several examples of artworks that depict 'nothing' and 'narrate' nothing. The West has constructed an artistic canon around both abstract and figurative art, just as every other culture has assembled an artistic canon of its own. Although we are aware of these canons, they have not determined the artworks chosen for our present purpose nor how we have approached them. We also address 'non-canonical' works - creations

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¹ It may also exist in a 'conceptual' dimension as, e.g., in the Christian tradition between the arcane dimension of the Virgin Mary - *he theotokos* or 'bearer of God', *he chora tou achoreitou* ('space of the extra-spatial', 'vessel of the imperceptible', as she is called in a mosaic in the Chora Church in Constantinople) - and her humanly communicable, palpable experience of motherhood.

that are not included in either the figurative or the abstract canon. Works which the Western aesthetic canon considers not to be art at all can likewise have the capacity to evoke the glimmer of the aesthetic impulse.

The art explored here is deeply rooted in the most inaccessible abysses of that strange union of body and soul that constitutes the human being. We do not resort to the rationalizing detour of concepts or symbols to give shape to these depths; this art calls on us to be genuinely receptive to what lies beyond both emotion and idea. With neither narrative nor discourse, it touches something for which no concepts are available: the paradoxes of existence. These depths appear in their most potent guise as an epiphany of the Sublime, the aesthetic category that refers to the almost-unbearable, the more-than-beautiful, with its almost painful intensity. It allows itself to be felt rather than defined.

What aesthetics are we talking about here? It has to do ideally with artworks, both abstract and figurative, which contain the Sublime within them; which (mostly) arise from an unpredictable stratification; which can almost never be read immediately; and which invite us to participate in an almost physical experience. And in which, moreover, the connected 'state' of the artist with a primal material/life and his or her detachment from the ego can be sensed. It is through these manifestations of the Sublime that art can exert its transformative power. This energy can be present in a wide variety of artistic media, in highly varied cultures and across different periods of time. It has to do with an aesthetic creative force that strikes us as fundamental to the importance of art, its *raison d'être* even. Creations from different times and cultures may appear alongside one another: prehistoric artworks and installations, textile, video and creations that are hard to classify. All the same, they blend almost seamlessly with one another: what emerges is not what separates cultures, but shared sensibilities. Which does not

amount, however, to equalization or merging. We are looking for what connects cultures in an essential aspect of their humanity through aesthetic creation rather than for what separates (or distinguishes) them.

We do not view this by any means as a purely spiritual process. Aesthetic creation occurs through animated ('en-soul-ed') physicality, the so-called psychocorporeal zones. The body and the soul/mind/psyche as a vessel of experience are inextricably linked to one another and to the act of creation. There is no pearl without mucus and the discomfort of an intruding grain of sand. The pearl is at once the material and the aesthetic sublimation and cure of a tormenting experience. The sublimity of the pearl is universally seen to lie in its restless growth process in the unknowable, fecund primal matter of the mollusc's flesh and its 'processing' of a traumatic, irreversible intrusion.

These works invite us to view paradox and stratification as positive principles. It is a matter of epiphanies, of paradoxical appearances of that which cannot appear: the connecting and confusing network; the concealing and palpable-making veil; the unknowable 'face', frightening and protective; the ordering fabric and proliferating jumble; the dizzying leap and the oscillating sense of the edge; coordination and interweaving; the inkling of presence; the diffuse site of beauty, the paradox between veil and disclosure.

The transivity of the artwork

What is it that can touch us in an artwork of which we know nothing, the creator of which remains anonymous, and of which we might not even know in what place or era that unknown artist was active? What is it that can touch us in an artwork originating in a culture which, for whatever reason, repels more than attracts us?

Why do I find an old carpet, knotted by an irrecoverably anonymous woman of the Rehamna tribe from the barren plains above Marrakesh,² to be of sublime beauty? Following a gradual and almost imperceptibly metamorphosing structure of diamonds and geometrical forms, the space bursts open in a red expanse, in which three primitive

² Illustrated in: Paul VANDENBROECK, *Azetta. Berbervrouwen en hun kunst*, Brussels-Ghent, Paleis voor Schone Kunsten/Ludion, 2000, cover.

and at once magisterial forms loom up, equal yet not identical. This is a grandiose beauty that has sprung from a subservient and ordered life, which is nonetheless capable of something extraordinary, or holds such a dimension within itself.

