

## ***Metamorphosis: Titian 2012***

The recent multi collaboration *Metamorphosis*, between the National Gallery and the Royal Opera House was shown in London during the Olympics of 2012. The event consisted of an art exhibition, three live performances at the ROH which were filmed and shown on large screens throughout London, and various poetry readings. I would like to discuss this project as demonstrating the notion of empathy elicited by these particular works, themselves responding to three mythological scenes by Titian, and also as exemplifying *Gesamtkunstwerk*, both in its Wagnerian connotation and also in Artaud's concept of 'Total Theatre'. In discussing this collaboration I will be focussing on the exhibition at the National Gallery and the attendant performances.

Contemporary artists Conrad Shawcross, Mark Wallinger and Chris Ofili, together with seven choreographers and three leading composers, responded to the Titian paintings of *Diana and Callisto* (1556-9), *Diana and Actaeon* (1556-9), and *The Death of Actaeon* (1559-75) – all based on episodes from Ovid's epic poem *Metamorphoses*, completed in 8 AD. They created three collections of interrelated art-work, musical score and derived dance-work, each artist also acting as stage designer with own team of choreographers and a composer. The resulting performed pieces were: *Machina* (Shawcross), *Trespass* (Wallinger) and *Diana and Actaeon* (Ofili).



Fig 1: Titian, [Diana and Callisto](#), 1556-9.

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Fig 2: Titian, [Diana and Actaeon](#), 1556-9.  
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Fig 3: Titian, [The Death of Actaeon](#), about 1559-75. © The National Gallery, London

The exhibition at the National Gallery included paintings, sculptures, costumes, films and set designs. In relating his artworks to his performance of *Machina*, Shawcross created a seductive gyrating robotic 'Diana', enclosed within a glass case with a light tipped wand which overshadowed and pointed to a single antler carved out of wood, evoking obvious connotations of the dreadful transformation by Diana of Actaeon into a stag resulting in his particularly gruesome end, providing the mythological

'huntress' with her prize. According to Shawcross: 'Artists have always had to redefine themselves in relation to technology'. His project was intended to 'represent Diana in a modern way' reflecting both her naked vulnerability being intrusively gazed upon in *Diana and Actaeon* and also her victory over this sacrilege represented by *The Death of Actaeon* (National Gallery Guide). The exhibition also consisted of set designs and costumes. Shawcross's set design typically featured a seductive but also predatory 'Diana', enticing with her dancing light, his costumes depicting diverse geometrical patterns and criss-cross lines reflecting the light patterns from her wand.



Fig 4: Conrad Shawcross, *Trophy*, 2012 © Conrad Shawcross. Courtesy of the Artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London. Photograph, The National Gallery, London

For Wallinger: 'Diana is about being caught in the act' and he wanted to find a way to represent her 'bathing' in a contemporary manner (National Gallery Guide). His artwork: *Diana*, consisted of a constructed bathroom with various real life Dianas holding court at different times which the audience could spy through carefully constructed very restrictive peepholes. In doing so the spectator takes the place of Actaeon's voyeuristic gaze. In fact, all the women who took part in his installation were actually named Diana. For Wallinger, his project reflected the dominant themes of discovery and concealment which he believed were central to Titian's paintings. His set design with its curved mirrored backdrop, referencing the reflective visors worn by the first humans landings on the moon's surface alluded to its lunar landscape. His costumes likewise represented lunar themes with the female costumes depicting 'a tile pattern with crescent moon' originating from the floor of Siena Cathedral (Wallinger quoted in the National Gallery Guide) and also referring to the link between the mythological Diana and the moon.



