

for various landforms, fish species, bird life, dance forms, weather patterns, star formations, and moral values. And I was tempted to speak of the reciprocal movement of the weavers as an image of harmony—between inner and outer, past and present, self and other. What I did say, however, was how important it was for my own work to acknowledge the plurality of the human condition, the dialectic at the heart of all experience between what lies within us and what we project beyond ourselves in spoken or written words, in works of art, in marriage, and in collective endeavors. “This,” I said, “is why Louise Bourgeois and Joseph Beuys have been seminal influences in my present work.”

Hardly had I said this than Carola moved to a pinboard on the dining room wall, moved aside a cloth that had obscured it, and showed me the portraits of these two individuals that she had pinned there—figures equally important to her. And it was then that I remembered that in Carola’s studio she had taped to the wall a sketch she had done of one of Louise Bourgeois’s spiders, which Bourgeois once described as “an ode to my mother. She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver. My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was in charge of the workshop. Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother.” With its resonances of spinning, weaving, nurturance, and protection, Bourgeois’s *Maman* also recalls the Greek heroine Arachne, a skilled weaver who challenged Athena’s own abilities at the loom, only to be cursed and transformed into a spider.

On the train back to Basel, scribbling notes, recovering snatches of conversation and fleeting impressions, I kept coming back to Heidegger’s comment on Dasein as always understanding itself “in terms of its existence—in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself,”<sup>86</sup> and of his image of a clearing (*Lichtung*) and of the spaces of light and illumination that sometimes appear in the darkness of our lives, moments when we can lower our guard and fully accept, and perhaps wholly embrace, the world in which we find ourselves thrown.

As the train crossed the Rhine, I put my journal back in my briefcase and made my way to the carriage door, ready to alight as soon as we pulled in to the main station. Two blue-shirted border guards (*Grenzschutz*) were stand-

ing over a young African woman who was struggling to insert a tiny key in the padlock of her bulging suitcase. One of the guards held the woman’s passport in one hand and his cell phone in the other. Spelling out the woman’s name, letter by letter, he then waited for a response from his controller. The other guard continued to observe the woman, now wrenching open her suitcase in the cramped space so that it could be rummaged through. I thought of the thousands of individuals risking death to cross the Mediterranean from Syria or West Africa, desperate to leave a place of darkness, danger, and despair and find their way into a promised land, a world of light. Will they make it? Will they see the land of milk and honey of which they have dreamed? And who will be their Moses, leading them out of bondage?

I had observed this humiliating scene many times before, but this time, possibly because Carola’s *Exodus* was still fresh in mind, I found it unbearable to remain passive as this woman suffered the indignity of being searched and suspected of being illegal, while I crossed the border as though innocent of any crime. But was I not complicit, simply by being white, in some great travesty of justice and was I not guilty of shrinking back into my self, lips sealed, hands tied, safely cocooned like the invisible pupae in Carola’s art, while another dark age descended on the outside world?

### Making It Otherwise

Arguably, artists are afflicted by a more than ordinary inability to accept things as they are.<sup>87</sup> This is not simply the result of an unusually critical or skeptical cast of mind, for its source is often some traumatic experience that has broken one’s trust that life will give one at least as much joy as grief, as much acceptance as rejection, and on balance be worth living. Disappointed in the shortcomings of the external world, one may draw solace from the world within, and what one creates for oneself *by other worldly means*—including the work of art. If the artist is like a refugee from the world where most people find a secure niche, then art is her sanctuary. If the artist is compared to someone who risks madness by living beyond the pale, then art is her asylum. And if the artist is someone whose devotion to work takes precedence over everything else, then art resembles the monastic life.

In its methodology, however, art resembles ritual.