Why am I moved by P.J. Harvey's *The Dancer* or Marie-Nicole Lemieux's performance³ of the aria *Nel profondo* in Vivaldi's *Orlando furioso*? The former is a 'creating' artist, the second an 'interpreting' artist, yet the singing of both women is an aesthetic elevation of the profoundest affects, which do not encompass anything inherently 'beautiful', but which are sublimated by a musical form and its performance.

Why am I profoundly touched (more than that, it 'unleashed' something in me that I now suspect to have been decisively important to the making of this book and of the exhibition that is its ephemeral and experiential companion) by Pé Vermeersch's *Blondes have no soul* – a dance without a 'story', without a 'meaning', sustained entirely by the sublime character of the movement and a few short, wordless chants; a work that makes possible a transfer in one single movement, not played out in time, from basic affect to highly sublimated manifestation? And which, beyond any dogma or religious conviction whatsoever, creates a sacral time?

Why am I always touched by Thomas Gainsborough's *The Artist's Daughters* (c. 1758)?⁴ It shows two girls, one of whom looks at the viewer, while the other focuses on her sister, placing a hand on her head. Yet the artist initially had the first girl make the gesture, before effacing this part of the composition and reversing it, without entirely overpainting the initial relationship. The quiet scene expresses an unfathomable, loving complexity, characterized by shifting mutual intensities.

A qualitatively different, yet equally elusive depth is found in certain Romanesque *Sedes Sapientiae* or in icons of the Mother of God (or, in the East, of the Buddha or a bodhisattva). The face, with no specific expression in the eyes, mouth or other 'details', conceals and reveals a compassionate exaltation, entirely free of individuality. The image

³ Antonio Vivaldi, *Orlando furioso*, RV 728, ed. Jean-Christophe SPINOSI, (*Tesori del Piemonte*, 24), Opus 111, OP. 30393.

⁴ Canvas, 40.6 x 58.4 cm. London, Victoria & Albert Museum, no. F9 (Forster Bequest, 1876).

may 'represent' the Virgin and Child, yet its formality manifests an arcane nobility on the female side, something that cannot be depicted, only evoked. What 'speaks' here cannot be reduced to a doctrine or thought. It lies 'below' that, deeper than a story, a conviction, an emotion.

An equally strong, similar effect can, however, be generated by collective performances, developed over many generations in rural or urban communities. I have witnessed *ahwash* (High Atlas) and *ahidous* (Central Atlas) performances in Morocco, for instance, in which the male participants are ranged in a crescent as musicians, singers and dancers, and the women as singers and dancers in an opposing crescent. They include antiphonal singing (*responsoria*), in which some verses are repeated endlessly and which have assumed their form over the course of time (although new variations can always arise). Dance movements themselves are collective: sometimes almost imperceptible undulations, bends, vibrations. The way the performers place new emphases depends on the energies of the moment. 'Strong' performances can be entirely sublime: they evoke the most powerful emotion, and embody an aesthetics that wholly transcends the 'beautiful'.

Certain Russian choral songs have a similar effect on me (I do not speak Russian, so whatever it is I experience has nothing to do with the words being sung): a constantly varying intensity, a spectrum from whispered quiet to joyful outburst, an undulating and expansive use of exuberance and control.

We know that medieval worshippers could not control their tears when viewing a traditional procession,⁵ yet a person with no religious belief told me in 2010 how he found himself by chance in the middle of a religious procession in Málaga, and was so moved by the uplifting beauty of the collective event that his eyes were soon blurred by tears. As a liberal atheist, he was inclined to be resistant, if not dismissive of such things, so it was not a shared religious background that 'programmed' him to be receptive. And yet he was part of it; he was moved by it.

⁵ Jan VAN DER STOCK, *De Rugerio picture*, in Rogier Van der Weyden, 1400-1464: *Master of Passions*, ed. Lorne CAMPBELL and Jan VAN DER STOCK, Leuven-Zwolle, Waanders/Dauidsfonds, 2009, p. 21.

