



## **An Exploration of Spiritual Embodied Practice: Art, Death, Land**

Esyllt George  
*MA, Cardiff Met University*  
[e.george20@ntlworld.com](mailto:e.george20@ntlworld.com)

### **Abstract**

This paper will explore visual, performative and aesthetic responses to the theme of death, grief and loss in relation to spiritual experience. Religious experience will be aligned to a concept of spiritual expression involving creative responses to themes of death and grief with a potential of bringing together people of all faiths and none. Creativity, and the use of the creative imagination is explored as central to this lived spiritual experience. It is explored how this creative spiritual expression can co-exist as part of and also as transcending specific religious dogma. The paper will include reflections on theory about death and grief, incorporating artistic, performative and relational perspectives regarding these theories. There will be an interdisciplinary approach in evaluating contemporary research, identifying gaps in research, and providing new interdisciplinary frames of reference in developing and extending contemporary discourses. The work will add to as well as make links between contemporary writing on these subject areas.

The paper will start with an overview of core themes and research, followed by an explanation of framework of interdisciplinary research perspectives drawn upon. I will go on to discuss the links between a range of theorists and practitioners, particularly within the fields of performance art and ritual, death studies, spiritual psychology and sociology. I will draw upon the work of spatial geographer Avril Maddrell regarding her research and writing on relationship of religious experience to spiritual expression through ritual. The summary and final part of the paper will link further key themes of the research and their interwoven relationship.

### **Introduction**

Contemporary research indicates a revival of community interest in the theme of death, in searching beyond a purely medical, clinical approach (Walter, 1994; 1999; Valentine 2008). Imaginal, spiritual and symbolic visual image, has been explored by Carl Jung as providing a healing process in integrating a spiritual awareness of death within day to day life (Jung, 1986 edition). Ritual, enactment and public sharing of art

practice about death have been seen as tools of community therapeutic engagement (Schef, 2001; Bell 2009), bringing a sense of belonging within personal and public exchange, where artistic or creative expression assists a process of psychic integration (Turner, 1982). Engagement and public ritual through art practices about death can provide this cathartic sharing and positive relational exchange, which can also lead to therapeutic interaction and community engagement, including acknowledgement and development of positive continuation of bonds with dead loved ones (Fitzpatrick, 2012), within a context of contemporary community interest in the 'revival of death' (Walters, 1994).

My research develops these theories further to look at performative art ritual practices about death, dying, and grief in relation to a range of psychological, sociological, spiritual and philosophical reflexive methods and contexts, combining Social Interactionist theory (Charon, 1998), with Psychological Active Imagination (Jung 1983/1996 editions); (Romanynshyn, 2013), Heuristic (Hiles, 2002) and Relational Aesthetic discourses ( Bourriard, 1998) , together with Phenomenological approaches (Manen, 2014) and Personal Narrative frameworks ( Valentine,2008; Fitzpatrick,2012) My research explores embodiment as central within an intersubjective responsiveness to lived experience, which involves awareness of the presence of death in life. Connections are made between theory within death and grief studies with performance art theory and practice stemming from performance art interventions of the 'Happenings' movement of 1960's and 70's, the paratheatrical work of Grotowski, land art movement, including spiritual expression through art practice, particularly in relation to works of contemporary performance artist Ana Mendieta. Performance art is examined alongside relational process, (Bourriard, 1998), where relatedness between self, other, environment and theme of mortality are central. Connections are made between performative expression and interdisciplinary approaches regarding the body in relation to visual kinaesthetic of relationship within a sense of 'being in the world' (Merleau Ponty, 2008 edition). Jungian active imagination methods (Jung, 1986 edition; Romanynshyn, 2013), phenomenological perspectives (Manen, 2014; Carman, 2008) and narrative research methods (Valentine, 2008) are particularly utilised as reflexive methodologies.

Exploring performativity of the living body in relation to visual culture of sacred environments will be developed both in theory and practice, to include concentration and focus on specific works by performance artist Ana Mendieta. This will be centred within a contextualisation of contemporary community 'revival of death' (Walters, 1994). Theoretical underpinning to this includes analysis of and development to studies of contemporary theories related to death, grief, continuing bonds and spiritual expression, incorporating teleogenic plot theory, spatial geography, and use of personal narrative, phenomenological, Jungian embodied active imagination, and relational art theory as key interwoven concepts.

Exploration of the visual and embodied through performance art and ritual are seen to be a tool for spiritual and therapeutic exploration of psychological and aesthetic integration, involving awareness of relationship of life to death as part of creative expression in community, which is accessible across and beyond distinct religious expression. Furthermore, the work examines relationship between academic writing, the body, performativity and visual image, as spiritual response to environment.

## **Research Perspectives**

My research methodology involves interdisciplinary and self reflexive methods, with theoretical contextualisation on personal narrative (Valentine, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2012), relational art (Bourriard, 1998), spatial geography (Maddrell, 2010, 2009, 2016) and phenomenology (Manen, 2014), as well as psychological and sociological perspectives (Jung, 1986 edition; Chiron, 1998). Linking these methodologies from a diversity of disciplines and perspectives, I build on an interdisciplinary approach, and bring into further focus a combination of reflexive methods emphasising relationship between embodiment, visual image, spirituality, and personal narrative. There follows an overview of key theories which inform this methodology.

