

Artistic Experience as Religious Experience

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By
Junko Chodos

I Introduction: Struggling, embracing images

When I look back at the many hundreds of works I have created over the last 35 years, I see some images dragged up from the depth of unconsciousness to the shore of my consciousness just like sunken ships, recovered and reconstructed. I see some images hanging like a tapestry which first appeared very far away in the heavens and gradually came down with enormous weight to just above my head illuminating the sky. And I see some images in the midst of an unknown forest, solemnly standing in the darkness, tangled tightly with creeping vines and roots, without revealing to me still yet who they are, just leaving me alone with a deep sense of awe.

Many visitants (that is what I call them) entangled in the roots of trees, hidden in the broken engines, confined in the horseshoe crab's armor-like shell, still keep coming to me again and again. They are wounded, bleeding, paralyzed, groaning out for help. Those visitants are often grotesque and ugly, cut out from the huge vitality of the universe until I struggle with them, embrace them in my arms and pull them up into the pictorial space where the power of irony does its work most dramatically: there the most grotesque, ugliest thing turns into the most sublime thing, there the most blackening darkness turns into the most dazzling light.

The series, *Requiem for an Executed Bird*, which I have chosen to use as an example in this paper to illustrate my idea was born from long years of this struggling and embracing. It was born from the suffering caused by a small incident I experienced during World War II. Small as it was, I struggled because of that incident for almost fifty years although the actual working on paper to create the 45 works in this series took only 6 weeks. The incident was that I witnessed a slaughtered hen. This scene crystallized for me all the fear associated with the war: the terror of violence and of the rampant fascism that had overtaken Japan at that time. The Bird represents freedom and aspiration. The Bird was created to fly and be free. It had been slaughtered not for anything it had done, but because of what it was. I saw its death as an unjustified execution. I developed a phobia of birds of all kinds and I suffered with that phobia for half a century. Later on, the many experiences I had of abuse of authority, of violence against the individual, of the taboo against being who you are -- all became part of this early experience.

In May and June of 1991 I created a series of 45 works about that bird, and I will project images of nine of those works on the screen here today. The series has a clear narrative beginning with suffering and struggle and ending finally with a resolution and

transcendence. You can trace this narrative as you view the works in sequence, from No. 1 through No. 45. But what I want to emphasize - and probably can never emphasize enough - is that the artist never had a narrative before she engaged in creating the series, and that she never just illustrates or translates some narrative into visual images. Instead the narrative unfolded and revealed itself to the artist as she went through the process of creation, and it could be comprehended and analyzed only as the works developed. The Image always leads the artist through the process. Following that image was a surprising and awesome experience, requiring of the artist great risk and sacrifice. But finally the artist's suffering is transcended and resolved through this amazing process.

Art is not a mere illustration or translation of what the artist already knows: art is a primary act of dealing with reality, forming consciousness in its essential characteristics. Without knowing the destination the artist continues her journey, just as the children of Israel followed the Pillar of Fire at night through the barren desert. In this talk I want to communicate to you what I have learned through my many decades of creating art: **that the act of creating art itself includes religious experience at its core.**

Through the process of creating art the artist goes through a sequence of deep experiences which may properly be called "revelation", "epiphany", "resolution", and "transcendence" – just as many mystics went through over the course of history. This central idea – delicate and somewhat controversial, which requires a wide range of knowledge and experience, I venture to present and communicate to you in this very short paper.

The idea that art is not a mere illustration of what the artist already knew but is rather a primary act of dealing with reality and forming consciousness is not quite new: Ernst Cassirer writes in The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms that myth, religion, and cognition, each embody an original formative power which does not merely reflect the empirically given but rather produces it in accordance with an independent principle. He believes that each of these functions creates its own symbolic forms and these forms enjoy equal rank in the human spirit. He says "None of these forms can simply be reduced to, or derived from, the others. Each of them designates a particular approach in which and through which it constitutes its own aspect of 'reality'".