What is it that seizes us at such moments?

The artwork embodies a technical quality, a mastery of materials and technique – the dimensions that have been studied in such depth by art history. This applies both to body-related arts (in which the body is the material) and art forms separated from the body. Yet true mastery goes further; it is not the technical quality that inspires: there are countless artworks with an extremely high level of technical 'skill', which nonetheless do little to move us inwardly. The inspiration or enthusiasm – literally the fact of being possessed by a god – occurs through a transfer via matter which, paradoxically goes further than that matter. This inspiration ideally has a transforming effect. We can be changed by the artwork for the good – Thomism was on the right lines in this respect in making a connection between the Beautiful and the Good – provided, at least, that we are receptive to it.

If we do not offer the artwork such openness, then we merely consume it, without reciprocity, without interaction. We are behaving in that instance like a torturer who refuses to look his victim in the eye, for fear of being gripped and changed (for the better). What Emmanuel Lévinas wrote about the origin of ethics in the other's gaze also applies in another dimension to the aesthetic field: the artist has drawn from his or her treasure and has offered it to the world, to whoever is willing to experience it. It is a gift that always remains valid. And to use a gift without gratitude is to abuse it. It is therefore right to expect a reciprocal gift from the audience – as occurs, for instance, in Japanese performing arts like *Noh* – in the form of openness and affectivity. Aesthetic production has become a commodity in Western culture, which consumers must use up as much as possible in order to build their 'symbolic capital', their status in the social field, and the size of their ego. It is a race to partake of everything, which then must be 'critically' judged (but according to what standards?). This judgement, communicated to others, likewise serves our own symbolic capital, fuelling our ego. For the most part, incidentally, this judgement is not a very personal one, based on a real experience, but participation in a judgemental *sensus communis*, peculiar to the specific social field to which we belong. It can likewise consist of uncritical praise, or, to the contrary of harsh and unjustified rejection, since these possibilities are tacitly expected within the social field. This explains why the mechanism has certain similarities with an

audience's 'spontaneous' applause in response to the appearance or the words of a dictator. The latter is a specifically identifiable person, but the socially governed *sensus communis* in a 'democratic' regime is no less coercive: not participating in the act of judgement might not be life-threatening, but it can certainly put one's social prestige at risk.

The transformative power of the aesthetic work functions in parallel with that of the ethical appeal, and touches on the origin, the ontogeny⁶ of art. It is not a matter of a thought in this zone and not even of an emotion, but of a fundamental urge that takes shape at aesthetic level – a shape that embodies the power to inspire and to transform and that also conveys the affect. By 'affect', we do not refer to a 'recognizable' and nameable emotion, but to a 'charge'; its transfer is even possible between an artwork and an observer with no knowledge of either the artwork or of the culture that produced it.⁷ This is not, however, a question of 'individuality' and 'otherness', or of the 'identity' that is endlessly discussed within the present social debate. What seems desirable to us is a possibly intermingling individuality, giving and exchanging, in a wide network of cultures that neither cling to 'identity' as right-wing ideologies do, nor glorify the 'other' as a purely innocent victim, as in the current Western politically correct discourse. The world as not only a statics, but also an energetics of constant judgement, exploration, co-emergence, and co-responsibility. This 'intercultural' capacity does not correspond with the common view of 'multiculturalism'.⁸ The art

⁶ We immediately think in this instance of a leap backwards in time, of art in 'archaic' or 'primitive' cultures, which is indeed how 'primitive' we aim to be. But it does not mean that we wish to present 'retro' art: We want to bring the same transformative dimension into a contemporary context, in a highly complex and differentiated society. Unless we seek the relevance to the contemporary and future order, the project is not really necessary. There are other ways than this of dealing with art, but that is not what motivates us.

⁷ As long as current culture continues to speak of 'other' cultures, it testifies to its unconscious desire to preserve its 'individuality' or to be absorbed in the 'other'. This thinking remains embedded in a phallogocentric pattern of separation or fusion. As long as we immerse ourselves in momentary alterity at all manner of festivals, we will *continue* to celebrate carnival. Symbolic inversion tacitly perpetuates our own identity and that of the Other. Veneration of cultural difference is accompanied by a collective identity crisis, in which we reject our own cultural traditions and fill the void with alterity.

