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# The “Oriental Guru” in the Modern Artist: Asian Spiritual and Performative Aspects of Postwar American Art<sup>1</sup>

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The ongoing spiritual, aesthetic, and political preoccupations of American artists with Asian culture are increasingly recognized as a definitive feature of modern American art history. But among the questions that require further study is how has this artistic attention to Asian themes impacted American beliefs about what an artist should be? I would like to group together a cluster of metaphysical concepts and popular stereotypes under the term “Oriental guru” and propose that the wide circulation of this figure in discourses of art exerted a profound impact on the profile of the artist in American society. Indeed, one of the least-recognized components of the East/West discourse as it unfolded in the development of postwar art in the United States was a recurring mode of interaction between artists and interlocutors who served as their “Oriental gurus.” Suzuki Daisetsu was the paragon of the type. At the height of his reputation as a Zen sage among New York artists in the 1950s, Suzuki was said to “radiate the glamour that attaches to aging Oriental men of wisdom.”<sup>2</sup> But although the figure of Oriental guru was thus defined by race, gender, and age, sometimes women or European American men performed this role. Moreover, the relationship between modern artist and Oriental guru was highly unstable and the same individual could move from one role to the other. Still, many artists absorbed charismatic qualities from guru-like figures and incorporated them into their performance of the role of modern artist. This pattern can be traced in the careers of numerous American artists, but this study focuses on four of the most conspicuous and interesting cases: Mark Tobey, Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, and Linda Montano.

Each of these four artists presented dramatic visages of “the artist” in a bold frontal sort of manner to

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1 The author wishes to thank Shigemi Inaga for the opportunity to undertake this study as well as his challenging questions and suggestions, which contributed greatly to its development. This study grew out of the author’s essay, “The Asian Dimensions of Postwar Abstract Art: Calligraphy and Metaphysics,” in Alexandra Munroe, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2009), 145–157. Many of the questions addressed here were first triggered by the texts and objects connected with the various parts of *The Third Mind* exhibition and book. Many thanks are due to Alexandra Munroe for the opportunity to participate in multiple stages of that ambitious and fruitful project. The portion of this essay dealing with Mark Tobey benefited greatly from Miani Johnson’s knowledge and generosity. Linda Montano generously shared her thoughts about relationships between artists and gurus in numerous exchanges. Finally, the author thanks Yoshiko Suzuki for her assistance in the preparation of the Japanese version of this text presented at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies on November 10, 2010.

2 Winthrop Sargeant, “Profiles: Dr. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, Great Simplicity,” *New Yorker* 33:28 (August 31, 1957), 51.

the spectator. For example, Mark Tobey, a leading abstractionist among his generation of postwar American painters, posed a haunting face, maybe his own, that barely emerges through dissolving black ink strokes and grayish smudges on faded newsprint. (Fig. 2) Nam June Paik, who is known as the founder of the video art movement, sat in lotus position and meditated on his own live image in a video monitor as captured by closed circuit video. (Fig. 6) Bill Viola, widely regarded as the world's leading video artist today, submitted his body impassively to combustion in a rising wall of flame. (Fig. 8) Finally, Linda Montano, a leading proponent of performance art in the U.S. since the 1970s, effaced her vision by pasting two flesh-toned patches over her eyes. (Fig. 9) Dissolving one's face, contemplating one's self in video, undergoing a cremation of sorts, and sealing off one's eyesight: these acts contributed jarring new images to the prevailing profile of the artist in American society. There are many explanations for such remarkable modes of artistic self-presentation—including ideals of abstract art, avant-gardist antics, developments in video technology, and feminist activism—but the focus of this study is how each of these curious visions reflect the performative gestures, mannerisms, or beliefs of Fig.s admired for their Asian spiritual practice. I will consider each of these artists and return to these images, roughly in art historical chronology, starting with Tobey, continuing with Paik and then his younger colleague in the video art movement, Viola, and concluding with the performance art of Linda Montano.

But first, in order to obtain a sense of what an “Oriental guru” was in the mid- and late-twentieth-century American cultural context, I turn to a Hollywood dramatization of the moment when an aged holy man in a monastery in India accedes to the entreaties of an earnest young American to become his acolyte. (Fig. 1) In the 1946 movie, *The Razor's Edge*, and the 1944 novel of the same title by Somerset Maugham, a sensitive and troubled American youth named Larry bucks the rampant superficial materialism of his American friends and embarks on a globe-trotting search for truth.<sup>3</sup> Part of Larry's quest involves sacrificing creature comforts and undertaking hard labor in a coal mine, demonstrating that the path to enlightenment is as difficult as traversing “the razor's edge,” in the metaphor borrowed by Maugham from the *Katha Upanishads* for the title of the novel. At length, Larry hears that “the East has more to teach the West than the West conceives,”<sup>4</sup> and makes his way to India. In Maugham's text, Larry later describes his momentous interview with the sage. In response to Larry's request for spiritual guidance, the guru fell “into a trance which the Indians call *Samadhi* and in which they hold that the duality of subject and object become Knowledge Absolute. I was sitting cross-legged on the floor, in front of him, and my heart beat violently.”<sup>5</sup> After coming out of his trance, the guru grants Larry's wish to become his disciple. Larry then adopts Indian dress, passes for a native of India, attains enlightenment in solitary communion with nature on a glorious mountaintop, and eventually returns to Europe and the United States with miraculous powers of healing and a charismatic

3 *The Razor's Edge* (1946), starring Tyrone Power and Gene Tierney, was directed by Edmund Goulding and distributed by 20th Century Fox. For additional notable portrayals of the Fig. of the guru in American contexts, see Christopher Isherwood, *My Guru and His Disciple* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980); and John Updike, *S.* (New York: Knopf, 1988).