A phenomenological emphasis on lived experience and physical relatedness between self, other and environment informs my work, linking to relational perspectives within visual art theory. Merleau Ponty's phenomenological work is key, emphasising embodied relationship between self, other and environment within our 'being in the world' with emphasis on a pre cognitive state of wonder and being of children as also vehicle of wisdom for the adult, (Carman, 2008) and which also has relationship to a spiritual pantheistic approach (Wordsworth), that 'the child is the father of the man' (Wordsworth, 1967 edition). Merleau Ponty speaks of touch, textural relationship and direct communication between self and environment, with art being described 'as a bodily act' (Carman citing Merleau Ponty p.184). In his emphasis on flow of sensory experience, presence, embodiment and interconnection we link phenomenological perspectives and performative art; self, body and environment being in continual presence of dialogue (Manen, 2014 p.131).

Jungian concepts of active imagination, individuation, archetypal connectivity, the spiritual, numinous, and creative dialogue between conscious and unconscious, are widely documented within contemporary psychological research and writing (Storr, 1983; Romanynshyn, 2013). Jung highlighted the importance of the visual symbol and image as a way to access spiritual and inner truths (Jung, 1966 p.77). Jungian based researcher and writer, Robert Romanynshyn, in his internationally acclaimed work 'The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind', develops and applies Jungian theories to research (Romanynshyn, 2013). Centering academic research within an embodied, imaginal and spiritual self reflexive position, he explores a phenomenological sense of self as applied to Jungian individuation of having a capacity to be present to grief, mourning and death as central to life. Roamanynshyn points to the archetype of the Orphan within this individuation process of adult self awareness, as an archetype which connects us to the sense of grief of an adult being in the world which is a necessary part of life. It is possible to link this to performative spontaneity of organicity explored by Grotowski and the performance art Happenings movement; an expressive authentic response to experience in stripping away masks of the world as a return to authentic being (Richards, 1995). Romanynshyn develops a concept of 'reverie' in describing Jungian active imagination processes within an embodied visual and spiritual approach to academic research. He brings the organicity of performance art found in the art of artists such as Ana Mendieta and Bourriard's relational aesthetics work, and applies this to the field of academic research and writing. Romanynshyn speaks of research being a searching into what has been lost in connection to the wisdom of the ancestors and the collective unconscious 'We work in the ambience of their dark-light,...one sets a place for the ancestors who gather

around the writing table...this ancestral audience for whom the work is done' (Romanynshyn, 2013 p.313)

Inevitably linked to the embodied, imaginal individuation process of sense of self in the world is a personal narrative frame of reference. Personal narrative methodology has been central within contemporary death studies discourse, (Valentine, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2012), bringing into focus the individual making sense of their own reality through individual life narrative in community which continues to change and evolve, and which has an ongoing bond of connection to the past and others who have died. Within performance art practice, the embodied narrative of the individual artist in direct relationship to other and environment is central. Within performance art and ritual practices exploring death and grief, the body of the artist is present within embodied narratives where death is explored as part of this performative relatedness of authenticity in living. My research explores personal narrative and includes teleogenic plot theory as having a central role in defining and shaping narrative (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Teleogenic plot emphasises a cyclical and continuous shaping and re shaping of narratives which both flow into the future and simultaneously stay connected with past roots, which also have capacity of flow and change in relation to the present. There is a sense of the past informing the present, while also being re shaped by it, and so in return identity and relationship does not stay in the past realm but in a flowing timeless present. 'the end writes the beginning and shapes the middle' (Paley, 2009, p.21 citing Brooks, 1985) Within continuing bonds bereavement theory there is an ongoing bond between individual and those who have died, while the relationship is also dynamic and shaped by life in the present, and within performative and relational art practice the emphasis on authentic movement and connection means there is a continued re discovery of past memories in the lived present which reminds us of a sense of continued spiritual bond and relationship of past and present, between the living and ancestors. An example of this is when the performance artist Paul Hurley in his work 'I Fall to Pieces' (Hurley, 2016) is moving his body in the lived experience of grief felt at the death of his friend, there is a re shaping and re configured physical as well as emotional and spiritual relationship between his body and felt experience.

My research links this work of continuing bonds within death studies to relational aesthetic perspectives (Bourriard, 1998), where artistic expression provides opportunity for intersubjective connection in community and authentic relatedness. Within this artistic expression is defined by intersubjective encounters between self, others, environment and community (Bourriard, 1998, p17.). Similarly to continuing bonds frames of reference and community connectivity through ritual expression in death studies, relational aesthetics sees artistic expression as the shaping of social bonds and a non-commodifying means of creating dialogue between people and environment. This non commodification focuses on social interaction as emotionally creative significant connectivity. This shaping of authentic dialogue connects performative artistic expression within phenomenological, narrational and imaginative exploration of relationship between self, community and environment, where death is an inevitable aspect of this expression. The materiality of an aesthetic object is framed within this interpersonal encounter, where dialogue takes place within a 'social intersice' of connection, an intersice being an interaction which is outside commodification and consumer based dialogue (Bourriard, 1998 p.16) which links us with the spiritual. A visual ritual emerges of intersubjective connection as embodied art.

It has been important to combine and interweave these research methodological perspectives within my work, being complementary to each other and providing depth of connection.

