

CONCERNING THE SPIRITUAL



Dimitri. Or the Silent Orgasm, Foam x ADE, 2017 installation view © Jean-Vincent Simonet, courtesy of the artist, installation photography by Christian van der Kooy

Essay by Kim Knoppers

From depicting a ritual, to performing a ritual, to providing a ritualistic space through the photographic medium.

Until the traditional art of *pizzaiuolo* was officially added to it, I had never heard of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List of Humanity. Although pizzas with tomato sauce are quite tangible, the art also includes more intangible components, such as the spectacular spinning of the dough and the songs and stories that have turned pizza-making into a social ritual in Naples. The UNESCO list was introduced as a way of protecting and raising awareness of intangible elements of culture all around the world. They range from ancient rituals to traditions and social customs. Along with media-friendly pizza twirling, the most recent convention in 2017 recognised a further 33 practices of intangible cultural heritage. They included spiritual rituals such as the Kushtdepdi rite of singing and dancing from Turkmenistan, and the Mongolian traditional practice of worshipping sacred sites.¹

These days we no longer perform as many rituals as we did in the past — although the word is often used as a synonym for a personal habit. This explains the need for lists of rituals that ought to be preserved for posterity. In their original form, rituals are closely bound up with a series of acts carried out collectively. They symbolise something invisible and intangible that is usually impossible to allude to precisely in the form of words. Rituals confirm a specific social, religious or cultural identity. Often they have something to do with recognising the existence and influence of gods, spirits or ancestors, through which rituals are performed to invoke and placate them. Or they may be intended to ward off evil. They can include special gestures and words, songs or dances, special costumes or masks, processions, or sacrifices of food or animals.

In the collection of portfolios in this section, humanity's spiritual quest is central; they explore inner and outer journeys, and the rituals performed and experienced along the way. Despite revolving around the same theme, the portfolios are extremely diverse in subject and form. Some depict spiritual acts, or symbols and places relevant to them. In others the work itself is the result of (spi)ritual acts by the artist during the creative process.

An interest in recording spirituality and rituals has been a feature of photography from the start. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, photographers attempted to capture in their photographs the ghosts of deceased loved ones floating in the air around their clients. The camera could 'steal' and record the souls of the dead. Photographers started to produce what they called spirit photographs, using double or triple exposures. In the name of anthropology and ethnology, Westerners travelled to 'darkest' Africa or the 'mysterious' Orient to document fertility and initiation rites. At the start of the twentieth century, Austrian priest Martin Gusinde (1886–1969) visited the people of Tierra del Fuego and had them re-enact scenes from religious ceremonies. In its early years, photography was not a spiritual experience in itself for the photographer and their audience, rather it was a useful trick for earning money or carrying out semi-scientific research from a dubious colonial point of view. Nevertheless, it sometimes resulted in fascinating photos in which spiritual acts were depicted along with the symbols and places related to them.

It would seem that the connection between the medium of photography and spirituality is now being revived, prompted by a quest for a higher power or to uncover the essence of the deeper self. Nowadays the following question now seems relevant again: Can the act of taking, constructing, printing, editing and analysing photographs be a gateway to spiritual enlightenment? To ask the question is not necessarily to answer it in the limited space of these pages, but I can give a few examples of the ritualistic experience of photography, for its creator or for its viewers.

The series *Dwelling: In this space we breathe* (2017) by Khadija Saye (1992–2017) can be conceived as a reference to the nineteenth-century obsession with the documenting of apparitions.² In a series of eight tintypes, British-Gambian Saye investigated the migration of Gambian spirit practices. In each of the images Saye holds objects that are regarded as sacred, which came into her possession through a process of prayer and exchange with Gambian spiritual healers. The ritual objects are laden with spiritual significance and derived directly from the diaspora of which Saye was part of. Saye wrote that the tintypes had become sacred objects for her too. The process of making them had itself become a ritual of which Saye was the initiator.³ In the performative acts carried out by Polish artist Filip Berendt in creating his series *Monomyth*, the camera is also a tool. The immersion in mysticism, prompted by the shamanic, plant-derived drug ayahuasca and the ‘journey within’, has its origins in a deep interest in a spiritual realm beyond the phenomenological worldview.

Does the popularity of consuming ayahuasca or DMT amount to a new form of seeking contemporary spirituality? *Dimitri, or the Silent Orgasm* by French photographer Jean Vincent Simonet, in collaboration with DJ and producer Trippin Jaguar, is a reflection on the psychedelic state created by DMT, a molecule found in many plants and animals that has historically been used by indigenous peoples in rituals, and for purposes of healing. It can produce vivid hallucinations and, for that reason, is illegal in most countries. In Jean-Vincent Simonet’s work, bodies and places, nature and artificiality are submerged in a celebration of image-fetishism. Trippin Jaguar’s musical style and persona are likewise inspired by the ritualistic use of hallucinogens and psilocybin, found in magic mushrooms. Trippin Jaguar’s immersive soundscape complements the ebb and flow of emotions and visions in Simonet’s projections. Visitors are completely surrounded by the work and they figuratively step through the door to another world, a door the artist has already passed through. As a viewer you are challenged to put yourself in a space that opens up and enables you to see the world in a new way.⁴ The work of Saye, Berendt and Simonet can be seen as the material residue of spiritual rituals initiated as part of their own inner journey.