4 W. Somerset Maugham, *The Razor's Edge* (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 282.

5 *Ibid.*, 295.

intensity that charm all who come in contact with him.

*The Razor's Edge* predicts several aspects of our artists' fascination with Asian spiritualists and their teachings. First, spiritual wisdom is portrayed as an epiphany-like insight obtained by the aspirant through direct face-to-face contact with a charismatic guru possessing rare insight and the ability to transcend subject-object dualism. The "violent beating" of Larry's heart produced by the trance of his guru approximates the intense experience intended for the



**Fig. 1** Tyrone Power (right) as Larry Darrel and Franz Lieber (left) as the Guru. Scene from *The Razor's Edge*, directed by Edmund Goulding, screenplay by Lamar Trotti based on the novel by W. Somerset Maugham. 20th Century Fox/ The Kobal Collection

spectator of a work of art featuring the spiritual mien of its artist. Second, not only does the aspirant hold the potential to mature into a guru through austerities and meditation, but the performance of the role of the guru itself entails a highly relative, unstable, and shape-shifting sort of identity. In Maugham's text, Larry temporarily becomes Indian in the process of attaining enlightenment, and in the movie, the role of Larry's Indian guru is played by the German-American actor Fritz Lieber. Artists too, increasingly foregrounded their self-presentation with performative and theatrical gestures, and this encompassed visions of self-transformation. Third, despite the guru's unstable identity, some manner of Asian identification is a decisive component of his appeal, for this alterity serves as a catalyst in the critique or rebellion against cultural values regarded as "Western," such as materialism, dualism, or rationalism. Perhaps the most striking distinction between American artists' attraction to figures of the "Oriental guru" in the early postwar decades and similar impulses among their contemporaries in other parts of the world was the perception that American culture represented the most egregious extreme of these presumably Western tendencies and therefore required a stronger dose of Oriental spirit to remedy their ill effects. Indeed, while the term "Oriental religion" is a gross aggregate of diverse beliefs, sects, and traditions, the will to conflate their diversity stems from the appeal of their shared non-westerness. Thus, although strictly speaking the term "guru" references a South Asian religious teacher, I follow the prevailing trend in American thought that conflates Asian diversity, and use the term "guru" to encompass other Asian spiritual teachers, notably proponents of Zen Buddhism.

### **Mark Tobey: *Space Ritual***

Not only did the young Mark Tobey (1890–1970) look remarkably similar in appearance to Larry the truth-seeker as played by Tyrone Power in *The Razor's Edge*, he also had a similar penchant for Asian

religion.<sup>6</sup> In 1918, Tobey converted to the Bahá'í Faith, a religion that originated in Iran in the nineteenth century. Later he would travel to Bahá'í pilgrimage destinations in the Middle East and would remain a Bahá'í adherent for the rest of his life. And in 1934, he spent one month at the Zen Hall for Foreigners (Gaijin Zendô) established by Suzuki Daisetsu at Enpukuji in Kyoto. But Tobey's search for Asian religion was also a search for Asian roles to play, and he had a dramatic flare for the exotic. In one 1939 photograph of Tobey, perhaps taken at a private costume party, the artist clutches a rug of the sort that he might have picked up off the floor of the entrance hall of an American home to his chest and dons a braided satin curtain on his head in the makeshift costume of a turbaned sultan.<sup>7</sup>

But the role that Tobey played more consistently and that became foundational to his reputation was that of "Painter-Philosopher," as *Life* magazine characterized him in a 1953 feature article.<sup>8</sup> The article claims that Tobey (and other "mystic painters of the Pacific Northwest") "translate reality into symbols." The article is illustrated by a telling photograph of the now grey-bearded Tobey attired in a sober business suit. The artist seems to peer out sternly at the 13.5 million readers of *Life* magazine, as though daring them to imagine the enormity of his thoughts. The caption explains that he "sits meditatively beneath his art and panels of Chinese writing which influenced it." The "panels of Chinese writing" displayed above Tobey in the photograph are rubbings of script by the Qing-Dynasty calligrapher Weng Fang gang (1733–1818). Tobey had studied Japanese and Chinese calligraphy in the 1930s and developed his signature painting style, called "white writing," through what was admired by Sidney Janis in 1944 as a "fusion of the spirit of Chinese writing with the morphic characters rooted in twentieth-century painting."<sup>9</sup> Tobey himself later claimed that "in China and Japan I was freed from form by the calligraphic."<sup>10</sup> The breakdown of solid volumetric form associated with "the West" was regarded as a crucial transcendence, enabling visionary powers of insight. Tobey studied the scripts of many languages he could not read, deforming them into what he described as "Oriental fragments—characters which twist and turn drifting into Western zones forever speaking of the unity of man's spirit."<sup>11</sup> He sought to integrate fragments of numerous language scripts into abstract "white writing" suggesting a human ur-language in accord with the universalistic ideals of the Bahai Faith.

