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Someone's Staring:

The Archetypal Meaning of the Stare in Art

My title comes from the song:

Someone's crying, Lord, Kumbaya (bis), Someone's crying Lord, Kumbaya, Oh Lord, Kumbaya

Someone's singing, Lord, Kumbaya (bis), Someone's singing Lord, Kumbaya, Oh Lord, Kumbaya

What if someone is staring?



Maria's staring eyes in her self-portraits are to me like a poignant call: "Someone's staring, Lord..." Is it a warning? A call for attention? Or for solace?

When I discovered her self-portraits decades ago I could not turn away. I gave lectures and seminars on Maria. But it was only after more than 10 years that it finally dawned on me what the grip of her eyes might be all about.

This is what I am going to explore: what can mean the emotional response to a straight gaze? The students and women friends who saw Maria's self-portraits would admit to the forcefulness of her paintings. There was a strong pull in opposite directions, attraction *and* repulsion. Some were interested, and others frankly disliked her work.

What is it in the unconscious that is being hit hard by this stare? Where does this feeling of déjà-vu, this diffuse recognition come from? And how to explain the uneasy

feeling that goes with it? Is it just that the gaze reminds you of your earlier fear of antagonizing your god-like parents? Or do you associate it with the stern eyes of an inner judge? Possibly. But isn't there more to it? Can it be that the unease that sets in reaches far deeper into a wordless terror in the face of the mystery that underlies our existences? Can it be that these chills are in fact a most natural human reaction of awe, an archetypal experience of the unknown that surrounds our lives?

Let us start with Maria. Maria Lassnig was born in Austria in 1919, died at 95 in 2014. She was what you called at the time an 'illegitimate' child, born out of marriage. She grew up in Carinthia, a rural province, conservative and very catholic. Already at school Maria feels stigmatized, as the dumb girl from the countryside. This feeling of isolation will stick with her. All her life she will feel undervalued, rejected, ignored. She will have no lasting attachments, not to partners, nor to an artistic community. Her mother to whom she has an ambivalent relationship is nevertheless the only person whom she feels safely bound to. It shows at the death of her mother. Maria, by now a mature woman of 45, is literally devastated.

She is about 21 when she decides to go to Vienna all on her own and learn painting at the academy of fine arts. At 30 (1949) she finds to her very personal artistic style, inspired by many currents but belonging nowhere. She decides to paint 'the most real reality' as she puts it, which is her bodily sensations. She had enough of realistic painting, now she wants to paint what she *senses* - simple, trivial, *real* things. She calls her works 'body-awareness' pictures.

Her self-portraits break away from the convention. They do not represent her from head to toe, as an *object* seen in a mirror. In fact, she mostly paints herself without a mirror. She combines her sensations with some outside view of herself, or rather with a "memory" of her body measures, especially of her face. So these figurative components are not realistic but an interpretation of how she *feels*. She paints solely the parts of her face that she *feels* so that it appears distorted and fragmented. And she uses colors to transpose mainly her bodily sensations (of pressure, burning, stretching, tearing, tingling). stretching, tearing, tingling).

[Self-portrait as a Monster, 1964]



The small face seems to express altogether inadequacy and dependency, as well as a strong desire to live. At 45, Maria's apparently naïve self-portrait expresses a poignant mixture of desperation and determination. Up to this point, she paints no eyes in her self-portraits, or they are closed.

After her mother's death (1964) she moves to New York (1968), the new Mecca of the arts. She stays 10 years there. Now the eyes appear in her series from New York - as in this self-portrait. - as in this self-portrait. [Self-portrait Encased in Plastics, 1972]



At 61 she is nominated professor at the Academy for Applied Arts in Vienna, the 1st woman ever to teach painting in a German speaking academy. She comes back

home. From then on she stays in Austria. The large public begins to take notice of her. She wins prizes, is exhibited all over the world.

At 80 (2000) she changes to a high-keyed palette and to more emotional, forceful images. She takes to daring combinations of colors that speak more directly of her emotions. She looks back on the things she missed in her life. She has hardly ever spoken of her unhappy love affairs. But she has obviously felt deeply hurt on several occasions.

[Illusion of the Missed Marriages II, 1998]



Watch for her gaze! It tells stories of submission, resignation, and exhaustion.

