



SHARON ALWARD



**"I BELIEVE OUR ATTITUDES ARE NUMBED,
ABSOLUTE, AND STRANGE."**

Professor Sharon Alward received her BA from the University of Winnipeg in 1975, her BFA from the University of Manitoba in 1983 and her MFA at the University of California in 1985. In addition to teaching at the University of Manitoba School of Art, she has volunteered at TERF (Training and Employment Resources for Females) as the Artist-in-Residence, which evolved out of her work at POWER (Prostitutes and Other Women for Equal Rights) as an outreach worker. She was also an Administrant and Lay reader for the Anglican Church. Alward's performances and video-tapes have been exhibited worldwide. Her work investigates the metaphysical, moral and epistemological role of the contemporary artist through the use of ritual symbolism.



SHARON ALWARD ON LIMINAL ACTS

I HELD A BANQUET FOR ANY AND ALL PERSONS THAT WISHED TO ATTEND IN Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. This area has experienced an influx of problems such as drug addiction and dealing, HIV infection, prostitution, crime, lack of adequate housing and high unemployment.

After the guests had left the banquet, huge platters of food were created and seven guests, including the curator: Victoria Singh, went out into the streets and passed out food and desserts to the homeless.

The performance subverted traditional theatre, clichés of "climax and conclusion," and the traditional information structure. 'Liminal Acts' worked within a non-matrixed performative structure which is based on the audience relationship and the potential for transformation.

The performance also made reference to the writings of anthropologist: Victor Turner, specifically his theories associated with "the betwixt and between of the liming."



MENU

Smoked Salmon and Chive pastry rolls

Chickpea hommous with pita bread triangles



Smoked Salmon and Chive pastry rolls
Chickpea hommous with pita bread triangles
Tortilla cups with black bean and Jack cheese
Deluxe-open and closed-cocktail sandwiches on white and brown bread filled with a variety of meats, (roast beef, salami, pastrami, chicken breast), fish (tuna smoked salmon) and non-meat (eggs, cheese)
Brie on baguettes
Assorted bruschetta
Mini profiteroles from France, filled with Peruvian Chocolate mousse
Traditional Nanaimo bars
Fruit punch (grapefruit, orange and berry with sparkling soda) served in wineglasses

E-MAIL INTERVIEW WITH VICTORIA SINGH

March 2004

You spent some time in the performance space (the Luxe) before people entered the room...what were you doing and why?

I always begin all of my performances with prayerful meditation. This is meant to create the potential for a holy space and the proper mind set. Through the meditative and ritualistic aspects of the work, I believe a spiritual sphere emerges. Placing people in relation to one another in a public space gives them a way of having identities vis-à-vis one another.

C. Levi-Strauss argues that ritual gestures and objects short-circuit the process of verbalization. Language, he suggests, characteristically divides up the world. Discourse distinguishes, introducing distinctions and discontinuities into life. Ritual tries to reassert the connectedness of things and the continuities in life; it is less an expression of thought than an experiment in living. It is where we lead with the body and the mind follows. 'Ritual' condenses procedures which otherwise would have to be discursive...ritual uses gestures and things to replace their analytic expression.

Hannah Arendt's ideas of the performative, and how action creates a certain kind of space for a certain kind of person to be, are important considerations. My ritual of meditation before each performance creates a welcoming space and leads people to open-up to me. The repetitive actions or rituals that are incorporated into the performances also opens up a space for people.

Can you discuss the nature of "betwixt and between" in relation to 'Liminal Acts'.

In recent studies of initiation rites I discovered Victor Turner's concept of "liminal space." He says that it is very hard to come by in the modern and now post-modern world. We are now too strategic, functional, and hurried to seek what the ancients sought above all else. Now only pain is strong enough to lead us into this unique place "where all significant transformation happens." I believe our attitudes are numbed, absolute, and strange.

Sacred space is by definition: liminal space. We are not in control, not the 'center,' therefore something genuinely new can happen. Here we are capable of seeing something beyond self-interest, self-will, and security concerns. True sacred space allows an alternative consciousness to emerge.

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space is a unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be, but it is where some mystical force, energy or power (some might call God) is always leading them. It is when you are in between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. For me it's about learning how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust, wait and not 'explain.' Few of us know how to stay on the threshold. You just feel stupid there — and we are all trying to say something profound these days. Everything genuinely new emerges in some kind of liminal space — a holy aimlessness.

Mircea Eliade presents a parallel idea when he speaks of "sacred space." He says that we largely live in profane space now, and the best we can do is create "ceremonies" that give the appearance of sacred space but not the reality. Ceremony would be more liminoid — a false sacred — rather than liminal. It apes the sacred by sentiment, scale, and heroic language.

There are three clear differences between the ceremonies of profane space and true sacred space:

- 1) Profane space has no absolute center, but many centers that periodically take their turn.
- 2) Profane space always reflects the dominant consciousness because it knows no alternative.
- 3) Profane space never allows the appearance of the shadow. It would be far too threatening.