6 See the photograph of Tobey taken by Jessie Tarbox Beals in 1918–1920. The Schlesinger History of Women in America Collection, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America (Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University). Accessed through ARTstor Collection.

7 This photograph is illustrated in Eliza E. Rathbone, *Mark Tobey: City Paintings* (Washington, D. C.: National Gallery of Art, 1984), 102.

8 "Mystic Painters of the Northwest" *Life*, September 28, 1953. 84-89. The entire text of this article including the illustrations is reproduced in Sheryl Conkelton and Laura Landau, *Northwest Mythologies: The Interactions of Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan, and Guy Anderson* (Tacoma: Tacoma Art Museum, 2003), 12-13.

9 Sidney Janis, essay on Mark Tobey in Willard Gallery Mark Tobey exhibition pamphlet/catalogue, April 4–29, 1944. Willard Gallery NY Scrapbooks 1936–1969 Exhibitions - Publicity Archives of American Art, Microfilm Roll N 69-114, frame # 243.

10 Stedelijk Museum, *Mark Tobey* (1966), n.p. (opposite pl.114.)

11 Mark Tobey, 1944, quoted by William Chapin Seitz, *Mark Tobey* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1962), 21.



**Fig. 2** Mark Tobey, *Head*, 1963. Watercolor and ink on newsprint. 29 x 20.4 cm. Private collection, Munich © 2010 Estate of Mark Tobey/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



**Fig. 3** Mark Tobey, *Space Ritual #8*, 1957. Sumi ink on Japanese paper, 57.8 x 87.6 cm. Seattle Art Museum, Gift of the Estate of Mark Tobey. © 2010 Estate of Mark Tobey/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In the spectral vision of a human head mentioned above (Fig. 2), some of these abstract calligraphic strokes coalesce into just enough of a visage to suggest the artist as seer, freed from the form of his own body by the sense of energy conveyed through calligraphic draftsmanship. In 1957, reaching for some of the acclaim already attained by Jackson Pollock and other younger contemporaries among the Abstract Expressionists, Tobey produced a series of abstract ink studies, some of which were titled *Space Ritual*. (Fig. 3) Rather than identify the materials of these works as “ink on paper” he specified “sumi on Japanese paper,” thus invoking East Asian calligraphic practice much more directly than his oil-on-canvas or tempera works of “white writing.” At this time, he noted that over thirty years earlier, at the Zen Hall for Foreigners at Enpukuji in Kyoto, “I was given a sumi-ink painting of a large free brush circle to meditate upon. What was it? Day after day I would look at it. Was it selflessness? Was it the Universe—where I could lose my identity?”<sup>12</sup> Thus, a mystical transcendence of self could be imagined through the vaporized Head and in even more disembodied form in *Space Ritual*. During the course of a 1957 interview with Tobey, a journalist examined a group of works by Tobey in the presence of the artist. Tobey sensed his interviewer’s preference for those of his works that possessed more recognizable imagery than the abstract *Space Ritual*; the journalist reported that he “...became uncomfortably aware of failing to meet the test of Zen...” and Tobey declared, “I thought so, you are a slave of Western taste.”<sup>13</sup>

12 Mark Tobey, “Japanese Traditions and American Art,” *College Art Journal* 18:1 (Fall 1958), 24.

13 Seldon Rodman, *Conversations with Artists* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1957), 6.

**Nam June Paik: *Living Buddha***

A few years after Tobey, Nam June Paik (1932–2006), who was then in Germany, performed a sumi “space ritual” of his own and like Tobey, he too invoked Asian cultural connotations in his ink performance. While Tobey emphasized the Japanese word “sumi” and remarked on the significance of ink work in the context of Zen Buddhist tradition, Paik referenced Asian culture by employing the handscroll format and using the word “Zen” in the work’s title, *Zen for Head*. (Fig. 4) But in contrast to Tobey’s characteristic tone of imperious mysticism, Paik displayed more of the antic humorous aspect of the avant-garde. His “sumi” is mixed with tomato juice in a washbasin and, instead of a brush, he applied the ink to the paper by dipping his necktie into the washbasin and dragging it across the paper. In addition to his necktie, he also dunked his head in the pail and used the hair on his head like a brush, splashing the ink onto the handscroll.

If Tobey’s *Head* suggests a mysterious spiritual transmitter, Paik’s *Zen for Head* gives the impression of a floor mop. But Paik’s travesty of the seat of human reason was consonant with a broad vision of East Asian culture as a cure for excessively rationalistic tendencies associated vaguely with “the West.” The painter Cleve Gray explained, “I felt I’d been dominated all through life by my brain. Rationalization, structure. I couldn’t let myself continue to be dominated by Western civilization. The Chinese and Japanese influence allowed me to stop my brain from working.”<sup>14</sup> A sometimes goofy Zen-associated behavior was widespread among artists and took on the currency of a shibboleth for countercultural youth in American society, such as the beatniks and the hippies in the 1950s and 1960s. The long hair and beards, beads, and flowers of these American youths were likened to “the holy men of the East”<sup>15</sup> and this Asian associated countercultural sensibility had an enduring impact on the image of the artist in American society. The California artist William T. Wiley, for instance, was characterized as a “denim-clad art monk [who] casually peppers his conversation with quotes from . . . apocryphal tales about the Buddha, and koan-like riddles, playing both the guru and the fool.”<sup>16</sup>

Paik’s Zen antics contributed to this meme after his move to the United States in 1964, but as an Asian artist working in overwhelmingly Caucasian contexts – the European and US art worlds – his racial identity also impacted the reception of his invocation of Asian cultural connotations. In one statement of 1962, Paik declared, “Yellow Peril! c’est moi.”<sup>17</sup> At this early phase in his career, Paik’s avant-gardism was often aggressive and he was willing to deploy stereotypes with a caustic edge that challenged the racial preconceptions of his art world environment. Perhaps one of the vexations that provoked his aggressive stance was the realization that his access to Asian cultural resources was shaped more by his Euroamerican context than his Asian experience or nativity.