[Illusion of the Missed Motherhood, 1998]



She is crouching and holding between her thighs a whitish form that must be the baby she has just born. But it does not look like a newborn baby. And the way she holds the thing, hardly touching it with her fingers tips, would be quite inappropriate. Maria looks straight at us and seems puzzled more than anything as if saying: "Look at what came out of me, what shall I do with it?" This picture belongs for me to the most disturbing ones for the odd expression of helplessness and unrelatedness.

Maria pursues her quest around the basic, existential question of how it feels to be alive, in her senses, her guts, her nerves, her heart. There is again helplessness and resignation in her gaze.

[Language Grid, 1999]



She often uses bright, conflicting colors. You never know what she is trying to say, that is, she is mostly saying a bundle of things.

[You or Me, 2005]



As here (she is 86), where the wide open eyes tell of anger and desperation. But the way she sits exposed in her plain nakedness adds irony to the pain.

[Two Ways of Being, 2000]



. She is 81 and fiercely honest. She shows two sides of her being. We recognize immediately Maria on the right side. She looks as an old woman looks when she gets out of bed, not groomed, her hair not done – just as she truly looks. On the left side, Maria has the looks of an animal, maybe a pig. As a matter of fact she said once about her bodily sensations “(...) my head is sunken into the cardboard of the shoulder blades, the

skull is open at the back, in my face I feel the nasal opening, as big as a pig's, and around it I feel the skin burning. I'll paint it red."¹ Again she is saying many things at once: Because of the brutal clash of pinks, blues, greens and yellows, she seems to claim loudly the legitimacy of her double being, and to say 'Look here, this is how I am, I am both!' one with basic needs and one groomed person (you might say shadow and persona). But the tired eyes of her persona are just matter-of-fact. She is both, loud and provocative – but also unconcerned.

What finally dawned on me was that Maria's straight gaze reminded me of Ereshkigal's eyes of death.

Ereshkigal is the goddess of the underworld in the Mesopotamian myth of the 3rd millennium BC. She is the sister of Inanna, the goddess of the plentiful, queen of love and war, of greens and dance. The sisters meet when Inanna who had all the powers you could think of, and on top of it a passionate lover, decides to go down and visit Ereshkigal. On her descent into the underworld she has to take off one by one all insignia of her power. When she comes down naked, Ereshkigal kills her and impales her corpse on a hook. Inanna's servant, worried at not seeing her mistress come back gets the help of 3 tiny characters. They sneak in, bringing with them a miraculous herb. They manage to cajole Ereshkigal into a deal. They will bring Inanna back to life, and Ereshkigal will allow her to go back in the upper world on the condition that Inanna sends someone else down in her place. So it happens. Inanna comes back up and has to choose someone to replace her. She has changed. Now she watches her people *with the eyes of death*. As she finds her beloved consort enthralled with his new role as the king, she points to him. He will be the one to go down and replace her in the underworld. As things go, his sister takes pity on him and volunteers to take half of the exile on her so that he will be gone only every half a year. It means that every half a year Inanna will have to forsake the joys of love-making.

The Jungian analyst Silvia Brinton Pereira was intrigued by the eyes of death. She writes in her study *The Descent to The Goddess*²: The eyes of death are "pitiless, not personally caring". They can be many things. "They can suggest a capacity to be objective, *an unrelatedness to the other, that is life- and self-affirmation at its basic demonic level*³ – not what we like to think is feminine in our culture." Jung, she notes, writing on the *muladhara* chakra, reminds us of the *value of the negative aspect of the Self*. Jung understands this paradox as an "aspect of hatred... [which] one would describe in Western philosophical terms as an urge or instinct toward individuation"⁴. Now how can hatred foster individuation? For a person who identifies with loved ones hatred may have to destroy the symbiotic relationship in order to set the individual apart⁵. The eyes of death would be one side of the ambivalence that belongs to the experience of love.

¹ Quoted in interview with Jörg Heiser, Frieze Magazine, 2008 (?).

² Silvia B. Pereira, *Descent to the Goddess*, Inner City Books, Toronto, 1981.

² Silvia B. Pereira, *Descent to the Goddess*, Inner City Books, Toronto, 1981.

³ Italics mine.

⁴ C. G. Jung, "Psychological Commentary on Kundalini Yoga", Lecture 1, October 1932 in: *Spring 1975*. P. 2.