I am trying to contradict that distinction by using ceremony and ritual (the banquet) to create a truly sacred space. Whether I was successful or not is best left to those who participated. I hope that the 'shadow' appeared...

Victor Turner created a flow chart: 'The Evolution of Cultural Genres of Performance from the Liminal to Liminoid' — there is a "reaggregation" section where 'post-performance suppers' are listed. Was 'Liminal Acts' a supper of this nature?

I am not familiar with 'post-performance reaggregation suppers.' As I understand, reaggregation is the reincorporation or the reintegration of people as full members of society. With the meal as a form of *communitas* — how people see, understand and act towards each other. Then the members of the *communitas* (the meal) took food out to the larger community or the secular and profane world (hopefully carrying some of the sacred with them). I remember your call to me in the wee hours of the morning — you were so excited by the experience. At the moment I spoke to you the performance was complete, and to my mind successful.

I recall you stating during our e-mail interview in 2002 that this performance ('Liminal Acts') would be the first time you would use autobiographical references in your work. Can you comment on the references you made and why you chose to use them?

The direct autobiographical reference was made by showing my experimental film during the meal which was projected on the large back wall of the space — it was the size of a large movie-screen. As participants ate, sat on the floor or in chairs after socializing, they got to hear my life-story of coming to grips with the sacred and the profane. This piece showed continuously all night as a loop. Many of the participants asked questions about personal aspects of the narrative. I chose to do this as a way of

opening up the possibility of an intimate exchange — taking a risk and creating a space for intimacy. Usually I am just available to talk to during my performances, as I was at the Western Front, but this time I was also available autobiographically. I was able to tell the story of my journey towards the sacred. This made for some very moving exchanges with some of the participants. I have to admit I felt pretty vulnerable as some of the details are very intimate and don't always place me in a very flattering light...

May 2004

In our last series of communication (March 2004) I asked you if you intended 'Liminal Acts' to be interpreted as a 'post-performance reaggregation supper.' I was referring to a feature of a flow chart illustrating 'The Evolution of Cultural Genres of Performance from the Liminal to Liminoid' — Victor Turner.

However, your explanation of it ("As I understand, reaggregation is the reincorporation or the reintegration of people as full members of society. ")

However, your explanation of it ("As I understand, reaggregation is the reincorporation or the reintegration of people as full members of society...") inspired me to interpret your piece as a metaphorical, post-performance supper. I have been using performance (art) as a metaphor or a microcosm for many facets of real/actual life performances or life rituals when I think about, and endeavor to contextualize and further understand the works that featured in this series. For example, you refer to Micea Eliade's notion that we create "ceremonies" that give the appearance of sacred space but not the reality. I have been taking assertions like this and replacing words like "we" with "performance artists" and "ceremonies" with "performative works" for instance, "performance artists draw on genuine acts of ritual to create works that give the appearance of sacred space." (Of course not all performance artists do this, some works are acts that are not intended to address sacred or deep space at all.)

I feel that we can describe your performance as a 'post-performance reaggregation supper' in that it altered peoples' (the participants) perceptions and whisked them into your self-created performative 'void' or liminal space for a fragment of time. If we interpret the private ceremony or ritual that you carried out before people entered the space as the 'performance' surely the meal could be 'post-performative.' The energy you intended to manifest with these actions may have reintegrated the participants as new, enlightened members of society. How do you feel about this?

Yes, I absolutely agree with you re: the private ritual. It is always such an integral part of the work I do. This is brilliant analysis and insight.

ARTIST STATEMENT

Suzi Gablik talks about ritual's symbolic significance and Rachael Rosenthal speaks about "sucking the disease from society." My projects question the role of the artist in society and the social responsibility of the artist. I am also interested in art as a healing agent. The necessity for ethical action; love, compassion, altruism or care has its early appearance in the work of Suzanne Lacy, Rachael Rosenthal, Linda Montano, Joseph Beuys and other performance artists.

Edith Wyschogrod describes the blissful enlightenment in the endless assistance to others not as a nostalgic return to a pre-modern hagiography but a post-modern expression of excessive desire; a desire on the behalf of the other that seeks the cessation of another's suffering and the birth of another's joy. Repulsion, seduction and exoticism have also been explored in my previous works.

One of the most important features of all of these projects is the audience's accessibility to the artist and the work, they are invited to participate and ask questions before, during and after the performance.

Walter Benjamin said that the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction reduced the aura of the unique artwork to multiples that quickly degraded to kitsch. Pop art accelerated this process; the transcendental quality of the auratic artwork disappeared and art became commonplace, superficial and banal. Art no longer represented an independent reality.

This failure of representation in art has led me back to the beginning, to an awareness of our brief mortal moment. The challenge for me is the possibility of 're-framing' the sacred in our post-modern world. Baudrillard claimed that: when everything is aesthetic, nothing is beautiful or ugly anymore and art itself disappears. He submits that: the present disorder in art may be interpreted as a fundamental breaking in the secret code of the aesthetic and that we, as artists, should approach art from the standpoint of a set of rituals. Returning art to its ritualistic platform, combined with recent technological developments, may create new possibilities for the spiritual imagination.