14 Cleve Gray quoted in Nicholas Fox Weber, *Cleve Gray* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 101–102.

15 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors; Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), 244.

16 Katherine Gregor, “Zen and the Art of William T. Wiley,” *Art News* 88:4 (April 1989), 186.

17 This document signed by Nam June Paik is reproduced in Wulf Herzogenrath, ed., *Nam June Paik Fluxus/ Video* (Bremen: Kunsthalle Bremen, 1999), 52.

Indeed, for Paik, the role of "Oriental guru" was performed by none other than the American avant-garde composer John Cage. Paik regarded his meeting with Cage in 1958 in Germany as "the turning point in his life."<sup>18</sup> He would say that he first "went to see [Cage's] music with a very cynical mind, to see what Americans would do with Oriental heritage. In the middle of the concert slowly, slowly I got turned on. At the end of the concert I was a completely different man."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Paik would claim that John Cage was the sole reason for his move from Germany to the US in 1964.<sup>20</sup> But in his most notorious expression of appreciation for Cage, while performing his *Etude for Pianoforte* in 1958, Paik jumped off the stage and cut off Cage's necktie with a large pair of scissors. This hostility was a manifestation of Paik's passionate if Oedipal devotion, but later works would repeatedly convey more respectful expressions of homage to Cage. In Irving Sandler's words, "Cage was Paik's Buddha."<sup>21</sup>

While John Cage may thus be identified as Paik's "Oriental guru," Cage's own interests in Asian thought were sparked partly by his friendship with Mark Tobey in the late 1930s, and more decisively by Suzuki Daisetsu, the tireless advocate of Zen Buddhism, whose lectures at Columbia University in the 1950s inspired numerous New York artists. As mentioned at the outset, in 1957 *The New Yorker* characterized Suzuki in enthusiastic and clichéd terms: "As a personality, he radiates not only the general glamour that attaches to aging Oriental men of wisdom but a special serenity that makes him a magnificent living example of the doctrine he preaches."<sup>22</sup> Cage himself would note that in response to Suzuki's lectures he "determined ... to use chance operations as a discipline in my music, a discipline equal I trusted to sitting cross-legged, having faith that ... my writing of music would be as a result not self-expression but self-alteration."<sup>23</sup> Perhaps we may sense in Cage's view of Paik something of the patronizing view of a guru for his disciple. He acknowledged that he was horrified by the violence of Paik's earlier works such as the performance during which Paik cut off his necktie, but was relieved by the more contemplative



**Fig. 4** Nam June Paik, *Zen for Head*, performance of La Monte Young's Composition 1960 #10 (to Bob Morris) at the Städtliches Museum, Wiesbaden, August 9, 1962

18 Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: Video Visionary, Nam June Paik," *The New Yorker* 51:11 (May 5, 1975), 47.

19 Nam June Paik, 1975, quoted in Edith Decker-Phillips, *Paik Video* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Barrytown Ltd., 1998), 25–26.

20 See Patricia Mellankamp, "The Old and the New: Nam June Paik," *Art Journal* 54:4 (1995), 41.

21 Irving Sandler, "Nam June Paik's Boobtube Buddha," in Klaus Bussmann and Florian Matzner, eds., *Nam June Paik: eine DATA base: la Biennale di Venezia XLV, esposizione internazionale d'arte, German Pavilion* (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1993), 64.

22 Sargeant, "Profiles: Dr. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki," 51.

23 John Cage, "On the Works of Nam June Paik," in Toni Stooss and Thomas Kellein, eds., *Nam June Paik, Video Time - Video Space* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 22.





**Fig. 5** Nam June Paik, *TV Buddha*, 1974, Closed-circuit video installation with bronze sculpture, monitor, and video camera. Dimensions vary with installation. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

works, such as *TV Buddha*, that Paik turned to in the mid-1970s. (Fig. 5) Using a term from Indian aesthetic philosophy, Cage celebrated Paik's development from the black *rasas* of sorrow, fear, anger, and disgust to the colorless *rasa* of tranquility.<sup>24</sup> *TV Buddha* consists of a Buddhist icon that contemplates its own simultaneous image, not reversed as in a mirror, but in closed-circuit video on a spherical monitor, an installation that has been admired as a “straightforward, if startlingly modernized, statement of a basic Buddhist truth.”<sup>25</sup>