### **Death and Dying in relation to Visual Art and Performative Expression**

My research connects contemporary theories of death and dying to potential of visual arts practice as healing community processes. This can act as a means of assisting the living to integrate and incorporate awareness of death, grief and dying within social and personal life, involving continuation of bonds to loved ones who have died (Walters, 1992, Fitzpatrick, 2012, Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996)

A relational perspective to visual arts has a capacity to connect people in community, with potential to produce a healing catharsis, living with death as part of life, which includes forming a relationship with the past as part of an embodied awareness of the present moment, as work of a range of artists have demonstrated (Holbin, 2012; Walsh, 2011, Hurley, 2015). My research identifies performance art as having a particular capacity to engage in embodied holistic responsiveness to the subject of death through visual mediums (Bourriard, 1998; Mendieta, 1981; Abramovic, 1995).

Furthermore, exploration of telegenic plot theory within interspatial geography discourses can highlight and expand awareness of visual and performative expression in providing healing connections of death to life (Fitzpatrick, 2010; Maddrell, 2010; Hockey, Komaromy and Woodthorpe, 2010) This takes my argument a stage further, in exploring grief and death awareness within visual embodied presence which has a capacity for spiritual alchemical transformation. This embodied transformation involves an interplay between both joy and grief in personal and collective narratives of mourning. This structural reformation of narrative involves a reconfiguration of self in relationship to others and environment. An embodied awareness of the flow of grief within the body as connected to the visual, moving body and the land, is symbolised through relationship between sacred architecture and landscape representative of death and the living body in spatial connection to time and place. This has a contextualisation within phenomenological, narrative, relational and imagistic frames of reference

Telegenic plot theory examines the nature of relationship and change with a continued attachment and flow of narrative between the present and the past, between the embodied life of the living and to people who have died and to ancestors (Fitzpatrick, 2012). There is a capacity to embrace change in the present while acknowledging relationships and attachment to the past which have energy and which continue to have value and presence for the psyche in the present moment. This telegenic plot structure of narrative is in contrast to Kubler Ross's popularist theory of bereavement and adjustment to death, where change is viewed as necessitating a break with the past in order to go forward into the future. (Kubler-Ross, 2008). Telegenic plot incorporates the past into dynamic relationship with present and future, in a flow of energetic connection, involving both change and ongoing integration within a nonlinear journey of relatedness. This can be connected with an interspatial geography perspective of relationship in time and space, which brings into focus the importance of psychical and embodied spatial relatedness to place, there is both a reformation

and ongoing relationship within a restructuring of energetic dialogue between time, body and place in community. (Ortega, 2004; Woodthorpe, 2010; Madrell, 2010) Contemporary research has indicated a dynamic of relationship within an interspatial and telegenic plot context, of dialogue between self, land and living energy of the past as seen and felt through earth and natural materials like stone. 'Landscape has been variously read as aesthetic, historic record and symbolic text, but rather than being seen merely as a cultural product, landscapes are increasingly recognised as polyvocal, dynamic, cultural processes which are experienced through embodied performance' (Maddrell (2010) p. 138). 'Deathscapes' interspatial researcher Avril Maddrell explores deep mapping of geographies of grief, which includes physical, emotional, symbolic, and virtual mapping,... the invisible topography of grief, a form of emotional deep mapping...' (Maddrell, (2016), p.169)

Theories of grief and loss can be energetically connected to performance art theories and practice. Performance art with roots in art 'Happenings' as a genre, have reference to visual performativity as relationship between people, land, the past (Pearson and Shanks, 2001), and the domain of grief (Fitzpatrick, 2010, 2012). This is now linked to exploration of Jungian alchemical psychical processes in relation to alchemical transformation of fear and mourning as playful embodied connection in community, within imagistic relationship. This paper also explores this with particular reference to the performative art practice of Anna Mendieta. Performance art has a historical context which challenges conventions of bureaucratic systems, bringing people together within relational connection. The embodied presence of the artist points towards what ultimately is of value and worth in contemporary society beyond market force consumption and mechanised authority (Bourriard, 1998). Contemporary research within grief and loss emphasise an individual need to challenge assumptions of structures which de value direct emotional engagement and authentic relatedness, bringing about individual connectivity in community, and presence within the living moment of what incorporates past and present within the flow of time (Walter, 1994, 1999; Fitzpatrick 2010, 2012).

### **Ritual and Performance Art in relation to Spirituality and Death**

My research observes links in visual culture, performance art practice, ritual, death, and spiritual expression (Jung, 1986 edition; Hillman, 1991; Pearson, 2001; Walter; 1994; Kuspit, 2000; Turner, 1982). There is a liminal space of connection and awareness through ritual expression as a space of bringing people together to experience life's relationship to death (Turner, 1982; Bell, 1992; Schef, 2001). The liminal space can be seen as a spiritual realm where a mystery of the unseen and everyday sense impressions meet (Campbell, 2008 edition; Romanynshyn, 2013). Performance art practice has a capacity to bring people together within this liminality with a heightened emotional presence in space and time, where there is capacity for creativity, art and life to come together (Ortega, 2006, p.34; Gritzner, 2011) 'Ultimately, this is where the field of psychology, ecology and art overlap' (Gablick, 1995 p, 382) Gritzner, in her extensive contemporary research about art and the spiritual, explores relationship of the word spirit, spiritual and art practice. She speaks of entering into a spiritual realm through art and performance as ...'gestures towards a kind of positive transcendence of negativity, for example, of death' (Gritzner, 2011 p.88)