Consider, the collaborative work of Christo Javacheff and Jeanne-Claude de Guillebon. Their invention of wrapping as a form of art has its origins in mundane activity. “Babies are swaddled, corpses have shrouds. Mummies are wrapped. We are wrapped, in clothing. Bandages wrap. And, really, since Christo, many of us have come to see our cities in different ways, as life imitates art. . . . Every time we see a giant building wrapped in plastic, our attention may well have been alerted because of Christo.”<sup>88</sup>

Art and ritual share one compelling element: they avail themselves of mundane images and activities in order to transform the way the world appears to us. Eating and drinking provide a basic repertoire of behaviors that are elaborated in rituals from the Eucharist to animal sacrifice and libation. Washing, weaving, spinning, stitching, and masking are primordial metaphors. And inducing vertigo through swinging or swaying is a means of altering consciousness among children in playgrounds everywhere, as well as Turkish dervishes, krishnaite swingers, and South Italian tarantists.

The Japanese tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) beautifully illustrates the way in which the kinds of heightened states of awareness that we associate with transcendence and religious awakening have their origins in everyday practices—in this instance, preparing, pouring, and drinking tea.<sup>89</sup> Thus the injunction “just heat water and prepare tea” resonates with key expressions in Buddhist thinking such as “just sit” in Zen practice, *just* implying actions free of all instrumentality and worldly distraction. In this vein, one might remark the way in which the host sprinkles water on the shrubs and flagstones outside the teahouse just before his guests arrive, so that the first sensation for the guests will be the aromatic smell of rain-rinsed cedar leaves. As for the details of the ceremony itself, every gesture and moment assists the consummation of a sense of intimate being-with-others, of harmonious relationship and an appreciation of mindfulness and simplicity. A cardinal rule of tea preparation, for instance, is that heavy, sturdy utensils should be handled as though light and fragile, and light utensils as though they are heavy. This method imparts a quality of momentousness to the handling of the bamboo tea scoop and ease to the taking up of the iron kettle or filled water jar. The implication is that the utensil and the practitioner are united in the act of lifting, so that the conjoined act is a reality in which they coexist. In this very Heideggerian view, the essence of the object is revealed in

the way it is taken up and deployed, while the essence of the person is revealed in the way in which he handles the object.

A late sixteenth-century poem by Sen Sotan captures this mode of apprehension in this way:

If asked  
The nature of chanoyu  
Say it's the sound  
Of windblown pines  
In a painting.

With gongs and incense, the warmth and bitterness of tea, and the sounds of steaming kettle and whisk against bowl, chanoyu engages all the senses, and every movement in the enclosed space of the tearoom is felt in the subtly changing air currents and shifting shadows. Sotan's poem suggests that the heart of the experience of chanoyu lies in moving beyond a one-dimensional, intellectualized grasp of things. An ink painting, when regarded as a work to be viewed, remains simply a perceptible object, distant and impersonal. What Sotan appears to be saying, however, is that when one ceases to externalize the object as something to contemplate and enters fully into it, one may savor it as an extension of one's own body and soul. The sound of the wind in the pines suggests an elusive depth beyond the surface of the paper and the ink.

Chanoyu is neither ritual for ritual's sake nor art for art's sake; it is an art of life that may transform our sense of objects and of ourselves in relation to objects, as well as our sense of ourselves and of ourselves in relation with others. In chanoyu the immanent is fused with the transcendent. The everyday becomes, through mindfulness and care, something so unfamiliar and extraordinary that we feel disposed to speak of it in spiritual or religious terms. But this transcendent experience is not, and cannot be, arrived at through conceptual thought or even put into words. It requires the suspension of thought and complete immersion in the actions themselves, such as using a whisk with minimal expenditure of time and effort in order to preserve the temperature of the water and the fragrance of the tea.