In The Principles of Art R. G. Collingwood defined his concept of "Art proper" as that art created without any distinct preconceived idea. That is the result to be obtained should

not be preconceived or thought out before being arrived at. In other words there should not be any distinction between means and end, nor between planning and execution in the process of creating art. Under Collingwood 's criterion, the first thing to be eliminated from the realm of "art proper" is craft, then many kinds of religious ritualistic art as well as nationalistic patriotic art and most representational art, and then art for the sake of entertainment . By the phrase "art proper " Collingwood did not mean to refer to a subcategory of art. Instead he makes an idealistic attempt to affirm the purity of art by identifying its essential characteristics.

This is a radical idea because it contradicts the whole western concept of art as the power to produce a preconceived result by means of consciously controlled and directed action. This was the central idea which lasted throughout history since Plato defined art as craft. Collingwood's idea is radical also because it devalued the whole genre of representational art which viewed the world through scientific perspective and which spread all over Europe in tight association with the authority of Christianity. Modern art, the most profoundly radical revolutionary movement in art history, found its philosophical basis in Collingwood's radical philosophy of art.

But as radical as it may sound, Collingwood's concept itself was not even new at all under the sun. In China, art has been strictly distinguished from craft: art deals directly with *chi*, the presence of the natural flow of the life force, resonating with God's breath and the universal rhythm. On the other hand craft has been considered somewhat like physical labour dealing with beauty -- which is a lower concept than *chi*. At the end of the 4th century, in China, in the oldest book of Philosophy of art remaining, the *Kogahinroku*, Shakaku wrote about this concept of Chi at great length and established it as the only true criterion of art. His writing clearly indicates that he believes in the independence of art from other endeavours: it respects the spontaneous flow of *chi* rather than any consciously controlled preconceived representational skill. Since Shakaku, the eastern view is that the artist is a sort of spiritual "ascetic" or "teacher" who disciplines and opens himself up to resonate with God's rhythm through creating art. And the function of art is to inspire the viewer with *chi*, and to encourage him to awaken and go further along his own path to *satori* (enlightenment). This view of art has been a strong tradition in the East for 1500 years.

But as a contemporary artist, and as a student who has admired and been influenced overwhelmingly by European modern art, I wanted to investigate the question of what it is that makes creating art a religious experience -- which I found it to be through my own experience of creating art.

II Studio laboratory notebook, Altered state of consciousness

To prepare myself to investigate this question seriously I started keeping a laboratory notebook in my studio in the early 1970s, something like a diary, a record of my working, fragments of ideas and visual images that came to me. In other words I undertook to play three separate roles concurrently: artist, scientist, and Guinea Pig for myself.

Throughout my diary you will see that my consciousness is altered during those creating periods -- sometimes quite drastically changed from everyday consciousness. I call this an *altered state of consciousness*. This state occurs rather regularly whenever I go into a creating period. During these periods, contrary to what I feared, my intellect does not disappear; it is rather sharpened. I have found that this consciousness moves through a clear progression of four stages -- stages which repeat themselves albeit with sometimes different degrees of intensity. I call those four stages: (1) Departure; (2) Deep Altered State; (3) Transcendence; and (4) Return:

1. The first stage: Departure From Everyday Consciousness

On May 20th, 1991, as I was just beginning to work on this series, I wrote in my studio diary:

A huge vortex is dancing in the heavenly sky and it pulls me up like a vacuum and sucks me in; and yet this vacuum misses me so I fall down on the ground and again this vacuum sucks me up and again I am crushed down. Today I have to go to the grocery, tomorrow I have to go to the Gallery. But those tasks are getting more difficult to manage.

This is the beginning of the Departure stage. My mind becomes inward. I talk to God in my mind more than I talk to people. The conflict between everyday consciousness and the altered state of consciousness becomes increasingly violent. It is like trying to cross a busy highway to go to the other side. A fear of losing my ability to cope with this world, my ability to drive, to speak in my second language English, intensifies.

The studio diary entry for May 25th reads,

It got dark around me, it becomes darker and darker. Finally I went through death. Without being able to speak, lying in bed, three days have passed.”