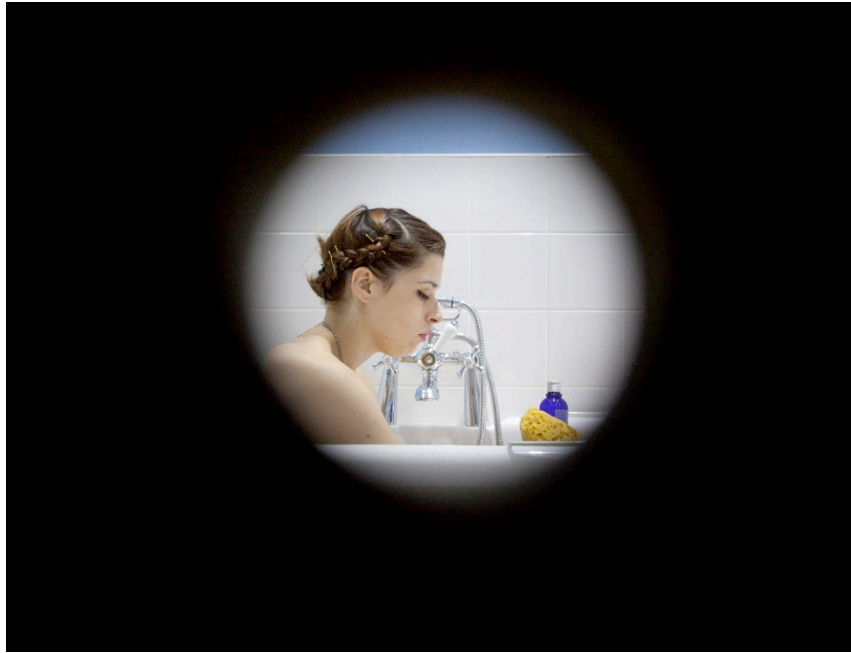


Fig 5: Mark Wallinger, *Diana*, 2012 © The artist. Courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery. Photograph, The National Gallery, London

Ofili transposed Ovid's work to Trinidad, presenting a vibrant, tropical, sensuous background for his *Metamorphoses*. For him, lust and sexual desire was the fatal impetus for Actaeon's actions which led to his death: 'like a lamb to the slaughter' (National Gallery Guide). For his exhibition Ofili produced a series of seven new paintings. One of them portrays a huge phallus (representing 'the male burden of desire' (National Gallery Press Release)), together with a voluptuous women standing beneath a crescent moon. Yet another one depicts a women leaning over backwards into waterfall that is a 'kaleidoscope of colours' emphasising the strong association of Diana's nymphs with water (National Gallery Guide). Ofili's set design replicated his central theme with its colourful, tropical vegetation (immense flowers and roots) providing a sumptuous, balmy setting for Diana and her nymphs. The vibrant colours of his costumes (his Diana was dressed in scarlet) reflected his general theme.



Fig 6: Chris Ofili, *Ovid-Desire*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London.

As expected the performances echo each designer's artworks (*Metamorphosis: Titian 2012* <http://www.roh.org.uk/productions/metamorphosis-titian-2012-by-various>). I was predominantly taken with *Machina*, which is a minimalist piece with the robotic Diana taking centre stage, and whose movements are taken from motion captured dancers. She begins with a slow and seductive gyration, her light beam creating criss-cross patterns across the set, gaining pace and eventuating in a particularly macabre dance of death. Shawcross worked on this piece with choreographers Will Brandstrup and Wayne McGregor with an original music composition from Nico Muhly. According to McGregor, speaking about his own choreography in this piece: 'I've drawn on fragments of the narrative, the dogs chasing and devouring Actaeon, the energy of that, but also conceptual ideas of the moon (symbol of the goddess Diana) and a lunar landscape as a grammar for the lighting' (Gallery Guide).

However, the other ballets are quite captivating in different ways. For *Trespass* Wallinger teamed up with choreographers Alastair Marriott and Christopher Wheeldon, and composer Mark-Anthony Turnage, in his response to Titian. Bringing alive his lunar landscape with its evocative associations to Diana, Wallinger's curved mirrored backdrop reflected the action on the stage where humans transform into stags and gestural forms take geometric shape to the sound of Turnage's dramatic sound composition. His costumes enhance this seemingly non-Euclidean transformation of space.

According with his pictorial intentions, Ofili's ballet focuses on the sensual where desire is ostensibly the driving force and where this compulsion leads ultimately to the downfall of both Callisto and Actaeon. His Diana is vibrant and voluptuous and the location and costumes are equally flamboyant and primitive. The choreography by Liam Scarlett, Will Tuckett and Jonathan Watkin reflect the centrality of passion in

this piece as does the corresponding composition by Jonathan Dove. Ofili's ends his *Diana and Actaeon* with Actaeon being literally torn apart by his dogs.