⁸ We aim to approach this politically correct concept of 'multiculturalism' or 'interculturalism' in a different way. In our

discussed here comes from many cultures and periods. It is customary within the current politically correct vision to bring together artists and performers of different origin in a single work, or to combine artistic products of different origin in a new work. There is an implicit conviction that this shows 'respect' for other – i.e. non-Western – cultures and artists, and a recognition of their 'equivalence'. Considerations of this kind play no part in our approach. We are interested in the connective elements between cultures; this does not mean ideas and feelings that are shared, more or less haphazardly, by certain cultures, but the anthropological/aesthetical rationale in the deeper layers of being human. A rationale that is not interested in religious, ideological or cultural boundaries, but which continues across these visible boundaries like an underground stream. This domain lies far below the conceptual and even the emotional field: it is the human psychocorporeal energetics in its aesthetic drive and power ('psychocorporeal': arising from the borderspaces between psyche and the physical body).

The body is abundantly present in contemporary art and culture. But which body? We 'forget' all too frequently which body we are talking about. The 'type of body' that is presented is of the highest sociopolitical importance. It is no coincidence that the social order is sometimes described in English as the 'body politic'; the body is the most fundamental, most experiential and 'palpable' metaphor with which to communicate about the vision of human beings and society, the functioning of the coherent organism, individually and sociopolitically. A 'body-built' physique entails a different model of society than, say, a body in which the emphasis is not on the musculature. The body in the artworks explored here is rarely a closed one. It frequently refers outwardly; it announces a transition towards a body-transcending structure.

view, it is not relevant to show art of different cultures in a juxtaposing manner, any more than we would considering it relevant to place performers of different origins alongside one another on stage. Juxtaposing equivalence (the latter is itself a dogma) is based on a belief in an underlying separation/delimitation; what is new is that the different cultures are no longer ordered hierarchically. However, the recurring use of words like 'understanding' and 'tolerance' is evidence of a difficulty with this alterity. You need not be tolerant or understanding of something pleasant and interesting, only of something unpleasant. The 'politically correct' moral imperative demands, however, a profession of faith in 'equivalence' and equivalent juxtaposition. I do not personally consider people and cultures to be equivalent.

In many cases, it is actually 'empty' – from a 'realistic', phallogocentric point of view⁹ – yet powerfully charged in a 'matrixial' sense. It is often a transitive, borderlinking, transcriptive, shared, layered and subtle body. It is one, and it is not-one. This is nonsense from a logistic point of view, but from an existential standpoint it is a fruitful paradox.

We focus on non-symbolic and 'religious' (in the etymological sense of the word: re-ligare, 'to bind again') art/experience. The focus is not on morally charged or politically or didactically tinged art, although this is not to say that we consider working with the art selected here as apolitical. Our approach entails an implicit social stance, namely that it is necessary now, to immerse ourselves in 'underlying', stratified and subtle energies; when seeking an art that 'touches', that 'moves', not in a manner bound by emotion or idea, but deeper. Why, for instance, do migrant communities, working-class people, homemakers, and other groups, feel no affinity with the art forms presented in the current system, and certainly not with contemporary Western art? Because within (post)modernity, its ideas about art and its art itself, the soul is taboo; it is seen as an obsolete notion held by 'outmoded' cultures (which, incidentally, conflicts with the contemporary multicultural dogma, since it implies the non-equivalence of these cultures). The 'mind' (*esprit*, *Geist*) and the concept alone are treated as absolute: but those 'others' in the current social order do not feel part of this and hence do not feel addressed or touched either. Art is generally reduced in the cultural ruling circles of this society to a cognitive (judgemental), intellectual and sociopolitical question, which has the effect of rendering art powerless, of enfeebling it.

