

THE LIMINAL ZONES OF HELENA EFLEROVA

In the teachings of the founder of Taoism, Lao Tzu, we find the virtues of water are often extolled. Water does not seek to attack impregnable objects but instead peacefully finds its way around them. Rivers do not fail to reach the sea, though they seek the lowest level and the simplest course. The reason for this emphasis is that Taoism, and under its influence also Zen Buddhism, gives a central place to the liquidity of *change*, to the role of time in forming our experience of reality rather than focusing on the eternal, unchanging or the immutable as the highest aim and ideal, as do western philosophical and theological traditions.

In Helena Eflerova's performances she often lies suspended in tanks of water, and we sense that here too there is the desire to emphasize the mutable and changeable, to evoke a temporality that is fundamentally transitive and radically impermanent. Her work is about the opposite of something fixed and definite. You could say that she brings us to a threshold or limit-situation, to a liminal zone.

Limen means threshold in Latin, and so in speaking of liminality I refer to borderline situations at which something is about to undergo a phase transition or turn into something else. These can be physiological or psychological thresholds spanning everything from hypnogogic states we inhabit between sleeping and waking to more extreme situations such as when we lie at the margin between life and death. Thus liminal moments are times of tension and extremes, but they are also moments of great potential. For something fundamental happens within this state that brings into question the structural unity of both the self and of society.

As the social anthropologist Victor Turner argues in his classic study of the rites of passage performed within tribal societies, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (1970), liminality has also played a central part in the rites of passage performed in traditional societies. Turner describes how the initiate in the liminal phase of such rites 'passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state'. This phase, Turner stresses, marks an important intermediary stage within a broader ritual process that leads away from passive embeddedness within the structures of static social norms via a period of indeterminacy and confusion towards subsequent reincorporation and reintegration into the social structure. In this way society is continuously strengthened through an influx of liminal energy. 'The attributes of liminality or liminal *personae* ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous', Turner writes, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the networks of classification that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols.....Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to the eclipse of the sun or moon.

But ultimately, argues Turner, such rites of passage are not limited just to traditional tribal societies, because what is at stake in such rites is the fundamental relationship between structure and anti-structure within all human societies. In this sense, then, the liminal is a recurrent dimension within social dynamics across time and space. It is also such awareness of structureless as being more fundamental than structure that Taoism and Zen Buddhism emphasise. They try to give us a sustained lesson in liminality.

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In an interview from 1992 Marina Abramovic imagined a kind of artist who is more like the shaman often to be found in traditional societies. She described what they might do:

For example one of them could demonstrate that it is possible to spend three days and three nights under water. There is no rational, scientific explanation of this phenomenon. There is no trick involved. Breaks with conventional 'understanding' are important to me; I want to produce a 'mental jump', want to lead people to a point where rational thinking fails, where the brain has to give up. The confusion which then arises in the brain is also an interval. Another world can open up. I shall point the way, no more.

Helena Eflerova has yet to immerse herself for three days and nights in one of her tanks, but she definitely aspires to a kind of art that is fundamentally transformative.

'Artists today?', asks Abramovic:

They are couriers, they accompany people on the true adventure, a journey into the inner self. There are no firmly established religious structures any longer, the old structures have all been destroyed and new ones have not yet emerged. Artists accompany us on our search for a new order.

Simon Morley

November 2009