Carl Jung's spiritual approach to psychology has been very influential to twentieth and twenty first century psychological, sociological and spiritual discourses. Jung challenged a Freudian view of human nature to also incorporate the numinous, mysterious, archetypal, and spiritual as being of utmost value in human expression and making sense of the world. (Jung, 1983 and 1986 editions) His work emphasises creative expression and self awareness through dialogue with inner visual image. Jung places the visual symbol as central to an understanding of spiritual aspects of psyche; and imagination as key to people reaching their potential. He developed the concept of individuation and active imagination, pointing to a need for the self to be aware of death as ever present in life. Active imagination introduces visual image as a means of connecting conscious and unconscious processes within individuation. Romanynshyn, contemporary Jungian scholar and academic researcher, relates individuation to the adult self becoming aware of the archetype of the Orphan within the psyche, as part of our connection with the earth and with death (Romanynshyn, 2013). He describes the capacity of the imagination as bringing together the world of the physical and the world of the spiritual, linking the sensory and spirit realm. Archetypal connection with the ancestors and through them the presence of death is central to this work. Jung and his followers such as Romanynshyn have much to contribute to spiritual exploration within death studies and continuation of bonds contemporary discourses and in linking the visual image and spiritual expression. In being in touch with the mourning body through symbol and imagination, the spiritual individuation journey brings embodiment to the archetype of The Orphan in performative self-expression, connecting us teleogenically with the ancestors and the past in a flow of relationship to the present moment. This captures a phenomenological embodied presence of relationship between past and present, contained within imaginative self awareness of interplay of life and death.

In her studies into spatial geography, grief and death, Avril Maddrell has researched the importance of the spiritual and sacred in relation to expressions of grief, undertaking research analysis with people in the UK, and concludes that even though formal religious worship has been in decline in recent years, nevertheless a form of spiritual belief is high among the UK population, which seeks self-expression (Maddrell, 2009, 2016). In her research into the creation of a contemporary architectural visual ritual site at the 'Witness Cairn' in Whitorn, Scotland, she explores a present day community performative intervention of expressions of shared rituals of grief and sharing connecting to past spiritual rituals and community pilgrimage (Maddrell, 2009).

A modern day cairn has been constructed by the community, where people can share personal narratives and create sacred performative actions through the placing of stones and pebbles as memorialisation for the dead. It is a sharing for all, where people from all faith and none participate. Adding decorated stones and pebbles to the cairn marks for people a dynamic of remembrance, witnessing presence or making a pledge. It is an interactive site of sharing and recognition of those who have died, in a continuation of bonds. Many of the stones have inscriptions of the dead, some have photos, some messages and some are purely left without a mark within remembrance and ritual (Maddrell, 2009, p.677) The community and visitors to the cairn are involved in a physical performative act of connection both to the presence of themselves in the landscape and to dead loved ones, in relationship to past and present. 'It was chosen because it was an embedded structure as well as a participatory one' (Maddrell citing

Brother Stephen Smyth, interview 2009, p.683). People are engaged in ‘a performative physical process’ ( Maddrell, 2009 p.684), where through making a sacred mark with the earth, the community are using performative actions and ritual in ‘living with grief as opposed to seeking an end to it through closure’ ( Maddrell 2009 p.685), thus the continuation of bonds is felt as living connection. She explores a definition of the sacred as ‘...that which is valued most highly and brings meaning to lives....’ (Maddrell, 2009 p.677), and within a broad definition of the spiritual which incorporates people of all religions and none, she also explores faith in itself as having a relationship to liminal and dynamic states of being, not as something fixed or unchanging. Her arguments link to a telegenic plot structure of personal narrative of grief, in a fluid structure of belief and meaning which changes within relationship to the past continually reforming in the present.

Maddrell’s research develops and builds on research into connections between visual performative expression, space and time, and sacred sites commemorating death. There is a connection to Mike Pearson’s work on performance art, the numinous, spiritual and ancient sacred monuments in the landscape, ‘...I stress that temporality be described as actuality, the return of the past in the present, but in a different guise...’ (Pearson, 2001 p15). Maddrell also connects us to Fitzpatrick’s research of ‘gifting’ bereavement objects at the Vietnam wall war memorial, and the importance of relational aesthetic objects within continuing bonds (Fitzpatrick 2012). In bringing together the research of Maddrell, Pearson, and Fitzpatrick within a performance art and ritual context, this paper demonstrates how visual performative actions in the landscape can be formed as healing rites of passage, where there is embodied mourning as performative ritual, which incorporates spiritual expression.

### **The Living and Grieving body within work of Ana Mendieta**

The performative work of Ana Mendieta will now be explored, highlighting and contextualising her work in relation to my wider research concerning death, grief and visual culture, within a relational embodied framework connecting people with death and land. Ana Mendieta explores space and time in relationship to the temporal body and the earth, there is a telegenic narrative to her embodied story of ever present connection with the archetypal feminine form, which is both womb and grave as represented by the earth (Ortega, 2006). There is a return to a geography of relatedness with people and environment, this interrelatedness of human beings in space within visual performativity as demonstrated in her work provides an ‘existential spatiality’ (Ortega, 2004 p.27) which connects our experience of life and death, and which link to the wider context of this research within death and visual culture.

Mendieta’s practice will now be explored further, by focusing on specific work of her ‘Siluetas’ series, ‘Imagen de Yagul’ and ‘Burial Pyramid Yagul’.