I mentioned the world 'psychocorporeal' a moment ago. The elements of this dimension are not separate essences: they are one, but just as much not-one. The 'energetics' springs from their interconnection. The imageless and wordless 'inter-

⁹ In representations of the Virgin Mary, for instance. Modern-day feminism has turned strongly against the cult of the Virgin, arguing that male power structures have frequently privileged it as a means of oppressing women. This is true, but it fails to recognize that the figure of the Virgin Mary was 'created' essentially 'bottom up' by the anonymous mass of Christian women and men. Pé Vermeersch has called this image of Mary 'probably the 'emptiest'/freest figure in Christian art'. Her ostensible 'emptiness' is the underpinning of an immensely varied potential.

mediate zone' is closely bound up with the 'soul'; the Sublime is closely bound up with the border-crossing/border-linking and the almost-unbearably-Beautiful. In our view, this is what our culture needs most today; yet it is afraid of it: a fear that is assuaged by a ceaseless flow of artificially evoked, 'instant' emotions and also by a conceptual flood (driven by the desire for definition and fixation) and the obsession with high technology (the non-charge of which is experienced as the opposite of inspiration). In so much as the Sublime is pursued at all, it is in extreme emotion or the narratively expressible, symbolic domain.

Meaning(lessness) and sense-giving

The Western tradition demands 'meaning' from visual art, and 'insight' from its beholder. Certain music, by contrast, is accepted as 'meaningless', that its sense lies immanently within itself. Can we ask for the meaning of a Baroque fugue? The answer lies in the experience: we are transformed 'differently' by one work than by another, without having to ask what its 'meaning' is. Its sense-giving arises through its beauty and form, through its orientation to the 'I' (we feel directly gripped by it) and simultaneously by transcending that I. In other words: through the trans-subjectively transformative power of the music. Other traditions, such as Japanese Noh, operate in a similar manner. The genre does not function psychologically, or individualistically-emotionally, but allows egos to break through their narrow contours to more overarching structures and to filter their torments into the Sublime.¹⁰

The symbolizing principle, which works via absence and substitution with image or word, is the most visible in the official history of art. On the one hand, it responded for various reasons to a preferred pattern on the male side, while most visual artists (i.e. those considered as such by a consensus of professionals) were men, who inevitably gave shape to their gender-specific interests and preoccupations. On the other hand, symbolic thinking based on absence and substitution is inherent to all figurative art and is its canonical expression. Not all dimensions of figurative art adhere to this principle, of course: every artistic

¹⁰ Kunio KOMPARU, *The Noh Theater: Principles and Perspectives*, New York-Tokyo, John Weatherhill, 1983; Eric RATH, *The Ethos of Noh: Actors and Their Art*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Asia Center, 2004.

effort also has an inherent matrixial dimension. The matrix is a meaning-creating principle that is accessible to each gender, but with dual 'access' (her own prenatal intrauterine experience and her own potential for pregnancy, whether or not used) for a woman. The matrix is present and active in the 'male' world - and more specifically in the fields of music, poetry and the visual arts on the 'male side' - but is frequently 'repressed' by phallogocentric forces.

The formation of the official art canon has been defined very strongly by phallogocentric interests on the male side. Non-canonical aesthetics, conversely, is located in an immense terra incognita - an art production that has tended towards abstraction for millennia, and has developed a non-symbolic meaning-creation. This art - usually, but by no means always on the female side - has pursued the goal, albeit without theorizing it, of the imageless Sublime rather than the merely Beautiful. For centuries, this was tacitly squeezed out of official visual art in the West, although not only there. This reflected an obsession with the direct, probing and dominating gaze and the compulsion to represent the unseen.¹¹

In this book, just a few of the many manifestations of subsymbolic meaning-creation and transfer will be explored in more detail. We begin by attempting to clarify certain processes, which in our view are decisive within the collective formation of style (the creation and charging of forms, from extremely basic to complex). Style formation is, after all, a collective occurrence; style is an aesthetic phenomenon, but it relates to countless creations, most of which do not attain an aesthetic level of the highest order, the Sublime. Nor does a truly great artwork come about in a vacuum, but in an aesthetic humus, which it is nevertheless able to transcend. Although we would not presume to fathom the aesthetic process in its entirety, we would like to highlight a number of processes deserving of in-depth, long-term research.