Planning his installation of *TV Buddha* in 1974, Paik explained, “for the opening night and one more day, I will become a ‘LIVING BUDDHA,’ myself, watching also TV. Therefore there will be two Buddhas watching TV, one is old wooden Buddha. The other is myself.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, Paik sat on a platform in lotus position with his eyes trained on his own live frontal image on a video monitor. (Fig. 6) In his rhetoric as an advocate of video, Paik proposed visionary humanizing and spiritualizing potentials of new technology: “People can create their own art and send it to their friends through video-telephone lines and elevate their mood by watching or attaching certain medical electronic gadgets and control their own brainwaves in order to achieve an instant Nirvana.”<sup>27</sup> This Buddhist vision of technology places Paik in close alliance with contemporaries such as Robert Pirsig, author of the best-selling philosophical novel, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Published in 1974, the same year as Paik's *Living Buddha*, this polemical text argued that “the Buddha...resides quite as comfortably in the...gears of a [motor]cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain.”<sup>28</sup> Paik, the artist who meditated in the eye of a closed-circuit video camera, surely would have agreed with Pirsig that the solution to “the conflict between human values and technological needs [was]... break[ing] down the barriers of dualistic thought to understand technology not as an exploitation of nature, but a fusion of nature and the human spirit into a new kind of creation that transcends both.”<sup>29</sup>

In the 1970s, new video technology was imagined as possessing a utopian spiritual potential to in-

24 Ibid.

25 Walter Smith, “Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha* as Buddhist Art,” *Religion and the Arts* 4:3 (2000), 361.

26 Paik document reproduced in Herzogenrath, *Nam June Paik Fluxus/ Video*, 186.

27 Nam June Paik, “TV tortured the intellectuals for a long time” (1971) in Herzogenrath, *Nam June Paik Fluxus/ Video*, 147.

28 Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, An Inquiry into Values* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974/ 1984), 16.

29 Ibid. 262.

investigate, extend, or intensify the extraordinary charismatic presence of the guru, the quality that was so dramatically illustrated in the scene of the tête-à-tête between Larry and his guru in *The Razor’s Edge*. In 1970 the experimental film-maker Shirley Clarke made a video tape of the popular Zen philosopher Alan Watts staring silently and patiently into the camera for five minutes and twelve seconds without speaking or acting.<sup>30</sup> This “Zen Lesson,” as the video is titled, has been interpreted as an “encounter [that] forces the ephemeral element of attention to the foreground, making it the central subject of the work and leaving the viewer to speculate about what is behind the philosopher’s placid exterior.”<sup>31</sup> But four years later Paik’s *TV Buddha* and *Living Buddha* propose video technology itself as the medium of meditative self-realization.



**Fig. 6** Nam June Paik, *Living Buddha*, Performance at Projekt 74, Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1974 (dpa Picture-Alliance)

### **Bill Viola: *The Crossing***

Bill Viola (b.1951) served as a technical assistant for Nam June Paik at the time of Paik’s *Living Buddha*. David Ross, the curator who hired Viola to work with Paik (and later became director of the Whitney Museum of American Art), maintained that for the young Viola, “the experience of engaging an artist whose practice flowed out of Buddhist thought was revelatory.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, we may be tempted to trace a lineage of guru-artist relations from Suzuki Daisetsu to John Cage to Nam June Paik to Bill Viola, like the unbroken ‘mind-to-mind’ transmission of dharma from one master to the next in the history of Zen Buddhism. In striking contrast to Paik’s often ironic, tongue-in-cheek references to Zen, however, Viola would focus his art on spiritual experience with moving solemnity and intensity. Viola has identified himself closely with Asian religions; he is said to be a practicing Buddhist, has frequently commented knowledgeably on a wide range of Asian spiritual texts, and his art has often been interpreted in terms of profound relationships to non-Western spirituality. But in a striking manifestation of the unstable terms of the relationship between the “Oriental guru” and the modern artist, the presumably non-Western spirituality underlying Viola’s art

30 Shirley Clarke’s videotape, *Alan Watts—A Zen Lesson*, ca.1970 (5 min. 12 seconds, black and white, sound, from *Videotapes: Series #2*) is referenced and illustrated in John B. Ravenal, *Outer and Inner Space: Pipilotti Rist, Shirin Neshat, Jane & Louise Wilson, and the history of video art* (Richmond, VA: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2002), 64.

31 Ibid.

32 David A. Ross, “Wisdom and Insecurity: A Meditation on the Work of Bill Viola,” in David Elliott, et al., *Bill Viola, Hatsu-Yume First Dream* (Kyoto: Tankōsha, 2006), 28.



**Fig. 7** Bill Viola, *He Weeps for You*, 1976. Detail, video/sound installation, 3.7 x 7.9 x 11 m. Water drop from copper pipe; live color camera with macro lens; amplified drum; video projection in dark room. Photo: Kira Perov

and informed by Asian religious thought. (Fig. 7) This image is a detail from a complex video and sound installation work of 1976 titled *He Weeps for You*. The tiny drop of water is gradually formed at the end of a brass spigot in front of a video camera. The artist or the spectator stands on a small carpet and peers at this small droplet, while a live color camera videos the likeness of his or her face as it appears through the lens-like filter of the drop of water. A huge magnification of this drop appears in video projection on the wall in the darkened room. Standing in front of the drop of water, the viewer gradually realizes that it is his or her own face taking form in the larger and larger drop of water. Finally the magnified likeness nearly fills the screen, but as soon as the drop gets too heavy it falls from the spigot, shatters the likeness on the screen, and hits an amplified drum on the floor, producing a loud explosive sound. Then a new drop gradually starts forming all over again.<sup>34</sup>

Viola has made known his great admiration for the guru-like figure of a Zen monk named Tanaka Daien with whom he became acquainted in Japan in 1981-82, but the themes of *He Weeps for You* proceed more from medieval Islamic thought than Zen Buddhism. Indeed, Viola's greatest expression of admiration was not directed at any living "Oriental guru" with whom he experienced face-to-face contact, but rather an ancient figure encountered through the written word. The artist identified the thirteenth-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi as his "supreme source of inspiration."<sup>35</sup> This installation work is accompanied by a poem by Rumi:

With every moment a world is born and dies,

33 Bill Viola in "Conversation: Lewis Hyde and Bill Viola," in David A. Ross, *Bill Viola* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1997), 144.