I recorded this only after I went through. It is impossible to write in the midst of that

darkness. This death of everyday consciousness sometimes lasts a few weeks.

But departure begins: I have finally crossed the highway and I am on the other side. I am extremely grateful to God for letting me cross the highway. I became calm and decisive. Nothing can distract me from the difficult and dangerous journey ahead of me. I meditate, pray and sleep -- sometimes for 10 hours at a stretch. In a feeling of grace, I think of what St. John of the Cross describes: "One dark night /Fired with love's urgent longings /Ah, the sheer grace!-I went out unseen /My house being now all stilled."

2. The second stage: Deep Altered State of consciousness

I am now in the second stage: the deep altered state of consciousness. It is in the beginning of this second stage that I usually encounter some object – the visitant which draws me deeply into itself and arouses my sense of urgency to embrace it, and then to bring it into my pictorial space to work on it until it is finally transcendent.

In the particular case of this series, one object which was not new to me appeared under a different light.

This object I had purchased at a junk store four years prior to the time of writing this part of my diary.

The old man in the store told me it was made for a wedding gift. "Unfortunately," he added, "the cap is missing. This was supposed to be the bird's head, so I will sell it to you at a discount." As you can see, it is ugly, grotesque and sick -- especially when you realize that it is a wine decanter: you are supposed to pour wine from the neck of that bird where his head was chopped off.

My phobia of birds, which I had suffered from since I witnessed the bird slaughtered, had prevented me to work on this object for four years. But now for the first time I sat and placed this wine decanter in front of me. The May 29th entry in my studio diary reads,



Wine Decanter

With bursts of crying in my chest I enter the studio this morning. Just like a flood, art rushed into me. It rushed at me so fast, my hand couldn't catch up with it. I was crying in my mind. I hear my own loud crying voice burst and it echoes in my bones, and yet my horror and pain are circling wild as if it were joy. All at once the first 6 works are completed.



This is work No. 4. This strong contrast of red and white, the violent red and vulnerable white feathers evoked my fear very sharply as I was painting. On May 30th I wrote in my diary,

Freely, freely, painting splashes out. My hand might be too sloppy, but the essence is intensely beautiful. Works numbers 7 through 19 were completed.



This is work No. 13. This work showed the scene of splashing blood most vividly among all works. By the time I created work 13 I was finally able to go back to the original scene.



In work No. 22 the red roses which I was already putting next to the bird presented themselves to me as stained glass and all of a sudden I realized that this bird was in a cathedral and that in painting this series, I was singing a requiem for him. The June 16th entry for my diary says,

This is a requiem for the bird! One after another, the bird looms up from the depths in the painful figures. However I try to comfort him, however I try to save him with red roses, the bird shows his most helpless figure. Oh God, only you can comfort him! One after another, the cry comes up from the depth. This is a requiem for my bird!



This is work No.23. The bird lost its rather rigid form and showed its emotion with more fluidity. The movement of the lines and the brush strokes are scattered in contradictory ambivalent directions. This work evoked deeper pain than the works before it.

3. The third stage: Transcending.

After this, I entered the third stage, Transcending. The diary entry for June 24th, 1991 reads:

With tears of gratitude I am writing this. My hands are trembling. Works 24 to

28 are born and all the works were done in 25 minutes. God responded to my prayer. He let me work through this. I feel God is in my body and my body is almost exploding. I feel I am rewarded for all the suffering



In work 24 the violent tone is fading and a glorious gold tone is appearing. I added Japanese letters saying, “The bird is dying.” Two circles almost appeared. Suddenly my consciousness level shifts deeper and I wrote,

The bird is dying . The bird is dying. The helpless bird, the wings which are made to fly into the expanse of the sky are bent down and hang down

powerlessly. The feathers are stained with blood and tremble.

The bird is dying ... the world is listening and the world cries bitterly.
...However decorated with red roses, however lamented with the melody of crying, the bird is in pain, in pain. The world continues to sing this pain, forever singing this pain.

... The bird who wanted to fly to the broad sky of freedom, has been executed.