The second chapter assumes a global perspective. Three aspects are explored: the fields of art (which aesthetic acts/occurrences constitute 'art' around the world?); the styles (in this instance, our

¹¹ In so far as the fields of the Sublime were approached, it was in such a way as to capture them in a figurative-sacral guise, or in artistic designs of numinous concepts such as, in the Christian tradition, the Eucharist.

limited knowledge obliges us to concentrate on visual art, although body and space-related arts are equally important); and the question of the spatial and chronological limits of a particular style or art form. By way of analogy, the lines of enquiry developed by historical linguistics and historical genetics will be mentioned here. It is established that styles may - though need not - coincide with ethnic or linguistic entities. When such congruence does and does not exist, and why this should be the case, is a question that cannot be answered as yet. Then there is the question of the link between style/technique/medium and social structures and gender. It is already clear that both (degree of social and economic differentiation; the question of gender) play an extremely important role and that the gender aspect is primordial.

The third chapter addresses the question of subsymbolic (non-substituting) meaning-creation/sense-giving: this reflects the fact that the border-linking, creative zone of the matrix will be foundational rather than the substituting symbol, which originates in a 'phallogocentric' binary zone of absence/lack/split versus substitution/satisfaction/fusion. It is here, in the matrixial processes, that affect-laden sense-giving is created, from a paradoxical in-between zone. The latter is deemed essential in a variety of cultures to the creative process. Paradox, crossover and rêverie maternelle are inherent to this zone. It is a site (actually a non-place) 'located' between matter and psyche/soul, without either one dominating. Bracha Ettinger's hermeneutic revolution is central to this.

A fourth chapter ('leap' or metamorphosis, resonance and paradox) deals with the crossover or leap to the almost inaccessible 'other side', which the artist must sense/touch: an elliptical movement towards the matrixial 'depths' of the self and others (as expressed in the Greek myth of Eurydice and Orpheus), with paradox as a site of creation and imagination in different religious and mystical transitions, and with reciprocal tuning and resonance - a process of rêverie maternelle (detoxifying re-presentation), a process that is fundamental to art as patient and doctor at once.

The fifth chapter explores the question of energetics, partly found, partly projected and partly created (as also, for example, in the so-called 'transitional object (or phenomenon)' in the development of the child). It begins by briefly discussing several manifestations of the energetic body in

differing cultures and cultural layers, and then the sacral, unknowable body and its energies. These are also located, however, in infinitesimal forms and in countless experiences and perceptions, no matter how fleeting or elusive. Aspects of overarching energetic bodies are also experienced in numerous cultures: the earth and its unfathomable forces, the heavens (astrology) - everything possesses an energetic character which, interacting cross-culturally with many factors, is experienced sometimes in the same way, sometimes differently. This is a huge field of research, of which only fragments have been studied within the wide range of disciplines. A few case studies in the field of dance explore this energetics.

The sixth chapter focuses on a number of energetic forms and combinations.

We spoke about a paradoxical in-between-zone, in which the decisive 'interventions'/impulses are born that determine the aesthetic character of an artwork. Is it possible to uncover this whole? I do not think so. We can only analyse a few processes that apply cross-culturally: fundamental processes that create the 'aesthetic underlayer', the 'style'. The inspiring imagination can rise far above this, which is when the aesthetically exceptional, the Sublime makes its appearance. It is impossible to establish or predict its place and capacity: there are no rules or analysable processes here. The creative work proceeds, like the cosmos, via systemic, identifiable processes and via unpredictable, one-off discontinuities. We look at a number of fundamental processes in artistic creation (of whatever culture): the psychocorporeal steps in stylistic formation, the matrixial field in meaning-creation/sense-giving, the in-between-space in the creative act, charging/sense-giving in and via energetic perceptions and spatial dispositions/constellations. The book does not set out to expose the final links in the creative work or in the functioning of the Sublime: that would be impossible and will, in my view always be so.