34 See Andrew Solomon's 1976 description of his experience of this work quoted at length by Hans Ulrich Reck, "He Weeps for You," in Rolf Lauter, ed., *Bill Viola, European Insights* (Munich: Prestel, 1999), 108.

35 Bill Viola in "Conversation: Lewis Hyde and Bill Viola," 144.

emphatically includes the European mystical tradition. Indeed, Viola has credited "the great Eastern émigrés to the West, D. T. Suzuki and A. K. Coomaraswamy" for his "rediscover[y of] the roots of my own Christian tradition," including such figures as Meister Eckhardt, St. John of the Cross, and Saint Teresa.<sup>33</sup>

Much like the video-mediated image of Paik's face in the *Living Buddha*, Viola's reflection in a drop of water is a contemplative exercise in self-reflection that is both enabled by closed-circuit video technology

And know that for you with every moment come death and renewal.<sup>36</sup>

Viola's title for this installation, *He Weeps For You*, further positions this cycle of death and renewal in terms of the all-encompassing relationship in Islamic mysticism between self and God, between the microcosmic world in the drop of water and the macrocosmic scale suggested by its magnification. The word "you" in both Rumi's poem and Viola's title for the installation hails the spectator as an aspirant to spiritual knowledge and as an initiate in a ritual of self-transformation. Not only does the artist design and create the architecture for this elaborate ritual, he also serves as a model for the viewer, demonstrating in photographs and explanations how "you" can stand on the carpet and peer into the droplet and feel for "yourself" the resonance between the micocosm and macrocosm, and achieve awareness of how god weeps for "you."

"Viola has always made a bridge of the body," according to one observer, "to cross the gaping abyss between dichotomies which have run through western thought since the Greeks split the world into reality and semblance."<sup>37</sup> And in *The Crossing* of 1996, the charismatic presence of the artist's own body in video performance accomplishes this bridging of the despised dichotomies with unforgettable force. In a large dark space the viewer is immersed in the spectacle of two larger than life size figures of the artist subjected to overwhelming onslaughts of fire and water. (Fig. 8) As viewers have noted, however, the artist seems not to suffer physically from these onslaughts. The writings of Rumi and a whole host of other mystical and mythological sources have been cited as a kind of literary foundation for spiritual, metaphorical, and aesthetic notions of cleansing rebirth in flame and inundation in *The Crossing*.<sup>38</sup> The artist stands impassively and raises his arms as if in a trance, while his body seems to dissolve and become one with the elements. He then seems to "cross" a threshold into some metaphysical beyond. Viola's own role as the guide for the aspirant's spiritual journey was apparently so critical to the desired effect, that he selected Phil Esposito, a professional actor who fortuitously resembled Viola's own physical appearance, to serve as the stunt man in the complex and dangerous process of filming the figure of the artist crossing into



**Fig. 8** Bill Viola, *The Crossing*, 1996. Detail, video/ sound installation, 4.9 x 8.4 x 17.4 m. Two channels of color video projections from opposite sides of large dark gallery onto two large back-to-back screens suspended from ceiling and mounted to floor; four channels of amplified stereo sound, four speakers. Performer: Phil Esposito. Production Still. Photo: Kira Perov

36 Rumi, *The Masnavi*, quoted by Bill Viola, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House, Writings 1973–1994* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 42.

37 Celia Montolio, "The Unspoken Language of the Body," in Alexander Pühringer, ed., *Bill Viola* (Salzburger Kunstverein, 1994), 174.

38 Caterina Maderna-Lauter, "The Crossing" in Lauter, *Bill Viola, European Insights*, 343–358.

flame and water.<sup>39</sup>

When the conflagration and inundation finally subside, the body is completely gone and we are left with a hushed emptiness. The abhorrent dichotomies of Western thought have been bridged by the transcendence of the physical body. In writings and interviews, Viola has been a passionate and persuasive spokesperson for the belief that moving electronic images, such as the video projection of artist in *The Crossing*, hold tremendous potential to mitigate the most dangerous conditions of the contemporary world. Indeed, the intense presence of the image itself assumes a guru-like role in this mission: “These ‘power images’ are like wake-up calls . . . today there is a need to wake up the body before you can wake up the mind.” While images have been “our companions and guides” throughout history, new technology has endowed them “with a fourth dimensional form” such that they “have now been given life.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Linda Montano: *How to Become a Guru***

Based on the artists considered thus far, one might conclude that the image of the guru apprehended by artists in the postwar American context was an exclusively male image. Was it possible for a woman to possess the “glamour attach[ed] to aging Oriental men of wisdom”? The performance artist Linda Montano (b.1942) has challenged this gender bias in the interface between the guru and the artist with uncommon resolve. Indeed, Linda Montano carries the story of the artistic appropriation of the qualities of the guru into new territory due to her feminist agenda as well as her overt affirmation of the term and the concept of the guru, including pastoral duties to the spiritual welfare of the lay community and cultivation of this spiritual identity in the form of performance art.