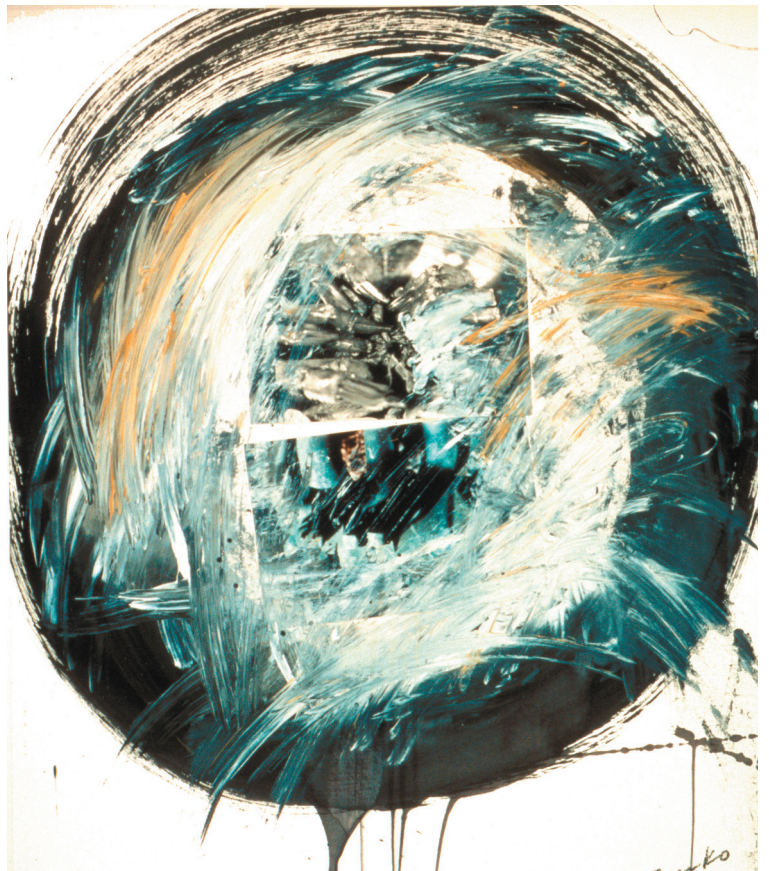
Some strange vibration came to my head. I could not breathe well. Then the floor swayed and I was struck by terror. I saw the unfathomable abyss under the ground on which I was standing and I felt that the ground swayed towards it like quicksand. I thought that I was pulled into insanity and I would never be able to come back unless right now I got out of it - got out of the studio. Torn between fear and the desire to keep working, I panicked. My consciousness suddenly dropped one level deeper and my hand started writing on a piece of paper on the floor near me:

Draw this melody which rises up towards you from the darkness. Don't be afraid of this melody. Bring this singing into the light. Then you will know that this darkness is the light. Light is gushing up everywhere. Light is gushing up everywhere.

As works 25 through 28 were completed I wrote, "Oh God, what a freedom I feel now. You are celebrating me, a newly born me. I am writing this with the deepest gratitude." For the next two weeks I continued painting.



Requiem for an Executed Bid
No. 27 (1991)
Mixed media on paper
42"x30"



Requiem for an Executed Bird
No. 38 (1991)
Mixed media on paper
42"x30"

Clear circles appeared continuously. The bird exists in the circle. His feathers are now spotted with gold, not red; golden air, golden space, and he exists there. He is finally free. The transcending process has happened and is almost completed. Works 29 through 41 were born.

