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Frank Moore

Posted on October 15, 2013 By Kelly Knox Kelly Knox, Obituary, Performance Art

~Artist, Philosopher, Shaman [Adult Content]



[Performance Artist, Poet, Painter and Shaman Frank Moore died Monday morning October 14, 2013, of double pneumonia. He was surrounded by his wife Linda Mac, his family, his friends and fellow artists. I first began corresponding with Frank in 1999 as I was researching my Master's thesis on Performance Art. I found Frank to be a very thoughtful and generous mentor, an insightful and inspirational artist. I devoted a chapter of my thesis to (my understanding of) his work. I have re-published it here as a small token in tribute to and in celebration of a man whom I believe will one-day be more widely recognized for the outstanding artist he was. Ed.]

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whole life long and yet be a man
 who draws energy from the things
 of the world.
 ~Henri Matisse

Imagine that in another time and place, Frank Moore is huddled by the firelight, wrapped in animal hides and carefully protected by his tribe. On ceremonial occasions he is carried to various sacred sites for the purpose of ensuring the well-being of the people who care for him and for whom he provides spiritual and emotional guidance. Moore dances, chants, moans and utters incomprehensible sounds that only a few trusted helpers can interpret for the rest.

As he grows older, he is more revered and respected by the ever-younger members of his clan. These latter know of him by reputation, and they travel great distances to benefit from his wisdom. They know that he is chosen, marked by the gods for a special purpose. He is wounded, but has somehow survived. When he mounts his spirit-horse, the drum, he flies great distances, he talks with gods and ancestors and then returns to tell his visions.

In performance, Frank Moore is a “shaman”; in “real life,” Moore is confined to a wheel chair and ninety-percent disabled. Moore paints, writes, and communicates with a pointer attached to his head by a leather strap. On stage he “sings,” “dances” and “performs.” Moore enjoys a large Internet presence that helps him to obscure the line separating his “real life” from performance. He has a twenty-four hour per day (Internet) radio station, a web site with many galleries and a vast network of correspondence that he calls his “E-Salon.”

Moore has cerebral palsy. A strobe light and the projected images he culls from his thirty years of performance art light his shaman rituals, not a fire. The only skins he is wrapped in are those of the various nude dancers that dance with, around or on him. Moore Has a Bachelor’s degree in English, A Master’s degree in Psychology, and a Master’s degree in Fine Arts (Performance and Video) (*Resume*). Moore sees his work as ancillary to that of Ann Halprin and Antonin Artaud. Moore is a rolling enigma.

Frank Moore bases his theory of performance on his idea of public and private rituals. Public rituals, for Moore, originate in private rituals. Private rituals are “only experienced within the mind and/or body of the person. Or between the bodies of two people” (*Private Rituals*). Moore’s performances often take place in “caves” or “tents” or other symbolic, created spaces that separate participants from the everyday world.

Participants in both the private and public performances are forbidden to reveal what happens within the performance space during the ritual. Moore writes, “one of the reasons to use secrecy is to draw a circle around the magic work that protects it from the prevailing taboos, morals, and judgments” (*Private Rituals*). Some of Moore’s rituals last for several hours, some for days. The outcomes or results of these rituals are difficult to assess because of the secrecy Moore imposes on the participants.

Moore wrote about his “Shamanistic Art” as

“an art that acts for nonlinear change... [that] by bringing new dreams, new myths, new visions into society from the universal underworld, it will radically change society”.(*Private Rituals*)

Moore concluded that the “job” of the artist as shaman was “to carry the new visionary myths from the gods into the world through [his] body”(Private Rituals).

The designation of a “sacred” space or “shrine” by a shaman is a common practice among “traditional people” like the Dagara in West Africa. Malidoma Some describes two Dagara funeral rituals in his *Ritual: Power, Healing and Community* (76-91, 100-102). The first account he gives, is of the ritual as it is practiced by the Dagara; the second is a “Dagara-style funeral” as enacted by those attending a “men’s conference” of Viet Nam War Veterans (99).

The participants at the men’s conference were divided into three groups: “mourners,” “containers” and “singers” (100). The “containers” built a shrine that represented the “border” between this world and the “Otherworld.” Later they would, as their designation suggested, “contain” the grieving mourners. Near the

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shrine there was a “line separating the tribe of men from the Otherworld”(100). A second space was designated as the “village,” the men were to return to the village after having expressed their grief. The distance between the village and the shrine (about twenty feet) was called the “road of grief”(100).