⁵ Silvia B. Pereira, *ibid*. P. 31

It is interesting that Edward Whitmont, like Silvia Pereira, detects this particularly dreadful, unrelated psychic energy in the *feminine archetype*. You wouldn't think of the "Yin-anima world", as he calls it, as the realm of such hardness. He explains this paradox with the closeness of the archetypal Feminine to nature: "The archetypal feminine attitude is more empathy- and involvement-oriented than the more abstract masculine attitude" (...) "[It is] part of an extended natural field, where all elements are interwoven in circular rather than linear fashion. Yet [he goes on] *paradoxically* the Feminine, *for this very reason also*, shares in the very impersonalness and playfulness of nature *in its more ready acceptance of suffering, of cruel necessities, of severance and destruction and the necessity to inflict them.*"⁶

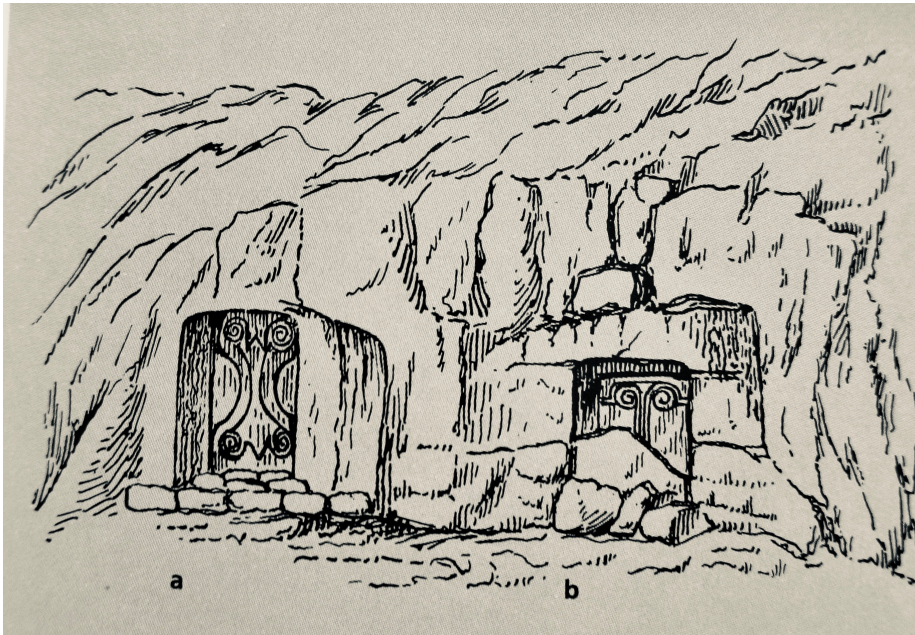
Ereshkigal goes namely back to the Great Goddess who was revered for millennia until the end of the Neolithic around the Mediterranean, up to West and Southeastern Europe and all the way along the Atlantic coast up to Ireland. The archaic goddess had to do with the cycles of nature, with destruction and renewal. And death was one of her manifestations.

Ancient artifacts depicting wide open eyes can be traced back to these ancient cultures, as early as the Neolithic. The archeologist-anthropologist Marija Gimbutas⁷ discovered numerous pre-historic artifacts with glaring eyes, reminding more or less explicitly of the eyes of the owl.

[eyes on bones, in or at caves' entrances]

⁶ Edward Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess*. Continuum. New York. 1982. P. 133

⁷ Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess. Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization*. Harper & Row. San Francisco. 1989.





The owl, explains Gimbutas, has since the earliest times been seen as the messenger of death. For this reason it has always been feared. It is still a common belief that to see an owl near your place means the imminent death of someone in the family. But then because of its extraordinary eye sight the owl was also deemed in possession of wisdom and divination power. The owl-goddess was *the one who sees and knows* and was associated with death.

[statuette, Cyprus, 3000 BC, 2 statuettes, Syria, 1000 BC, goddess, Cyprus 5000 BC, Kali, contemporary India, Medusa, Caravaggio, 1596]







But the symbols that belong to the owl-goddess - such as the snake, the vulva, the triangle, zigzag lines – evoke life and rebirth. So death was obviously closely connected with the continuous life cycle. New buds grow from decay, the moon wanes and waxes again, nature dries up in winter and blossoms anew in the spring, and women's wombs become fecund again after bleeding. The wisdom of the staring eyes that see and know of "cruel necessities" was part of the *whole* of nature. The

archaic goddess was all in one, life *and* death, beautiful *and* frightening, Inanna *and* Ereshkigal.