4.The Fourth Stage: Return

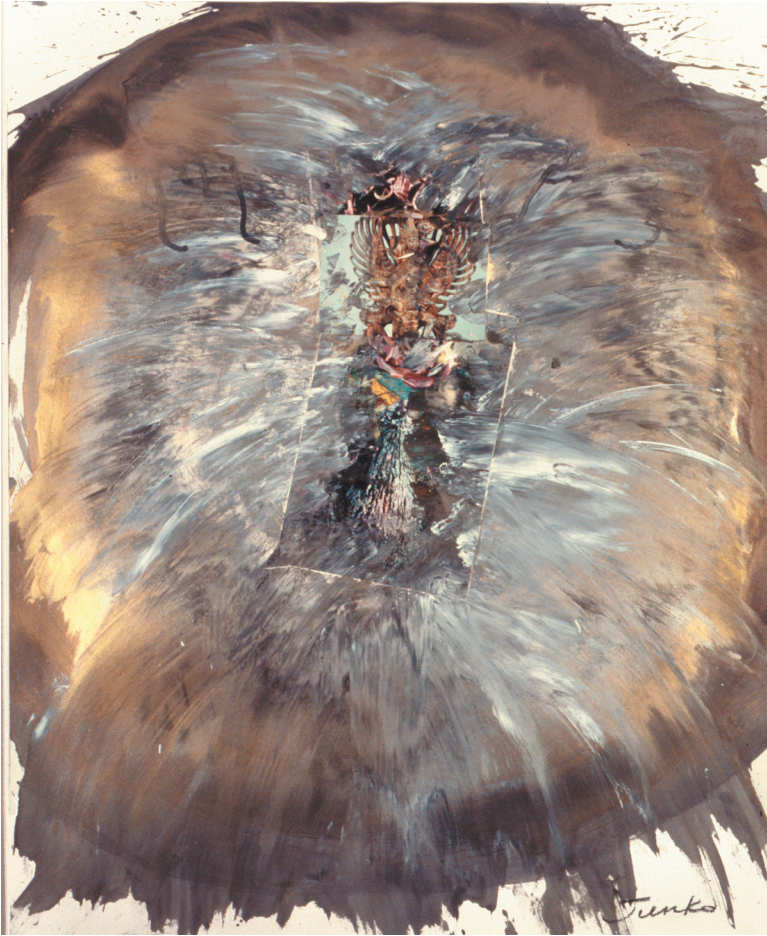
Then I arrived at the last stage: the stage of leaving the series. My diary entry for July 3d, reads

I feel my mind is empty; I realized this series is coming to an end and yet I still feel something not too emotional, very different from the earlier feelings I had. I have to paint one more.”

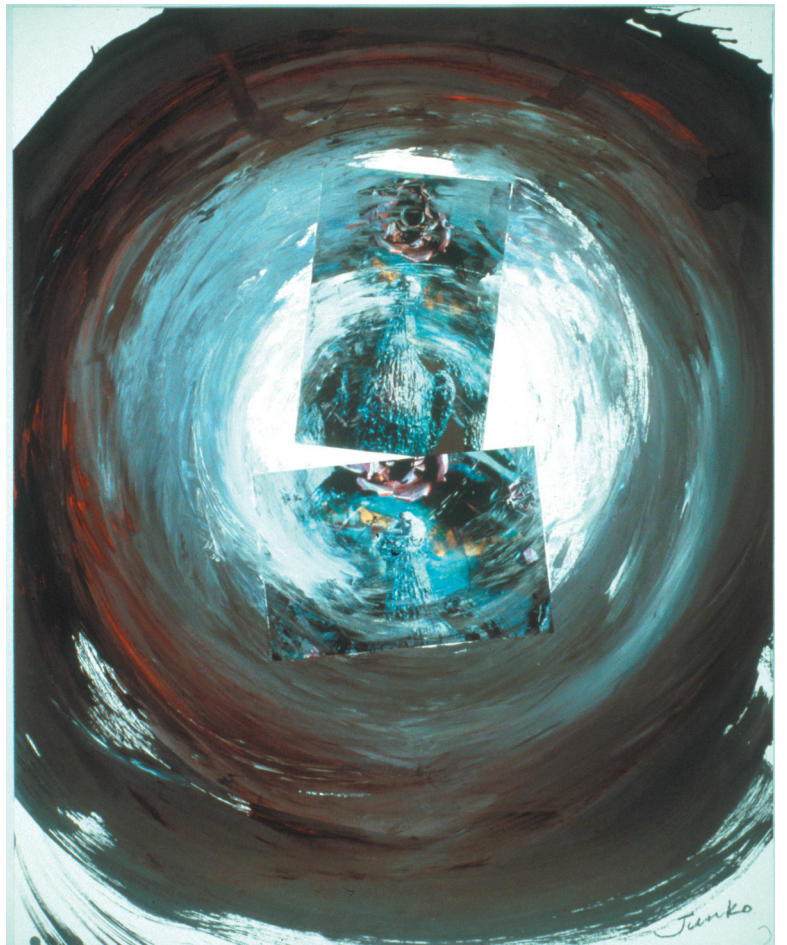
I decided to drive to Sycamore Beach before starting the last work. Being afraid that a sudden change of scenery might make my altered state of consciousness fade away, I walked like a person who carries a container full of liquid up to its brim -- with both hands together, being careful not to spill even one drop. The sea was vivid, every edge of each wave looked sharp and bright. The light dancing on the top of each wave, which moved constantly, was brilliant, delicate and overwhelmingly complicated. A feeling of undoubtedness, that some most serious divine work is in progress right now, in this moment, and through creating my art I was participating in that process in no matter how small a way. It was a most solemn realization which moved me to awe.