Reductionism/Admiration

The aesthetic work can be approached on an affective spectrum running from 'critical' rejection to absolute idolizing.¹² These extremes are inherent

¹² As a first-year art history student, I was admiring the Baroque altarpieces of Peeter Scheemaekers one afternoon at the Church of Our Lady in Aarschot - artworks that had contrib-

to a phallogocentric dualism. Western philosophy, psychoanalysis, society and art criticism rely unconsciously on the reductionist 'unmasking strategy' of modernity. Marx, Nietzsche, Freud - 'the masters of suspicion' (*les maîtres du soupçon*, as Paul Ricoeur put it) - set out to uncover the 'hidden motivations', scientifically underpinned since around 1850. Exposing, revealing, mostly undermining: 'what it really means is...'. This is masculinist and phallogocentric reduction. Critical detachment frequently degenerated into excessive distanciation, sarcasm and cynicism, the myth of the intellectual hero battling archaic delusions. What it came down to in this order was a choice between adherence to revealed truth or dogma versus the cult of meaninglessness, the loss of underpinning or 'centre',¹³ the pursuit of symbiosis versus wallowing in the despair of separation and loss. Dealing with this despair was one expression of the heroic intellectual. The opposite of this attitude was defined as what went on within the 'masses': lack of knowledge, fanaticism, acceptance, 'faith'.¹⁴ The possible combination of sym-pathetic faith and critical science remains an unresolved, yet central issue to this day. So long as we cling to dogmatic conviction, a critical sense that would entail a threat to dogma is indeed unachievable in the humanities. If we opt for a non-dogmatic faith, however, this is not irreconcilable with the most critical attitude¹⁵.

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uted to the many inspiring impressions made on me as a six or seven-year-old attending mass, until I suddenly and wordlessly became aware of this inspiration, at which point it dissipated (until much later). I was aware that many of my fellow students in that turbulent post-1960s period dismissed Baroque artworks like this as bombastic, histrionic and oppressive Catholic propaganda. I also sensed that this could not be a subject for discussion - it is impossible to adduce 'arguments' capable of shifting such rejection into admiration. This dismissal was fed by a drastic, almost 'hysterical' leftist self-censorship, which caused an irrational self-closure to countless aesthetic, artistic, and affective experiences - even though the individuals involved attributed their own 'critical' stance to 'reason'.

¹³ As, paradigmatically, in Hans SEDLMAYER, *Verlust der Mitte, Die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit*, Salzburg-Vienna, Otto Müller Verlag, 1948.

¹⁴ It is this 'critical modernity', which rejects 'accepting faith', that has evoked a fundamentalist backlash, such as 'creationists' in the United States or Muslim fundamentalists in Europe.

¹⁵ It is no coincidence, therefore, that 'official' religions come into conflict with one another on many points, but that the 'mystical path' within each religion offers an opening to the other/alterity.

Faith calls into existence

This book is written from an attitude 'of faith'. Not, we hasten to add, of dogmatic faith. In his sublime book *La Prière de l'absent* ['The prayer for the absent', 'Salat al ghaïb'], Tahar Ben Jelloun has one of his marginal heroes respond with surprise to the prayer of his companion, a Moroccan vagrant. The latter answers paradoxically: 'since when do you have to be religious to pray?' Prayer is an attitude that changes something and 'calls into existence': a solidarity, a capacity within the self, a reliance on a positive force. Many liberals and critical thinkers will dismiss this as self-deception, fantasy or delusion. Believers, however, will posit their own experience. No meaningful discussion is possible in this regard; the believer or the 'praying unbeliever' will perceive the impossibility of solipsism and even at the worldly, 'horizontal' level (the gaze of the other, which calls for ethical conduct: Emmanuel Levinas), the impossibility of not sharing (Bracha Ettinger). Possible link, connection, union: it is not a question of a theoretical nor an imaginary link. The mystical person too is holistic-experiential; it requires a total commitment of bodily and meta-bodily capacity. The prayer is an energy of faith in existence, of hope, of love for what is and can be. It may, but need not coincide with an idea of God. The faith that does not ask for or demand anything changes the 'believer', regardless of the actual existence or otherwise of the essence-+ to which the believer orients him or herself. Faith need not depend on the actual existence of a venerated being.¹⁶ Faith creates the conviction of a meaningful coherence, also outside any form of organized religion. It might be noted that practice can bring about a change: meditation, various body-related practices (provided they are holistic and not limited to strengthening solely the body) and prayer change the person him or herself; it is an attitude that creates consecration and dedica-