In *Metamorphosis*, the notion of 'empathy' is central as it relates to both Callisto (who was banished by Diana from her entourage after falling pregnant to Zeus) and Actaeon (who unfortunately caught sight of the naked Diana as she was bathing and as a result was transformed by her into a stag and torn apart by his own hounds). Interestingly, the Titian painting depicts Actaeon being shot by Diana's arrow rather than being torn apart as narrated in Ovid's poem though the ballets primarily reflect the latter.

Titian's pictures, the dance works and the associated artworks all explore the predicament of unintended encounter. The victim just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and meeting the wrong spectators. The consequences are irrevocable and savage. Therefore, using the word in its Aristotelian sense their fates cannot really be called 'tragic'; these have not flowed as a consequence of some major flaw which has set in train a sequence of events. They have simply got caught unawares. Aristotle himself would have regarded this as an obvious misfortune rather than a tragedy.

Nevertheless, these are pathetic events in that they arouse not only an element of distress at witnessing suffering but also one of fear: this could happen to us (Aristotle 1985). Whilst we are not the creatures of Ovid's rendering of mythology everyday headlines in the papers construct the same kind of narrative from random deaths and crime. All these reports trade on our intuitive feelings of empathy for others undergoing such misfortunes. Empathy is a more visceral form of self identification than sympathy which can be extended in an ethically directed way to others with whom we may have no empathy whatever. Empathy is more immediate and less cognitively conditioned; it overrides and sometimes disrupts settled belief systems.

After centuries in which empathy was wholly subsumed in moral and philosophical discourse into more general talk of compassion, it began to be re-examined during the Enlightenment by first, writers such as David Hume (1980) and Adam Smith (1966), and later by German aestheticians and poets. The nineteenth century witnessed a search for a subjectively active and yet attributable source of aesthetic standards; this stimulated the writer Robert Vischer to propose the notion of 'Einfühlung' ('in-feeling') as a foundation for aesthetic sensibility (Malgrave and Ikonomou 1994). Writers such as Henrich Wölfflin and Theodor Lipps developed this notion extensively in aesthetics and psychology (Malgrave and Ikonomou 1994). Having entered the discourse of Edmund Husserl and other phenomenologists, empathy gradually faded away from aesthetic and intellectual fashion, only to be rediscovered by experimental psychologists investigating moral agency and neuro-aesthetics. Empathy, so to speak, has come full circle.

A presently speculative area of neuroscientific research supports the notion of empathy in that we are deeply disposed to 'insert ourselves' into the actions of others and possibly to learn from them. Giacomo Rizzolatti and Laila Craighero have established the existence in monkey brains of 'mirror neurons', associated with the performance of actions *by* the subject, but which also discharge when the subject observes others perform actions. They have adduced indicative, though not

conclusive, evidence that humans possess them too. Thus when observing others act, the same neurons discharge as when we are asked to physically *imitate* their actions, whilst a suppressant activity stops us doing so (Rizzolatti and Craighero, 2004; Rizzolatti, 2005) .

Titian's works present us with empathy arousing incidents with an urgency that makes the whole artwork draw us in to its terrible and yet fascinating interior. The contributions of the artists and choreographers in this project have I think succeeded in revivifying the power of Titian's paintings since in a way quite distinct from more considered perceptual judgements, it seems we are impelled neuronally to perform un-enacted rehearsals of observed actions. For performance, as for all kinetic art-forms, the implications of such research are obvious. Audiences mentally 'move with' performance, whether represented in painting or on stage.