Attention to bodily movement, posture, gesture, and the senses—which are the basic building blocks of all ritual—helps us understand that ritualization

works largely outside reason and cognition. Indeed, the goals of ritual could not be attained through logic and language, for what ritualization enables are transformations in our experience that may be rationalized after the fact, and even put into words, but are not predicated on cognitive certifications and verbal scripts. "Rites," observes Pierre Bourdieu, "more than any other type of practice, serve to underline the mistake of enclosing in concepts a logic made to dispense with concepts; of treating movements of the body and practical manipulations as purely logical operations; of speaking of analogues and homologues (as one sometimes has to, in order to understand and to convey that understanding) when all that is involved is the practical transference of incorporated, quasi-postural schemes."<sup>90</sup> Ten years before Bourdieu penned these lines on the force of habit and of practical mimesis, the English philosopher Michael Oakshott also argued against the notion that an activity springs from "premeditated propositions about the activity" such as the grammar of a language, protocols of research, canons of good workmanship, or moral codes. His example of the cookery book succinctly summarizes his view: The cookery book is not an independently generated beginning from which cookery can spring; it is nothing more than a retrospective abstract of somebody's practical experience of cooking; it is the stepchild, not the parent, of the activity, and already presupposes a knowledge of how to boil or braise, how to mix and measure, how to dice or slice, how to stir and season, how to judge when a meal is done.<sup>91</sup>

Can we see art as the stepchild, rather than parent, of an activity?

Some years ago, the ethnographer Stefania Pandolfo met a forty-one year old Moroccan man who was suffering from a psychotic illness that had lasted two years. During his months of "despondent seclusion," Ilyas had painted murals on the walls of his room depicting some of the hallucinatory images that had seized him during his periods of madness. When not ill, Ilyas painted "ordinary things"—realistic scenes, landscapes, and geometrical motifs—but during his bouts of illness, serpents, swords, jinn, and mermaids drawn from Maghrebi mythology dominated his murals. Ilyas gave Stefania to understand that he painted in this way when not in an ordinary state of mind, though the Arabic term *bala* (condition, state) can imply mental illness, spirit possession, or a state of trance. While susceptible to mythological suggestion,

Ilyas would speak of the paintings as "his," albeit in an altered state of consciousness. "Ilyas says: '*kan 'abbar fi l-luba*,' I express, give form, in the painting, to what agitates inside me."

Art is a means of recovering a life—a struggle, as Stefania says of Ilyas, for an ethical life (*jihad al-nafs*)—under conditions in which one's life has become compromised or has failed one or been unfairly denied.

Though one cannot fully accept the world as one finds it, or even as one suffers it, it may be accepted under the terms that one imaginatively responds to it. This transition from passivity to activity is crucial.

Consider the work of the environmental artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, James Turrell, and Andy Goldsworthy.

None of these artists has sought to put a stamp on the world as he or she finds it—whether a bridge across the Seine, an extinct volcanic cinder cone in Arizona's painted desert, or yellowing elm leaves in a Scottish wood. Rather, the aim of these artists is to reveal aspects of the world that most of us never notice. "The best of my work," writes Andy Goldsworthy in a Zen vein, "sometimes the result of much struggle when made, appears so obvious that it is incredible I didn't see it before. It was there all the time."<sup>92</sup> The artwork is, however, transitory. "I think it takes much greater courage to create things to be gone than to create things that will remain," observed Christo who, with Jeanne-Claude, wrapped in synthetic fabric the coast of Little Bay in Sydney, Australia, the Reichstag in Berlin, the Pont-Neuf in Paris, and created a twenty-four-mile fence across Sonoma and Marin counties in California. Curiously, a disarming modesty accompanies these monumentally difficult projects. For Goldsworthy, his ephemeral sculptures of snow, ice, bark, stones, leaves, grass, petals, and twigs are not ways of making his mark on the landscape but of working out how one may collaborate with nature to reveal its essence. "By working large, I am not trying to dominate nature," writes Goldsworthy. "If anything, I am giving nature a more powerful presence in the mass of earth, stone, wood that I use."<sup>93</sup> Turrell's philosophy of art is almost identical. Of his work at Roden Crater in Arizona, he said, "I was interested in taking the cultural artifice of art out into the natural surround. I did not want the work to be a mark upon nature, but I wanted the work to be enfolded in nature in such a way that light from the sun, moon and stars empowered the spaces."<sup>94</sup>