These works particularly highlight connection with the earth as symbolising both womb and grave, exploring this as sense of homecoming between the artist’s body and sense of belonging with the earth. Her work demonstrates an interplay of death as an inevitable aspect of being alive ‘Death, as a demonstration of the vulnerability of the body and, at the same time, an occasion for psychic resurrection...are her constant concerns...she performs the body and both death and living memory, a surviving silhouette, a transfigured body’ (Kuspit, 2000 p. 213)



Mendieta conducted her 'Siluetas' series of interventions in Iowa and Mexico from 1973 to 1980, simultaneously working on related performance of 'Imagen de Yagul' in 1973 and performing and filming 'Burial Pyramid Yagul' in 1974. What emerges in this work is an ongoing dialogue between her body as a medium of living sculpture and a liminal space between life and death, body and shadow embodied as part of the earth in a '...space which claims both presence and absence...fuelled by nostalgia..' (Ortega, 2004 p.25). An organic visual ritual emerges in her work, which Mendieta termed 'earth-body' work and 'earth-body' sculpture (Mendieta, 1981). This work relates to 'gifting' rites of passage of a mourning body, as described by Fitzpatrick (2012) and Maddrell (2009, 2016). Her embodied narrative of grief through her practice in expressing feelings of exile from her motherland reminds us of feelings described by Valentine's work on personal narratives of bereavement (Valentine, 2008). Mendieta speaks about this ritual of embodied mourning 'I have been carrying out a dialogue between the landscape and the female body based on my own silhouette...I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb, nature. My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth. (Barreras and Perreault, (1988) p.10 citing Mendieta)

'Image from Yagul' produced in 1973 marked the beginning of the 'Siluetas' series. (Rosenthal, (ed), 2013 p.78). Mendieta's naked body is placed in what appears to be a shallow grave in the earth, and on her body, as well as between her arms and legs, are placed streams of white flowers. Through the means of a photograph of her performance work, viewers share in the experience of being present with the artist's body, alive and still, covered with flowers, contained in the womb and grave of the earth. Morgan speaks of the profundity of work connecting both spiritual and physical expression, (Morgan,2015), and we are reminded of the work of Turner in describing organic ritual between self and environment providing a creative release and a sense of connective spiritual 'communitas' (Hughes 1998 p 2-3)

In her performative work 'Burial Pyramid Yagul' which was filmed (Mendieta, 1981), we see her lying in a grave like enclosure on the earth, with stones covering her naked body. Through the moving image the viewer can see the subtle movements and living relationship between the stones and her living body. There is movement with the artist's breath which shapes relationship with the stones with which she is covered. The work speaks of dynamic responsiveness between self, nature, life and death. This is reminiscent of teleogenic plot theory within death studies, in continuation of bonds to the earth, within embodied narrative of both permanence and change co existing, connected to both vitality and vulnerability (Fitzpatrick, 2012), which contrasts with the idea of death as something to be feared by the living. Within this dynamic of the living body in relationship to death and the land, Mendieta explores the female form within dynamic visual and textural relationship with the living earth, not as an object in society which 'buries it alive' (Kuspit 2000 p210). Kuspit describes her relationship to the land as 'sacred space...inscribing her body in the earth', and through this 'she performs the body and both death and living memory' (Kuspit p.213) It is interesting to note how the use of film in recording Mendieta's work brings a further vitality of presence to the work rather than technological distraction. Within a recent exhibition of the restored films of Mendieta, her god daughter, Raquel Cecilia Mendieta, speaks of the process of using modern technology as a restorative technique of assisting access to the vitality of

Mendieta's work, with the act of digital restoration as being purifying and cleansing in terms of both inner and outer image, assisting us to be aware of that, 'every time the film is played, in that moment is alive' (R.C.Mendieta, 2016)

In response to this body of work by Mendieta the viewer has experience of witnessing a healing connection of the body to its source within the earth. This is reminiscent of death rituals and ritual connectivity of both birth and death (Bell, 1992). Mendieta uses her own creativity and originality to create ritual structures which have their roots in archetypal ancient traditions created anew through the artist's imagination. The research by Walters (1994, 1999) and Valentine (1998) of a twenty first century 'revival of death', where ritual structures of religion are re invented within creative individual expression and attachment to community can be paralleled with her work. The work can also be linked to Jung's individuation process of the psyche witnessing mortality through vitality of imaginative integration, visual symbol connecting conscious and unconscious processes (Jung, 1983 edition). We are also reminded of Turner's liminality of ritual space (Turner, 1982), a liminal space where there is a transcendence from duality incorporating both life and death within psychic wholeness.

Mendieta's *Siluetas* and related works indicate how memorialisation through gifting of aesthetic object (Fitzpatrick, 2012), can be focused as archetypal mourning of gifting of the body itself in creative transitional space between life and death. The transitional aesthetic object is removed and the body itself embodies this gifting relationship in reverence with the earth. Attachment within transitional space of life and death connect with a teleogenic plot relationship between change and permanence of continued bonds. Eminent psychologist Winnicott's attachment model (Winnicott, 1971) becomes a lived experience of body and the earth, as the living body enters into a liminal ritual space which is a relationship with both life and death. Attachment is explored in being both permanent and transitory simultaneously, as embodied transience within time. This reminds us of spatial geography discourses of interspatial connectivity between physical, spiritual and psychological space and time. (Woodthorpe, 2010; Maddrell, 2016)