Not represented here, but very much worth drawing attention to in this context, are artists who, by means of their photography, attempt to give their audiences a spiritual experience (or something close to it) by creating ritualistic spaces. For his 2016 exhibition at Foam called *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (a reference to the 1981 album by Brian Eno and David Byrne), Dutch artist Paul Bogaers created an overwhelming space in which the viewer was completely immersed. Ever since the start of his career in the mid 1980s, he has sought ways of escaping the most forceful conventions of photography. He couldn’t identify with the use of



Under the Influence, 2015 photographic installation
view © Dominic Hawgood, courtesy of the artist

photography as a dry representation of reality, intended purely to show what things looked like. Instead, he wanted to use photography as a tool to call up associations that went beyond the flat surface of the photograph and indeed beyond anything observable in it. Through the visible he tries to make contact with something invisible, something he calls inspiration. In the exhibition he presented a series of photosculptures and ‘heads’ made of papier-mâché, with photographs on them that were recognisable as the insides of masks. The illusion of depth was created by a flat photo and enhanced by the shape of the head.

Bogaers is fascinated by the inspiration seen in African masks and images, because of both their power of expression and their significance. They have a concrete form but they always represent something im-

material, whether ancestors, forces or ghosts. Making the invisible visible is, in his view, the essence of the artistic calling. The unfinished nature of the masks and sculptures is another feature that attracts him. They are used in rituals, and in the process all kinds of things are added: objects, rope, sacrificial blood. The sculptures change continually, as they need to if they are to remain ‘alive’. Every addition, as long as it is the right one, reinforces the power of the sculpture. No piece is ever completed, therefore, but always in transition.⁵

During his graduation exhibition for the MA in photography at ECAL, Switzerland, Calum Douglas presented a ritual space in which spirituality and the internet are closely connected. With *Arcana* Douglas intends to offer visitors a multi-sensory experience, central to

which are the psychology and semiotics of the chaos, confusion and anxiety evoked by today's digital experience. In the exhibition spaces are a fire pit, two fountains and a plinth with incense sticks. For each of the elements, use has been made of images that involve spiritual symbolism, taken from archives of the pre-internet imagery found in textbooks. Looking at the images, we have a sense of nostalgia. Paradoxically, *Arcana* attempts to create an immersive, ambient and calm space through the subtle use of digital 'persuasive design'.⁶

Two early adopters of the crossover between spiritual and digital languages are Melanie Bonajo and Dominic Hawgood. With her 2016 Foam exhibition *Night Soil* and her current exhibition *The Death of Melanie Bonajo: How to unmodernize yourself and become an elf in 12 steps* at the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht, the Netherlands, Bonajo accompanies visitors on a journey of spiritual performance through immersive spaces that offer an antidote to the excrescences of profit-based Western society.⁷ Dominic Hawgood, with his highly praised *Under the Influence* and his more recent project *Casting out the Self*, also builds spaces in which the visitor is offered a total immersion experience. In complete contrast to Bonajo, he does so in a high-tech manner that uses the entire toolbox of advertising photography, including lighting, digital image manipulation and CGI. In *Under the Influence* he investigated the visual imagery of the Pentecostal Church, in which it propagates its own healings. Similarly, in *Casting Out the Self* he uses the dominant presence of technology in society to explore further his fascination with sensations and states of mind, this time through his own experiences with DMT.⁸ The physical rooms in which he presents his work resemble digital spaces and, conversely, his digital spaces resemble physical rooms.

The spaces presented by Douglas, Bonajo and Hawgood are ritual environments that serve to put the visitor into a meditative state and offer an escape from today's turbulent life, without thereby abandoning a critical stance. The ritualistic spaces they create, in which the image is central, embody symbolic messages and open doors to a space in which the emptiness of the post-internet era is addressed. In these ritualistic spaces, people can not only feel but are allowed to think.

¹ See also: <https://ich.unesco.org/>

² Khadija Saye died on 14 June, 2017 in the fire at Grenfell Tower in London, just as she was about to make her artistic debut.

³ For further reading: Karin Bareman, *Dwelling: in this space we breathe*, Foam Magazine #49 Back to the Future, The 19th Century in the 21st Century.

⁴ Based on the exhibition text I wrote in consultation with Jean-Vincent Simonet for the exhibition *Dimitri. Or the Silent Orgasm*, Foam x ADE, 2017.

⁵ Based on conversations with Paul Bogaers for the exhibition cahier *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, Foam 2015/2016.

⁶ Based on conversations and email correspondence with Calum Douglas in 2018, during my educational activities at ECAL, Lausanne, Switzerland.

⁷ For further reading: cahier written by Kim Knoppers on the occasion of the 2016 Foam exhibition *Night Soil* by Melanie Bonajo.

⁸ For further reading: www.dominichawgood.com and *Speaking in Tongues*, Foam Magazine #42 Talent.