Some’s account related how the mourners became “fascinated by the sight of the Otherworld” and “were unwilling to return to the village”(101). Some of the mourners attempted to “throw themselves into [the Otherworld] as if in a serious need to join the dead”(101). When the dejected mourners were compelled (some by force) to return to the village, they effectively turned the village into a shrine, by carrying their grief with them. The formal structure of the ritual had broken down. The mourner’s seemed to turn the ritual space upside down. Apparently they confused the Otherworld with a goal to be achieved, not a space to be venerated. Some’s carefully reconstructed Dagara grief ritual was transformed into “ritual—period”(101):

People leapt out of the village in single line and danced their way to the shrine, turned around and came back home to the village. It was beautiful to see. The space between the village and the shrine was busy. The cleansing was happening. So much grief surfaced that the shrine was jam-packed with a crowd of men who did not quite register that they were only supposed to go to the shrine and drop their grief and return to the village where the drumming and the chanting was [sic] going on .(101-102)

Despite the misunderstandings, Some declared that the ritual was “a small success”(102). Perhaps among the group of men, the need for catharsis was so strong, that even when they misunderstood the stipulations of the ritual, they were still ecstatically displaced, and experienced catharsis.

Carr described Moore’s shamanic performance at Franklin Furnace in an article from 1987, included in her anthology cited above. She wrote, “Moore’s piece felt to me like five real hours from the Summer of Love, complete with group grope”(139). Carr was there as a journalist, and was not moved to join the ritual. She described the ritual as “a love-in”(140). Participants were first led to a specific place by “mid-priests,” they were offered “a drug” [i] to lower their “inhibitions” and they had their feet washed by their guide (138).

The designation of space, cleansing and communal drinking were all ritual elements. Here they helped Moore establish the unity of the group and the separateness or “special-ness” of the place he transformed into a ritual space. From the beginning, as theatergoers entered, Moore sat in his “cave”[ii] “naked in his wheelchair” and “howling”(138). The outward signs of ritual, pointed to the possibility for the inward journey Moore and his “audience” would take.

Moore then made himself “vulnerable” to his audience by having two of his attendants place him on “a mat on the floor”(139). His audience was invited to “explore Frank’s body,” as Carr reported only “one woman did” (139). As the performance continued, the audience was asked to participate in what Moore called “eroplay”(139). Moore’s wife, Linda Mac explained to the group that eroplay was “ ‘an intense physical playing or touching of oneself or others’”(qtd. in Carr 139). Mac then read a series of suggestive instructions that directed the participants as they performed with and around Moore. The ritual was concluded as “helpers wrapped everyone in a giant circle of cellophane, ribbon, toilet paper, and aluminum foil”(140).

The ritual binding of the group made *communitas* an explicit statement, complete with an undercurrent of physical restriction. [See Figure 1: Rocking and Wrapping.] This restriction was perhaps a warning from the shaman to the rest of the participants in the ritual[iii]. Or, perhaps the act of “unwrapping” or “releasing” themselves from their restraints was symbolic of the cathartic release they should have felt from the rest of the ritual.

Some’s well-defined “road of grief” has been reinterpreted in cellophane and toilet paper. The linearity of the cellophane and toilet paper was suggestive of a road and its suggested circularity, expressive of life’s cycles in which all were enmeshed. To cast off one’s “wrapping”[iv] was freedom for the participant and catharsis for the performer; to cast off one’s cycle of death and rebirth, for the “dead”[v] was enlightenment. Moore perhaps educed a similar interpretation when he wrote:

[Performance] art can have a more heavy-duty magical side to it that shocks, offends, and breaks new ground. This side is what is locked in, the subconscious, the womb, the underground, hell/heaven, pleasure/torture, the coffin, the grave, birth/death/rebirth, dream/nightmare, the hidden world of taboos. (*Reshaping Reality*)

In Some’s account of the grief ritual, a pervasive sense of ecstatic displacement and cathartic relief was evident. In Frank Moore’s “Rocking and Wrapping” elements of ritual and communion were enacted by the

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participants, as witnessed by Carr. Evidence of the experience of ecstasy or catharsis, beyond what was symbolically portrayed in Moore's ritual, remained hidden.



Frank Moore in "Wrapping and Rocking," Berkeley California. 1990. Moore is seated in his wheel chair; Linda Mac is standing in the center of the group; and "Leigh" is reclining on Moore's lap. [Photograph by Kevin Rice, 1990; provided by the artist and used with permission. Ed.]

[Frank Moore was born on June 25, 1946 and died on October 14, 2013; dates are a terrible way to commemorate his life. And wherever he is, he's probably dancing.]

[i] Moore's "helpers" call this "soma"; in fact it is just water.

[ii] Carr described it as "hung with quilts, sheets and strips of aluminum foil"(138).

[iii] In the sense of "that what binds us together also restricts our freedom to act as individuals."

[iv] Clothing and the tape and toilet paper are "wrappings."

[v] In many rituals the initiate is seen as dying to his former life. Here Moore may intend that "wrapping" tape is equated with the winding sheets used for corpses.

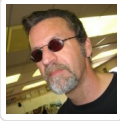
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