As a multi-media project *Metamorphosis* falls under a more reifiable artistic tradition. The possibility of empathetic response rests upon an embedded sense that the boundary between 'self' and 'other' (whatever that may be), is potentially fluid and may on occasions be suspended completely. Historic accounts frequently described such responses as involving the cross-activation of different senses- a low-level synaesthesia. This association entered into the creative intention to produce an artwork that 'consumed' its audience in their empathetic surrender by overwhelming them with a simultaneous spectrum of different media: the 'total work of art', or as Karl Trahdorff neologised it in 1827, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a term then popularized in Wagner's early writing: *The Artwork of the Future* (1895, first published in 1849). The term can also be translated as 'communal' or 'collective work of art'. Wagner stressed in his early writings that the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* was not only an aesthetic term but pointed to a communal ideal.

In relating this project thus, it is clear how much the ambition to let the audience maximally empathize is intertwined with the co-ordinated employment of a range of media. The paradigm of this is 'The Ring Cycle' or *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, a 'cycle of music-dramas' (Wagner rejecting the theatrical modes of his day), composed of three '*complete dramas*' and one '*lengthy prelude*' (Wagner quoted by Smith, 2007: 22). All relating to the fall and expulsion of the Gods (led by Wotan) from Walhalla and their eventual transformation from immortals into mortals. For Wagner, the 'ring' presents redemption in both 'content and form'. Wotan's dying and Siegfried's and Brunhilde's sacrificial deaths point to the merging of individuation with the collective (Roberts, 2011: 74). For Wagner, art and the social were indivisible and pointed to a very real belief in the wholeness and 'organic synthesis' of the Greek state which had been replaced by the fragmentation of industrialization and mechanization in the modern order. According to David Roberts:

Wagner's concept of total redemption entails a cyclical philosophy of history, stretching from the natural Greek polity to the completion of history in the communist society of the future (2011: 74).

This negation of individuation can be seen to be analogous to the myths of both Callisto and Actaeon where both individuals are sacrificed to preserve the integrity of Diana's collective entourage. Again, in particular, both Wallinger and Ofili point to an organic synthesis in their artistic creations with Wallinger focussing on the lunar

landscape directly connecting to the myth of Diana and Ophieli centring on the inclusion of colourfully flamboyant tropical vegetation as a very real element in both his exhibition and set-design. Although the link with the organic and Shawcross's production of *Machina* is less evident, movements which are captured from human dancers give life to his robotic Diana.

The first complete performance of the Ring Cycle tetralogy, which inaugurated the Bayreuth Festival, was presented in 1876 at Wagner's Festspielhaus. For Wagner, the main ingredients of his total art work were 'dance, music and poetry':

The language of the body [...] of the heart and [...] of the spirit. Opera, by contrast, is dismissed [...] as nothing but the occasion for displaying egoistic rivalry of the three sister arts (Wagner quoted by Roberts, 2011: 75).

However, other forms of plastic arts were also drawn into the Gesamtkunstwerk to provide a further intermingling of art forms. Again, according to Wagner: 'Not a single richly developed capacity of the individual arts will remain unused in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the future' Roberts, 2011 75). Of course, the Gesamtkunstwerk was not only a blending together of art forms but for Wagner importantly, it was a rejection of mechanization. However, regardless of his opposition to the mechanical, in fact, Wagner's music-dramas could not be staged without such elements. Wagner in trying to recreate a verisimilitude in his performances had no option but to utilize various mechanisms such as: a smoke machine, developed from an old locomotive boiler, which masked the various scene transitions by bellowing out coloured steam (causing problems for performers and musicians alike) and a very elaborate 'contraption' designed by Carl Brandt that was designed to support the swimming Rhinemaidens which again was intended to sustain the 'scenic illusion' (Smith, 2007: 33). Wagner also innovatively redeveloped the proscenium staging of his time. With the help of Brandt, the orchestra pit was sunk in front of the stage hiding the musicians and their instruments from sight which Wagner called the 'mystic gulf' (Smith: 30). In front of this was another proscenium creating the illusion of distance yet at the same time making the actors look larger than life. A further new contrivance (for that time) from Wagner was the darkening of houselights and the illumination of the stage; thereby, focussing all attention on that space which was itself almost as large as the auditorium. This to a certain extent merged the 'Greek amphitheatre with proscenium stage', giving all members of the audience an unobstructed view of the stage (Smith: 30).