In some of her most memorable early performances, however, the role she performed was hardly that of an Asian spiritual adviser, but rather a “screaming nun” (1975) and a nun with a mustache (1980), nuns of a sort that would be excommunicated from the church. To this day it is a crime against Roman Catholic law to ordain women as priests, and this prohibition was a deeply disturbing obstacle in Montano’s spiritual development. As a strict Catholic during her childhood and as a young woman, she dearly wished to become a priest, a status that would have given her the power to celebrate the Eucharist, to forgive sins, to bless, to preach, and to sanctify. She actually did become a nun in the early 1960s, not the zany disheveled nun who later screamed wildly on the streets of San Francisco, but a bona fide member of a convent of the Maryknoll order. Montano would, however, recall this as an unviable experiment that she quit after two years. Moreover, in addition to the patriarchal politics of the church, she would recall “it wasn’t cool to be a Catholic artist in the 60s.”<sup>41</sup> The apparent impossibility of being both an artist and a devout Catholic in this countercultural milieu, pushed Montano on her path to Japanese Zen and Indian Yoga.

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39 For an account of the production of *The Crossing*, see San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Bill Viola, June – September 1999, Exhibition Feature: [http://www.sfmoma.org/media/features/viola/indepth\\_BV01.html](http://www.sfmoma.org/media/features/viola/indepth_BV01.html)

40 Bill Viola, “In Response to Questions from Jörg Zutter” (1992) in Viola, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, 251.

41 Linda Montano in Alison Knowles, et al., “Art as Spiritual Practice,” *Performance Art Journal* 24:3 (September 2002), 28.

Montano practiced Zen in residence at a Zen monastery in the forests of upstate New York for several years and embraced the teachings of Ramamurti Mishra, the founder and spiritual director of yoga ashrams in New York and California. She continued to practice meditation under Mishra's guidance for over twenty years until his death in 1993 and still speaks of his "charisma," his "ability to enter us," and his "magnetism."<sup>42</sup> One of the ways she attempted to "initiate [his] vibratory brilliance"<sup>43</sup> was blindfolding herself. (Fig. 9) In 1975, she completed a performance titled *Three Day Blindfold/ How to Become a Guru*. She explained that, "the reason for the piece was wanting to be a guru. I had been studying yoga for about five years, and I had always been affected by my relationship to authority in the teacher and the guru. The only way I could do that was to get rid of my eyes because I reacted to whatever I saw."<sup>44</sup> But in addition to this agenda, Montano was also drawn to the experience of sensory deprivation by blindfolding because she "found that if sight, or any of the senses, is ... denied, then hormonally, or biologically, something is activated that raises a level of brain neurons."<sup>45</sup> While the goal of self-transformation was a familiar feature of various practices of meditation, for Montano, the intensification of awareness of the body through the practice of Yoga induced her to devote herself to performance art. As a medium of the avant-garde, performance art has often been valued for enabling an intense focus on the presence of the artist's body in the immediate experience of the audience; Montano worked to endow this sense of presence in performance art with the spiritual quality of the guru's presence.

She sought to invent a sort of performance that would allow the energy generated by the attention of the audience to promote healing. "By aesthetically purging subconscious material via public actions, via exposition of the excesses of power, via exploration of autobiography as art... the brain empties of obscurations, guilts, fears, shames, and goes into modes of consciousness carried by nuns, contemplatives, and all seekers of *Samadhi*."<sup>46</sup> In her performance, *Mitchell's Death*, Montano chanted in a monotone voice the



**Fig. 9** Linda Montano, *Three Day Blindfold/ How to Become a Guru*, Woman's Building, Los Angeles, March 22, 1975. Photo by Minnette Lehmann

42 "Linda Mary Montano Interview by Mary Lachman," Dec 31, 2009. <http://lindamarymontano.blogspot.com/2009/12/linda-mary-montano-interview-by-mary.html>

43 Linda Montano in interview with Jenni Sorkin, "Burger King and the Avant-Garde" (2001) in Jennie Klein, ed. *Letters from Linda M. Montano* (London: Routledge, 2005), 67.

44 Linda Montano, "Matters of Life and Death, Linda Montano Interviewed by Moira Roth," in *Art in Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1981), n.p.