I came back to my studio and finished 4 more works: strong not emotional. This is it. Looking at the 4 beautiful works I felt extremely happy.

Thank you very much God, for letting me work such a long time. I am deeply grateful. I have to go back to the world: the time to study my work will begin. I will contemplate this work, study it, write about it in order to understand your mystery.”



Requiem for an Executed Bird,
No. 42



Requiem for an Executed Bird,
No. 44

My laboratory diary of this series ended here. Since then I have contemplated, studied, and written many essays on this series, a huge body of new works gushed out of me as if a dam had collapsed, and my personal life changed drastically.

III Analysis and Reflections on the original experience

A. The Bird Symbolized Death

It was 1943 when this traumatic experience happened. I was four years old, surrounded by death. When sirens began I was awakened every night by my parents and I put on my jacket on which my name, address and blood type were sewn. We said it was for my medical attention but we knew in reality, it was for my death identification. We crawled into a damp and smelly hole underground to avoid the bomb attacks. From that hole we saw the night sky lit up with thousands of thousands of enemy airplanes, B29s, aligned like a chessboard moving above the big city where already huge curtain-like flames were hanging bright red in the sky. “A carpet bombing,” I heard the desperate whispers. And yet I was still not clear from what we were running. When I saw the bird hanging upside down, dripping blood from his neck where his head chopped off, I suddenly saw what we had been running from: death. For the first time in reality I experienced death itself. And it made me realize how incredibly vulnerable all we mortals are.

2. The Bird as a Victim of Fascism

We lived under the terror of the Japanese fascistic government authority all through the war – as well as under the terror of the war itself. As little as I was, I saw very clearly the essence of totalitarianism, without any intellectual knowledge of it whatsoever: it is the hatred and destruction of freedom. By commanding blind obedience to an irrational authority, and by torture and execution, they accomplished their goal. I was in terror all through my short life of revealing who I was. The slaughtered bird concretized this terror for me instantly.

The epidemic had spread over the town and its citizens, worn out by the attacks and under-nourished, were infected. I was sent alone under the charge of my uncle away from my family who were struck by the epidemic, isolated and quarantined. My uncle was a doctor who owned a hospital; he was a cold authoritative figure. It was there that I ran into this bird in his fancy Japanese-style living room, in the living quarters of his eerie hospital. When he killed a beautiful bird, my whole terror of fascism took a most realistic shape.

3. The Phobia

The most immediate change after completion of this series was my recovery from the phobia. The ending of the phobia meant more than just healing. The phobia is like a wall preventing one from seeing the reality that is too threatening for his ego to deal with. One could say, "What I am terrified of is only a bird!" Thus he does not have to face the real issue, which is his biggest terror of all. -- In a way you could say that my phobia was a blessing: because of that wall, the little girl was able to keep enough of her sanity to keep living in the midst of an absolutely insane society. The overwhelming desire to continue creating my work was a desire to embrace the bird's pain and release him from it. And the grace which filled me comes from the realization that he, my bird, had kept protecting me with his miserable figure until the little girl became strong enough to face this most diabolical part of life.