Art visits on nature a momentary order that nature will ultimately reject. "Process and decay are implicit."<sup>95</sup> And though the artist seems, for a moment, to be in command, it is the nature of things that she will also disappear. Not even photographs will bring back the immediacy of that moment when iris blades were pinned together with thorns and five sections were filled with rowanberries, for even as Goldsworthy created this delicate arrangement fish and ducks were trying to get at the berries. The appearance of Roden Crater changes with the seasons and the weather, and the impact of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's monumental wrapping is blunted when all one can see of them now is between the covers of a coffee-table book.

In our struggle to accept transience and loss, religion and art are copresences. Consider, for instance, Turrell's memoir of his father, whose love of birds was equaled only by his passion for aeronautical engineering. "He loved to call in the birds,"<sup>96</sup> Turrell writes, in order to feed them, and he succeeded in mastering a variety of complex calls.

In 1942, not long after America declared war on Japan, antiaircraft gunners around Los Angeles opened up a barrage, thinking that their city was under attack. It was in the midst of this real or imagined air raid that James Turrell was conceived.

Around this time, Turrell's parents were putting the finishing touches to a bird-feeding room that would later become James's bedroom. "I had to surrender my room to my father when he needed to call in the birds. The room was inhabited by my father's presence and the birds' song" (11).

Because of the fear of air raids, blackout shades had to be placed over the windows at night, though as James grew older he could draw the shades during the day, to darken his room. "When I was six years old, to assert my own presence in the room, I took a pin or needle to these curtains and pierced them to make star patterns and the constellations . . . These weren't just holes in the curtains, they were holes in reality. By changing the reality of the conscious-awake state of day, one could see further into imagined space to the stars, which were actually there but obscured by the light of the sun" (12).

As the years passed, the curtains, riddled with many holes, became torn and tattered. When his father died, Turrell returned to the room to find it "no longer vital. But I heard a mockingbird. It sang my father's song."

If I have cited Turrell's memoir at length, it is to make the point that though we carry the past in our genes and in our memories no one can know for certain what will endure of any individual life. Turrell inherited his father's passion for flying, his parent's Quaker faith in "the possibility of direct, unmediated communion with the Divine," and a desire to see the world with the same lens he had used to see the stars through his tar paper curtains as a child—to create spaces "with a similarity to the *camera obscura*. I wanted the spaces entered to be an expression in light of what was outside" (21–25).

Roden Crater was the culmination of a life's work that Turrell describes, not as a process of making art out of nature, or even of communicating his vision, but of enabling people to place themselves in contact with nature—its ever changing light and weather, its diurnal and seasonal cycles—so that *it* becomes *their* experience (61, 62). For some, this experience will undoubtedly be construed as religious or spiritual; for others it will be aesthetic or place them at a loss for words. But, for all, it will mediate a novel understanding of familiar things, natural events, and unanswerable existential questions.

A great sadness descends on me when I think of the artworks I have studied and revisited in the course of writing this book. Those who created them have, for the most part, passed away, and many have been indifferent to the durability of their work or deliberately made it degradable. What lifts my spirit, however, is the awareness that even as one artist's work crumbles or fades from our memory, or ends up in an archive or museum, new work appears, drawing on whatever materials come to hand—whether these be dead leaves in a wood, ochers in a jar or tube, blocks of marble, heaps of scrap metal, discarded clothing, pages torn from a book, iPhones, or video recorders—addressing someone's inner imperative to enter the world not merely as physical presence but as a creative figure who contributes to making that world new again. This is a process in which we participate, for it is the nature of being human to seek ways that our inner lives can find adequate expression in relation to others and our environments. Despite our occasional disenchantment with other humans or with nature, the world around us offers raw and renewable material for helping us think through our lives in a language that transcends the personal. But it is only in the world beyond us that we can ever know or find ourselves, let alone be redeemed.