Mendieta takes the cultural act of burial and shapes within this act a performative expression of individual relationship between self, nature, and viewer. This can be referenced to Walters' exploration of a need of ritual community sharing within death awareness. In her practice the vitality of the human body is placed within the context of death, immersed within the natural world, and retaining its vitality while in immediate dialogue with death. Sometimes this image is her actual body, sometimes her shadow form as transient image of self in silhouette. Within contemporary spatial geography discourse about death and relationship to space and time, a spirit of place is explored in relationship between body and place, with spirit being viewed as a transcendental union between the two. (Davies, 2010 p. 208). This vitality of relationship can be perceived as sacred embodiment of relationship between life and death. In his writing about spirit and spatial geography, Davies explores the image of the breath while contemplating death; he speaks of a 'symbol of such vitality is 'breath', this ancient sign of 'life' (Davies, 2010 p.208). Davies goes on to speak of Melanesian rituals of connectivity to the presence of those who have died, celebrated as part of the living breath of those who continue to live, and is an aspect of joy in life rather than a depressive dwelling on the past 'Through this emotional nexus bereaved people are provided with a cultural resource for developing their identity, a time of positive

opportunity...’ (Davies, 2010 p.218). Within this we are reminded of Jung’s exploration into alchemy and the possibilities of transformation integrating polarised states of being. Through Mendieta’s practice, we witness visual embodied practice within this integrated awareness of death and life in immersive relationship to nature ‘the analogy was that I was covered by time and history’ (Mendieta, cited by R.C Mendieta, 2016). It is of current interest to note, in linking her work to continuing bonds and death, how in June 2016, at the opening of the new wing of the Tate Modern in London, a group of women performed a symbolic action of defiance, by circling together in the Tate with symbolic blood strewn across their bodies, as performative demonstration to the gallery of not exhibiting Mendieta’s work. Chanting ‘Where is Ana Mendieta’ the women grouped together as mark of female bonding and continuing bond of strength in acknowledgment of Mendieta’s practice beyond her death.

### **Summary**

The journey of my research has involved an interdisciplinary approach to focus on the healing and transforming potential of visual and performance art and ritual practices when addressing themes of death, grief and dying. The work has been contextualised within diverse disciplines related to death and visual culture, incorporating a multi-disciplinary approach to evaluation of theory and practice. This has brought together and developed aspects of contemporary writing and research, and interconnected a range of perspectives from visual arts, sociology, spiritual psychology, death studies, spatial geography, relational aesthetics and philosophy. The work has examined relationship between ritual, rites of passage and memorialisation within a visual arts context, with a focus of this in relationship to performance art and relational art practice. Religious experience is explored within a context of embodied creative spiritual expression which can be experienced both as part of and beyond religious dogma.

There follows a summary in relation to core themes of the research. The first section ‘Performance Art, Ritual, Visual Culture and Death’, will provide an overview of the work, following this and linked to it, will be sections encompassing themes of ‘Embodiment’, ‘Spiritual Expression’, ‘Play’ and ‘Continuation of Bonds’

### **Performance Art, Ritual, Visual Culture and Death**

This research has identified ritual and performance art as being highly significant to contemporary dialogue about death and grief. Ritual theory (Scheff, 2001; Bell, 1992; Turner, 1982 ;) has been studied alongside contemporary theory and practice regarding memorialisation ritual about death, grief and of continuation of bonds (Maddrell, 2009, 2010, 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2012). This has been further contextualised within relational, performative and performance art theory and practice (Richards, 1995; Kaprow, 2003; Bishop, 2012; Bourriard, 1998), with reflection on work of specific performance artist Ana Mendieta. Performance art as a genre has been interlinked with ritual and other visual art forms; it has been recognised that many artists, such as Mendieta, have not defined themselves exclusively as performance artists, and use a wider vocabulary to describe their practice. Jungian active imagination methods (Jung, 1986 edition; Romanynshyn, 2013), phenomenological perspectives (Manen, 2014; Carman, 2008) and personal narrative research methods (Valentine, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2012) have been particularly utilised as reflexive methodologies within this

contextualisation

This research has contributed to current writing and practice in documenting and evidencing the capacity for dialogue and convergence between a wide range of disciplines to inform and add to contemporary current discourse within these subjects' areas.

This includes an inevitable interplay of relationship, structure and meaning between ritual and performance art, (Pearson and Shanks, 2001), The work of Maddrell (2010, 2016), Fitzpatrick (2012) and Woodthorpe (2010) have been influential to this work in exploring memorialisation ritual regarding death and continuation of bonds, and have been studied in conjunction to works by Ana Mendieta. Linked to this Pearson and Shanks provide a connecting link between performativity, ritual and visual language of living archaeology within memorialisation and performance, connecting memory, self-identity and landscape (Pearson and Shanks, 2001). Contemporary interspatial geography research adds to this work in exploration of interplay of self and space to form a fusion of inner and outer 'Deathscapes' (Madrell, 2010; Hockey, Komaromy, Woodthorpe, 2010). These works have been connected to writings of pantheistic poets such as Wordsworth, in exploring memory and visual image related to connectivity of continuing bonds with the past, merging inner and outer landscapes within a timeless connectivity of bonds. Through this relationship between inner and outer image and land, interconnection of both mourning and joy, has been explored, connecting to 'the still, sad music of humanity' (Wordsworth, 'Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey' 1967 edition)

### **Embodiment**

Embodiment within creative expression and visual arts practice has been central to my work. Contextualised within visual culture and death studies theories, the living body and visual embodied expression has been explored in relation to death and the liminal domain of connectivity to those who have died (Maddrell, 2010, Fitzpatrick, 2012.) Inspired by performance art's emphasis on live art practice as authentic expression, particularly works by Mendieta, my research has developed an emphasis on embodiment within memorialisation as ritualised expression. This adds to current research in its emphasis on the living body within memorialisation dialogue.