This preventing wall is found not only in phobia, it can be found in everyone's unconscious as a form of repression, prohibition, taboo which keeps him unfree and prevents him from achieving further integrity of personality in one way or another. One has to make a journey to the abyss and do enormous battle with the engulfing power of the unconscious. And he confronts it, struggles with it, breaks it and embraces it until it becomes a new part of his consciousness. This is the journey towards the growth of all humanity: towards the emancipated ego, towards consciousness and individuality. Sometimes the artist goes even further in the journey, crossing the boundary of psychology, beyond the world of the known into the world of the ineffable – the world beyond the dogmatic denominational fences which traditional religions have constructed – and encounters the divine presence..

Religion and art are our most sincere, powerful and yet very humble attempts to comprehend the ineffable, and to interpret our world in relationship with this unknown and unknowable: religion through narrative, and art through images, both attempt to respond to what is ineffable and share it with the community. When the ineffable is presented in narrative in human words, or as images which the eye can see, the ineffable will be transcended. -- Without those creative responses the divine presence would lead humans only to insanity. But after it becomes narrative or image, the experience will remain in society as a healthy part of human consciousness, as religion and as art.

IV. Function of art

The artist creates images from strong experiences just like the founders of religion must have created narrative from their original religious experiences. In religion, once the narrative is established, it becomes sanctified, repeated, and becomes authority. But the artist keeps bringing original images from his experience to the conscious plane in the creating process throughout his life and the artist never becomes an authority in the same way.

Joseph Campbell said about the Shaman and the priest, that Shamans functioned in early societies as artists do now. --A priest is a functionary of a social sort. The deity to whom he is devoted is a deity that was there before he came along. But the shaman's powers are symbolized in the deities of his own personal experience. His authority comes out of a psychological experience, not a social ordination.

The artist, more like the shaman than the priest, sets off on his frightening journey alone. He struggles and fights, he does not know what he will encounter till he embraces the image in his arms, then he has to crawl back to the little pictorial space where the images are transcended. This little space is the artist's universe in which everything happens and in which the artist is the creator. The artist wants nothing more than this little universe and this little universe is all he offers to the society.

But why to society? And why does society care for these images? Because the viewer will see his own mind in them, the things that are so dark, so ugly, that he had denied them and forbidden himself to see them. And just like I went through the wall of phobia during my process of creation, the viewer will break his own preventive wall and see what he had been afraid to see. The Image might not fall softly on the viewer's eye. Because it is the function of art to make us see what it has been prohibited to see and to reveal what is closest to *thanatos* great art often makes us uncomfortable. But at the risk of the viewers' displeasure, the artist keeps offering his work. And the images the artist brings forth, as ironical as they might be, can come to be accepted as a part of society's constructive consciousness.

V. Conclusion

What gives art the power to help penetrating and crumble down the viewer's own preventing wall and help him to become a whole person and help him to step even further towards the ineffable, the divine presence? Art cannot have power just because it uses "religious images" or mythological symbols. Whatever theme the artist deals with, unless

the artist sinks into the deepest personal abyss – to the depth where one might say that the most personal thing has become the most universal – and unless the transcendence which the artist went through during the whole process of creation is truthful - only then, encountering the art, the viewer might follow a journey to his own transcending. For this to happen, it requires earnest participation, responsibility, and commitment from both the artist and viewer. And yet after all is said, the experience of transcendence is something beyond anyone’s arbitrary act of will. When it happens it is a blessing.

This *Requiem for an Executed Bird* series of 45 works was completed in 1991 and is only one of 28 series of works in my working history. I have continued to create new works over the 13 years since then, and my experiences have deepened in various ways and my analysis of those experiences has also developed.

I have become more and more confirmed in my conviction that the act of creating art includes religious experience at its core. It seems that art keeps revealing itself – its function, its goals, its mission – under this new light in much more intriguing ways than I ever could have anticipated.

Thank you very much.

Junko Chodos
Claremont, Nov. 13, 2004