¹⁶ Whether the Virgin Mary, for instance, exists and lives in a hereafter is not actually of crucial importance, except to those who pray out of an ego-oriented desire (to obtain something for themselves). What is important is the belief in the feminine good-and-beautiful, in a *matrix* that is necessary for the 'warm' life. 'Mary' represents refuge, compassion, shelter, unconditional love, consolation - as does Guanyin or Kannon in the East. The conviction is that this attitude is a foundation of human existence itself, without which life would be a bitter task. 'Mary' is also about the 'beauty of beauty' as the Dutch artist Pavèl Van Houten has put it. The claim that Mary still exists is, in itself, so incomparably beautiful, that I am prepared to seek her until my death'; Pavèl VAN HOUTEN, *Maria causa salutis. De schoonheid van schoonheid*, Amsterdam, drukkerij robstolk, n.d.

tion, which in itself adds value for the individual and hence for others; it is about trust in existence. As Lao Tzu wrote in the eighty-first chapter of his *Hua Hu Ching*: '[...] trust the unvarying, positive nature of the universe'.¹⁷ No compelling arguments can be adduced on the basis of which we ought to cherish trust and love. The only 'proof' lies in life itself: without love and trust, life is a cold struggle, just as without openness there is no experience of beauty.

Aesthetic work, especially when it makes the Sublime palpable, is a high prayer without words, a 'Song of Songs'.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Hua hu tsjing. Uitspraken van Lao Tze volgend op de 'Tau te tsjing'*, ed. Hua-Ching NI, The Hague, Mirananda, 1997, p. 139.

¹⁸ This work is the third and final part of a project, the first stage of which was the exhibition *Hooglied* ('Song of Songs') and the accompanying publication (Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1994), and the second phase the exhibition *Borderline* with three accompanying publications (Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts, 2000). I will be eternally grateful for the realization of these two phases to Piet Coessens, director at the time of the Vereniging voor Tentoonstellingen 'Paleis voor Schone Kunsten'.

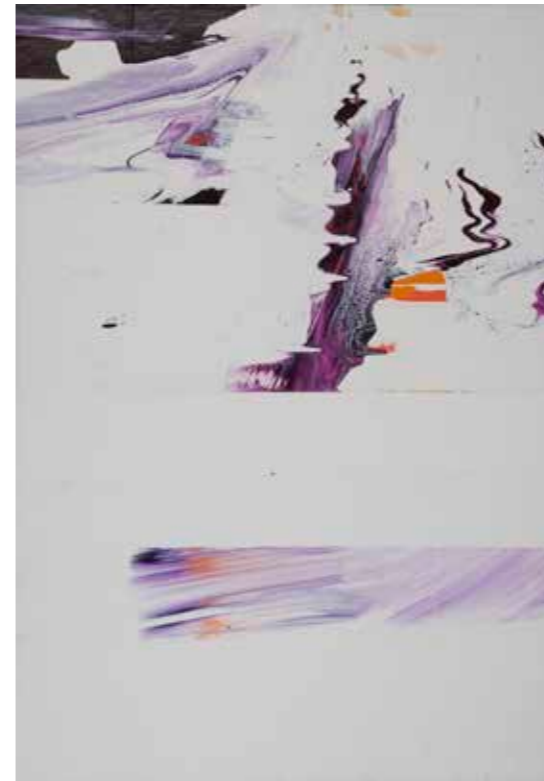


**Anonymous weaver Rehamna tribal confederation,
Haouz of Marrakech, Morocco**
Red rug with tiny white entities (19th century) (detail)
Wool & goat's hair, 300 x 155 cm
Private collection. Photo author

Anonymous worker 20th century
Plastered wall, repaired (2016)
Arcos de la Frontera
Photo author



Bram Bogart (1921-2012)
Witvlak (1969)
Pigment on canvas, 104 x 77cm
Private collection. Photo author



Bart Vandevijvere (°1961)
Decomposition (2009)
Acryl on canvas, 100 x 70cm
Private collection



**Anonymous weaver
South Tunisia, 19th century**
Bakhnoug (detail)
Private collection. Photo author

**Anonymous weaver
South Tunisia, 19th century**
Bakhnoug (detail)
Private collection. Photo author