Although *Metamorphosis* was only partially staged in the manner of the 'Ring Cycle', there remain various devices that are reminiscent of Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk, particularly in its inclusion of intermingling art forms such as design, music, dance and poetry. Various elements from the National Gallery's Exhibition were included in the performances, such as: set and costume design and related poetry events were also held. The Ballets themselves were staged live in the Royal Opera House and screened in various parts of the city providing an immersive environment and indicating an assimilation of art works.

It is my belief that *Metamorphosis* also relates to Artaud's concept of a 'Total Theatre'. He wrote:



The substitution, for poetry or language, of a poetry in space [...] the possibilities for realization in the theatre relate entirely to the *mise en scène* considered as a language in space and in movement (1958: 35-38).

At the heart of Artaud's attempt to re-totalize theatre was his 'theatre of cruelty' which was, in keeping with Wagner, directed towards de-individuation. Artaud's significance lies not so much in his practice (which was mostly unrealizable) but in his writings published in 1938 as *The Theatre and Its Double*. Underpinning this work was 'a radical critique and rejection of Western civilization and its arts' together with a belief that 'decadence and regeneration' exist together (Roberts, 2011: 181).

For Artaud, the stage had to be cleansed of psychologisms and social critique. The plastic and the physical were the true domain of the theatre. Certain affinities exist between Artaud's concept of a 'total theatre' and *Metamorphosis*. Artaud's stage was a theatre of dreams crowded with objects and bodies seen as signs, open to interpretation and without a narrative. The same can be said for the Royal Opera House's Ballets which remind spectators of some of the bizarre combinations that occur in dreams. For Artaud, theatre is 'a kind of organized anarchy' (1958: 51) and the object of theatre 'is not':

To resolve social and psychological conflicts [...] but to express objectively certain secret truths, to bring into the light of day by means of active gestures certain aspects of truth that have been buried under forms in their encounters with Becoming (1958: 70).

Artaud in his notion of the 'theatre of cruelty' believed that a certain 'essentialism' could be realized through performance. Artaud's actors were 'animated hieroglyphs', bodies that moved about like living ciphers in a type of choreographed cryptography (1958: 51-90). As Jacques Derrida writes, Artaud's theatrical writing is a 'writing of the body itself' (1978: 191) and also a critique of the logocentrism of Western society. The Ballets too, are literally a writing of the body.

A further similarity is Artaud's refusal to work with a dramatic text: 'We shall not act a written play, but we shall make attempts at direct staging around themes, facts, or known works' (1958: 90), which clearly resonates with *Metamorphosis* whose performances are so devised.

In keeping with the Artaudian theatre, all three Ballets include actions of 'terror' and 'cruelty' such as: the horrendous tearing apart of Actaeon almost literally presented in the Ofili performance and the banishment of Callisto. Thus realising Artaud's belief that: 'we are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theatre has been created to teach us this first of all' (1958: 79).

Finally, in *Metamorphosis* as well as all three designers creating stunning artworks in their own right their collective ensembles also breathed life into the Titian paintings, creating living, moving, 3D events, all carrying elements of the famous works. As McGregor mentions, commenting on his own choreographic process:

It's a recursive process where you take information from the paintings, however abstract, and use it to make something. You look at it on the bodies of the

dancers and that tells you what to look for next in the paintings. It's not about trying to recreate the paintings. It's about giving aspects of the paintings some energy that will take you somewhere else to invent your own set of ideas, your own narratives (National Gallery Guide).

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**Susan Broadhurst** is a writer and performance practitioner and Professor of Performance and Technology in the School of Arts, Brunel University, London. Her recent publications include *Digital Practices: Aesthetic and Neuroaesthetic Approaches to Performance and Technology* (2007), and edited with Josephine Machon: *Sensualities/Textualities and Technologies: Writings of the Body in 21st Century Performance* (2010) and *Identity, Performance and Technology: Practices of Empowerment, Embodiment and Technicity* (2012) all published by Palgrave

Macmillan. As well as being the co-editor of the online journal *Body, Space & Technology* now in its twelfth year of publication, she is also co-series editor for Palgrave's 'Studies in Performance and Technology.'