45 Linda Montano in Sorkin, "Burger King and the Avant-Garde," 67.

46 Montano in Knowles, "Art as Spiritual Practice," 27.



**Fig. 10** Linda Montano, *Mitchell's Death*, performance with Al Rossi playing a scruti-box and Pauline Oliveros playing a Japanese bowl gong, 1978. Photo: Center for Music Experiment Staff

narrative of her actual experience of a dire tragedy: the death of Mitchell, her former husband, by an accidental gunshot wound. (Fig. 10) Throughout her chant to the accompaniment of an Indian scruti-box and a Japanese bowl gong, her face was covered with acupuncture needles. “Eastern and earth-centered methods,” she would explain, were used “to achieve harmony and understanding of reality,” while the audience served as “co-healer... breath[ing] life back into me.”<sup>47</sup>

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We may now regard the artist as an extraordinary figure capable of such feats as self-transforming in a “space ritual,” manifestation as a “living Buddha,” breaching metaphysical barriers at “the crossing,” and generally succeeding in the quest to “become a guru.” This account of four artists’ investigations of Asian spiritual belief and practices demonstrates how each artist ventured out into cultural, artistic, and spiritual terrains far afield from the contexts in which they began their careers. Mark Tobey’s embrace of the Bahai Faith, Zen Buddhism, and Sino-Japanese calligraphy led him to a disembodied and transcendent painting style of linear abstraction; the example of John Cage’s avant-gardist investigations of Asian thought led Nam June Paik to the United States where he developed an Asian vision of the spiritual potential of new video technology; Bill Viola’s devotion to the teachings of Rumi and others in the mystical tradition inspired his innovation of electronic images of transcendent bodies; and Linda Montano’s yoga practice under the guidance of her guru Ramamurti Mishra allowed her to overcome Catholic patriarchy and invent a kind of performance art uniquely focused on a alternative modes of priestly healing.

Nevertheless, the deferred consequence of the creative extension of these individuals beyond the parameters of their cultural, geographic, and racial origins was, in each case, a dramatic return to some symbolic sense of home. Mark Tobey, though he was revered by his admirers for his profound knowledge of Asian cultures, responded to “critics [who] accused me of being an Orientalist and of using Oriental models” by insisting that he “knew when in Japan and China... that I would never be any [sic] but the Occidental that I am.”<sup>48</sup> He disavowed having ever experienced Satori and said that he doubted whether any other American

47 Montano in Klein, *Letters from Linda M. Montano*, 106, 133.

48 Mark Tobey quoted in Wieland Schmied, *Mark Tobey*, trans. Margaret L. Kaplan (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 11.

could have done so.<sup>49</sup> Statements such as these suggest that his transformation of East Asian calligraphy into what he called “white writing” entailed a racial sort of whitening. Nam June Paik had left his native Korea as a teenager and there was little contemporary Korean audience for the various references to Asian or Korean culture in his art until late in life when he exhibited and worked in Korea for the first time. In one late work he performed as a “native” shaman in his own rendition of a *koot*, or Korean shamanic healing trance.<sup>50</sup> Bill Viola, as mentioned, followed Suzuki Daisetsu and Ananda Coomaraswamy in annexing what he called “the other side of the Western tradition,”<sup>51</sup> namely medieval and mystical tendencies, to Asian thought in opposition to Cartesian mind-body dualism. Despite his profound identification with Asian religions, however, many of his more recent works have brought Medieval and Renaissance Christian art into vivid video projection, such as *Emergence* of 2002, which evokes the resurrection of Christ based on a fifteenth-century Italian fresco. Perhaps the career trajectory of Linda Montano provides the most dramatic about-face among these four artists; starting in the 1990s she grew to regret her “disloyalty” in the 1960s to her “root religion,” and she now embraces Mother Teresa (Fig. 11) as one of her most important gurus and, on one occasion, identified with “the fear, fundamentalist, don’t do anything bad or you’ll go to hell school [of Catholicism].”<sup>52</sup>

This pattern of returning, retrenching, or retreating from the alterity fostered by the guru’s guidance may seem to be a surprising coincidence shared by Tobey, Paik, Viola, and Montano, but the step back from the unfamiliar experience may have been an intrinsic part of the artist’s lessons in the guru’s religion. Indeed, on a very profound mystical level, “gurus” such as Suzuki Daisetsu counseled “seeing into one’s own nature”<sup>53</sup> or, in the words of Montano’s guru Ramamurti Mishra, “Man need not go afar to search for Atman. It is within him.”<sup>54</sup> This metaphysical centering seems to have encouraged the return to a cultural sort of home. In the Hollywood movie described at the outset, *The Razor’s Edge*, after the American protagonist



**Fig. 11** Linda Montano performing as Mother Teresa at the William Schuman Award Concert Honoring Pauline Oliveros, Columbia University, New York, March 27, 2009. Photo by Jackie Heyen

49 Tobey, “Japanese Traditions and American Art,” 22.

50 For *The Shaman-Rite* (KOOT) for *Beuys* performed by Paik in Seoul in 1990, see Stooss & Kellein, *Nam June Paik*, 102.

51 Bill Viola, “Putting the White Back Together, In Conversation with Otto Neumaier and Alexander Pühlinger” (1992) in *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings, 1973–1994* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 283.

52 Montano in “Linda Mary Montano Interview by Mary Lachman.”

53 Suzuki Daisetsu in W. Barrett, ed. *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), 9.

54 Shri Ramamurti Mishra, *Self Analysis and Self Knowledge: Based on Atma Bodha of Shankaracharya* (Translation and Commentary) (Lakemont, Georgia: CSA Press, 1977), 176.



Larry attains enlightenment on the mountaintop in India, he expresses his extraordinary new sense of peace and contentment by telling his guru that he could happily remain right there on the mountain for the rest of his life. But the guru replies in a honey-toned voice with the advice that Larry should go back to his own people where he is needed. We may conclude that hidden within the artistic, geographical, and racial othering that is so pronounced among artists who were swayed by the teachings of Oriental gurus, is a powerful and sometimes reactionary impetus for recovering and re-centering self-identity.