Phenomenological perspectives of embodied relatedness of 'being in the world' (Carman, 2008), have been explored, alongside aesthetics of the inter-relational (Bourriard, 1998) and interspatial dialogue (Maddrell, 2012). Personal narrative structures of individual meaning making in community have been considered (Valentine, 2008) and been developed within an embodiment of personal narrative in relationship with the earth. Influenced by artist Ana Mendieta, this has led my research to focus on visual moving body in relationship to physical personal narrative of connection between past and present.

The memorialisation and continuation of bonds studies of Fitzpatrick (2012) and Madrell (2016), exploring gifting ritual memorialisation of exchange, have been examined, exploring centrality of emphasis on embodiment of gifting within dynamic memorialisation. There is direct exchange and dialogue between the living body, land, and ancestors. An emphasis on the physical narrative of visual gestures, as influenced

by Grotowski and the performance art movement of the Happenings, assists in creating a liminal space within physicality of relatedness, where structure is fluid and physical exchange can be recreated organically and spontaneously within a ritual structure.

An interface between the living body, visual image, land and connection to those who have died, brings an alchemical dynamic relationship between the unseen, death, mourning and the living body (Romanynshyn, 2013). My work develops Romanynshyn's Jungian based research further, in focusing on the centrality of visual body in motion bringing into physical awareness a continuation of bonds with those who have died.

This centrality of focus on the living body in motion re configures aspects of contemporary research within death and visual culture. My research argues that this focus on embodiment within memorialisation invites a potential alchemical transformation through interplay of image, body and earth, bringing mourning and joy into emotional co-existence of the mourning body in relation to land. A vivid image emerges of the living body connected both to grief and memory in relationship to the land, while intimately connected both to joy of immediate presence and continuation of bonds with those who have died.

This work on embodied practice led me to examine further the relationship between art practice and academic writing. Jungian contemporary researcher and writer Romanynshyn, explores academic research as creating relational affective bonds through image and reverie, using visual, embodied and imagistic Jungian active imagination within this interplay (Romanynshyn, 2013). His work has informed my own research and writing, including utilising embodiment of feeling when writing, as a guide for my work. At one stage in my research, I felt unwell and disconnected to the work. This changed when writing about an embodied performance art practice about grief, which in turn led me to change focus in my research. Thus an awareness of responses in my own body and feelings became very influential to my academic writing. The latter stages of research, particularly in both reading the work of Maddrell, developed a connection into my own physical mourning related to land and continuation of bonds. My reflections on an alchemical transformation of grief into connecting with joy, containing mournful sadness as an integral part of this joy, is a result of these embodied responses as well as to theory, during which academic research and writing have co-existed hand in hand with direct performative embodied presence and reflection.

### **Spiritual Expression, Death and Visual Culture**

Spiritual expression has been identified as central to my practice and research. This has included reflection on similarities and distinctions between religious expression and spiritual expression within ritual and performativity (Schef, 2001, Maddrell, 2010). Rites of passage and ritual have been noted as having benefits to community sharing, which is not possible within a purely mechanised clinical approach to death. Within this religious rites often do not provide space needed for individual creativity (Walter, 1994). It has been argued in my work that there is a contemporary need for community spiritual expression of rite as distinct from rite of religious dogma, an acknowledgement of 'multiple expressions of the sacred' (Maddrell, 2009 p.689).

Works of Ana Mendieta have connected to this sense of the sacred and spiritual within performance art practice, such as Mendieta's explorations of sacred relationship between body and earth 'Her art is informed by a strong sense of the necessity of the sacred... Mendieta wants to re consecrate the body... restore the sense of it as a miracle' (Kuspit, 2000). Carl Jung's work, explores relationship between the spiritual, the psyche, synchronicity and visual image as symbol of unconscious processes (Jung, 1983 and 1986 editions). My research into memorialisation within death studies theory also point to the importance of spiritual expression in contemporary life regarding death and bereavement (Walters, 1994; Maddrell, 2016, Fitzpatrick, 2012). A sense of the sublime through visual symbol in connecting the present to the past and to death has been explored within a context of individuation rites of passage and a spiritual liminal space of change, transitions and transformation of death and mourning. This sense of a liminal space of change and exchange has been witnessed as an aspect of Mendieta's 'Siluetas' series of work. Jungian theory on visual symbol has been linked to performance art and ritual, recognising importance of ritual and symbol in bringing psychic balance of awareness of death and grief as an essential aspect of life (Jung, 1983 editions; Romanynshyn, 2013). Jungian visual active imagination has been utilised in my work within creating ritual and performative work. This exploration of spiritual expression documents ritual and performance art practice in relation to places associated with spiritual expression. Body and place as sacred is in contrast to a mechanised, purely functional relationship between self, other and environment. This sense of value outside a commodification culture of exchange, as authentic state of being is at the heart of much of the performance art movement since the 1950's (Bishop, 2012)

An observance of the importance of everyday subtleties together with heightened emotional awareness can be likened to spiritual observation, as is documented in Mendieta's work which combines detail of the everyday, with a focus on sanctity of relationship to the land and ancient structures of death, as spiritual homecoming with the earth.