What can modern Western art have to do with images from prehistoric cultures? Our Western outlook on art is completely different. “Our Western European categories of art [says art historian Neil MacGregor] are based above all on the idea of a *unique work*, the creation of a great genius with a particular vision and style”⁸. But Russian icons from the 17th century for example used to be made in a totally different spirit. “The aim of the artists [he notes] was not to realize on panel their own particular vision of the world, but to open a gateway to the divine by repeating a composition immediately recognizable to everybody who would look at it, and as familiar as a prayer or a song learnt in childhood.”⁹ The icons would “foster a deep sense of community, transcending social divisions and the passing generations”¹⁰ The same is still true of modern India. The ritual of making and destroying the images of Durga, the goddess with the large eyes, “provides a pattern in which all can find their place – *a pattern of enduring connection between human and divine*, and one that shapes and sustains a society over centuries.”¹¹

This is exactly what the Jungian analyst Erich Neumann¹² had noticed about the development of Western art. Up to the Renaissance period unconscious, collective and transpersonal factors had been far more significant than conscious and individual factors. Art had been the expression of the situation of the whole group. Symbols and symbolic acts had brought differentiation and order for all into what would have been an indeterminate world driven by chaotic forces. And creative activities had been inspired not by an individual urge of the psyche but by the spirit of the ancestors or by a collective spirit. The connection between the group and the divine had been re-established again and again by ritual artifacts, dances, music and myths.

It has been only about 5 centuries since Western art has become an individual creation made for individuals. The question is now: can art still provide symbols and connect its public with their collective unconscious? The answer is: yes! But how this happens is not a given – because it is individual. Even with the works of ‘great artists’, their impact remains hard to grasp and to share. This is my point. Do you see how long it went until I realized the connection between Maria’s stare and the eyes of the death goddess? Meanwhile I found that other works of art that made a strong impression on me, the first one during my studies at the Jung Institute, were reaching into the same psychic depths

(2 Gaston Chaissac, 1950ies / Picasso, *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, 1907 / Paul Klee, *Fire and Death*, 1940 / Miriam Cahn, *Thinking Soldier*, 2000 / Miriam Cahn, *Old I*, 2017 / Miriam Cahn, *Silent Sisters*, 1980)

⁸ Neil MacGregor, *Living with the Gods*, Penguin Random House, 2018. 255.

⁹ Neil MacGregor, *ibid.*, 256.

¹⁰ Neil MacGregor, *ibid.*, 254.

¹¹ Neil MacGregor, *ibid.*, 267.

¹² Erich Neumann, “Art and Time” in: J. Campbell (Ed), *Man and Time*, Eranos Yearbooks, 1957.









Surely, to look in the eyes of death is not a delight. It brings across a lot of suffering, sadness, confusion and despair. But the truthfulness of these eyes makes up for all the heart aches. The immeasurable value of these staring eyes is in my experience that *they see it as it is* – they do not turn away, they want to know. This can apply to

all things that are hard to accept – not only to our shadow, also to the limited time of our lives and ultimately to the mystery that surrounds our lives. The staring eyes reach deep into the age old, down-to-earth wisdom manifest in the ancient goddess and buried in our psyche, the objective psyche.

As I was packing, on April 2, I got an email from ARAS On Line with the title 'Archetype in Focus: Eye', a wonderful image of eye goddesses from an Ishtar Temple in Syria (4th millenium BC)



and this quote by Jung: The Self as 'eye' "searches the hearts of men, laying bare the truth and pitilessly exposing every cranny of the soul. It is a reflection of one's insight into the total reality of one's own being" (CW 10, § 639).

Symbols are inspiring. But do let them change your lives in some way, said the old master (Jung), otherwise you have wasted it. So what can you do with the eyes of death? You can embrace life *as it is*, accept wholeheartedly the hardships and joys, the anxiety, lust, hatred, shame, guilt – all of it.

Art & Psyche, Santa Barbara, USA April 4-7, 2019

As Erich Fried says in his poem¹³:
What it is

WHAT IT IS

It is madness
says reason
It is what it is
says love

It is unhappiness
says caution
It is nothing but pain
says fear
It has no future
says insight
It is what it is
says love

It is ridiculous
says pride
It is foolish
says caution
It is impossible
says experience
It is what it is
says love

10

20

¹³ Erich Fried, *Love Poems*, Alma Classics Ltd, UK, 2011. 5.

7