Avril Maddrell's work within spatial geography provides quantitative and qualitative data about contemporary spiritual expression regarding death and mourning (Maddrell, 2010, 2016). This points to a further need for connective spiritual expression in Western contemporary society outside the confines of religion, as an important aspect of performative expression within memorialisation activities in the landscape (Maddrell (2010) p.125). My research has documented and explored performative interventions as non-religious specific means of spiritual expression; acts of the sacred not confined to set religious dogma, and with roots in spontaneous creative expression which connect to continuation of bonds to the dead and bringing together the visual with the unseen. Indeed, this paper argues that the exploration of these themes through ritual and performance art practice can develop spiritual expression as art practice, where practice can become synonymous with a creative narrative of worship. There is need for further practice led research work in developing these themes further, which would contribute and develop current research, particularly that of Walter (1999), Maddrell (2010) and Fitzpatrick (2012)

### **Play and Solemnity**

The juxtaposition of both ritual play and ritual solemnity regarding the theme of death

have been important elements in my work. The practice of 'Happenings' performance art interventions and their predecessors brings to the forefront childlike play, connecting people with each other and environment within an organic kinaesthetic responsiveness, as seen in works such as Lygia Clark's *Rede de Elásticos* and *Corpo Coletivo* (Clark, 1974). This responsiveness through play can be linked to Winnicott's research regarding creativity, play, bonding and self awareness 'It is in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self' (Winnicott, 1971 p54). This exploration of play as relationship relates to Bourriard's relational aesthetics discourse, of 'art ..as a state of encounter' where there is a playful approach in use of relational art object and personal connection to others in relationship (Bourriard, 1998 p. 15). This also links to Fitzpatrick's research of the gifting of memorial objects within a relationship of continuing bonds. These works demonstrate the intertwining of play within ritual processes which combine a solemnity of ritual focus with the imagination and joy of childlike play.

This playful approach towards the subject of death has influenced my own research practice, following on from Roamanyshyn's writing in 'The Wounded Researcher' (Roamanyshyn) in utilising emotion, self-reflection and impact of embodied memory as part of my research. Intellectual scrutiny is bound together with the act of research as playful adventure and childlike exploration through use of the senses, emotion, spiritual connection and creativity in exploring a living texture to research about the subject of death. The work of Mendieta brings this sense of playful adventure into structures of ritual interaction within the land and body, and her work involves a transformation of associations of what constitutes mourning, birth and death and response to this within environment. A focus on embodied presence of playing as connected to death, grief and visual culture, develops contemporary academic writing on these subjects, and a need identified for further research in this area, including research into relationship between visual symbol, reverie and embodied play.

### **Continuation of Bonds as Embodied Living Relationship**

Integral to my research has been exploring and developing work regarding the concept of continuing bonds within contemporary death studies (Valentine, 2008; Fitzpatrick; 2012; Walter, 1999). Continuation of bonds between those living and those who have died, incorporate a personal narrative approach to death and mourning. This places importance on individual meaning making within community regarding continued emotional relationship to those who have died, recognising 'the existence of enduring rather than just temporary bonds with the dead'(Walter, 1999 p.105). My own research has framed this argument within a visual performative context of embodiment of personal narrative as core to this bonding. Furthermore, my work has developed an additional emphasis on continuation of bonds within an archetypal ancestral realm. Jungian concepts of visual image as related to archetypes and the collective unconscious have been explored within a wider connectivity of societal bonding (Jung, 1966, 1983, 1986 editions). Relationship with visual image, symbol and heritage of architectural ancient sites of death in the environment have been connected to teleogenic plot theory, in which connectivity brings a dynamic sense of belonging in the present as linked to the past, where past and present are in a flow of intertwining connection, which is also continually linked with the future (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Performance art and ritual have been explored as assisting within expression to a

continuation of bonds as part of life (Mendieta, 2013; Pearson and Shanks, 2001).

Exploration of bonds bring into focus a merging of personal loss with a wider approach to grief and mourning, as incorporated through relationship to the land as home and to wider ancestry through ancient and sacred sites of death. This develops further Walters' work in identifying need for community connectivity through contemporary rituals of death, emphasising links to a community of ancestors within visual presence of prehistory in the landscape, and creating further bonds between living present community and the past as lived present. A performance art and ritual perspective to this relationship brings an embodied visual dialogue to the heart of relationship with ancestors, death and the past. My work argues that this gives rise to a potential shift within personal mourning, through containment within a wider connectivity, as transforming an individualised grief into shared meaning making not only with an immediate living community but also within an awareness of bonds over time with lives and deaths of ancestors as symbolised in the land. Emotional connectivity brought about through a connecting to bonds with ancestors as well as personal memorialisation, has a capacity in bringing feelings of a joy of connection within personal mourning.

In exploring embodied connectivity between groups of people honouring the dead in sacred landscapes, a potential for organic community exchange has been identified, a connectivity of the living body in relation to other living bodies in community as well as to landscape and material and visual memorialisation of death. This work recognises a domain of loss within the living body in relation to grief, as well as shared embodied experience with others and sacred environment, which develops healing relationship of the living body with others in community and to the dead. This work contributes and adds to Fitzpatrick's writing in exploring the domain of loss (Fitzpatrick 2010, 2012), who describes domain as a region of space exclusively relating to the expression of loss. My work highlights this space and transforms it into a connectivity of embodied relationship as an aspect of creative visual expression of acknowledgment to loss. Connected to this has been an examination and exploration of continuation of bonds within an attachment model of human behaviour (Winnicott, 1971; Bowlby, 2005). My work has highlighted a gap within contemporary writing to include more work on attachment and bonds between the living in relation to those who have died, and exploring this within considerations of healthy attachment in contemporary community. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between psychological attachment, individuation and continuation of bonds through aesthetic and relational meaning making. This could involve further research between early life attachments and attachment in relation to grief and loss within the latter stages of life, relating this to Jungian individuation models.



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