

## WHAT IS TRANSPERSONALISM?

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### WHAT IS TRANSPERSONAL ART?



*"My work is entitled transpersonal art because they allow the viewer a look beyond my personality. A wide range of artistic expressions are utilized in my paintings to express my inner worlds, an interpretation of the shapes of my life while engaging my soul's intrinsic peace, until I am reminded that inner peace forms a strong core for everything else I do." James e. Woody, 1995*

The term transpersonal is frequently used in the descriptions of Woody's artwork (writings and paintings), sharing with its origin in transpersonal psychology. He derives much of his concepts from the field of transpersonal psychology as has been introduced by Abraham Maslow (Battista, 1996:52).

Transpersonal development is part of a continuum of human functioning or consciousness in which an ego remains available but is superseded by more inclusive frames of reference. In differentiation to such a psychological understanding of trans-personality, Woody is using the term in a more philosophical connotation. What is of interest here is not so much a model of the development of the self as it is proposed, for example, by developmental psychologist Ken Wilber's (1996, 2000a) concept of an expansive and including model of an evolutionary self, which goes through successive phases, becom-



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ing ever more holistic – more encompassing, integrated and comprehensive. What Wilber (1996) outlines might also be termed an Art of the Self, however he describes the hierarchical version of such an Art, striving for ever higher forms of realization and implying a developmental process inherent to all of humanity.

For Wilber, development of the self implies an unfolding through pre-given and describable stages, until the self reaches first its mature egoist form (the centaur) and subsequently transcends this form into higher stages of being (subtle and causal). On each level the self materializes as an individual form (surface structure, the personal and concrete expression) which is shaped and determined by the pre-given, unconscious structural “potentials and limitations” specific to that level (deep structures). (Wilber, 1996:46).

The question if any, may not be the psychological question of the evolution and superseding of the ego, but the philosophical and ethical question of an understanding of the self beyond individuality and the distinctive way of life that might ensue from such a conception. For this dissertation, the transpersonal should be understood much rather in connection with certain theories of subjectivity which problematize the idea of a single, coherent and stable individual and dissolve the understanding of an; I-you dichotomy.

### What are the methodological considerations?

The main method proposed in this dissertation starts from an analysis, recombination and interpretation of certain practices. The main methodological problem posed by this dissertation is reflected in the question of how one can theoretically approach something which eludes theorizing. Moreover, how is it possible to approximate theoretically something which is beyond rational description? From here we can trace a connection to a type of experience which is linked to a certain understanding of the self leading to these works of art in light of the implicit critique of empiricism that is inherent in Woody's work.

Any empirical research leading to scientific knowledge will consciously be avoided in favor of an argument for experiential understanding. This is a necessary restriction advocated and not a shortcoming, as it could be argued that a certain experiential field invariably falls out of the reach of both rational theorizing and empirical research, any attempt to bring it back into either of those fields can only be through an act of reduction and renewed rationalization.



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The method chosen here consists in leading the theoretical argument up to this moment of transformation, while acknowledging that it is only through this critical restraint and a cognitive letting go that the field of the trans-rational can be opened to anyone at all. Although it would have been possible to approach the topic via the field of psychology, we have chosen to lay more emphasis on the summary philosophical side. If the question is how far it is possible to go with certain postmodern philosophers beyond postmodernity, then this slant towards philosophy only appears consequent. It is Woody's aim to propose meeting points for those two fields, spaces of connectivity where, beyond the narrow categories of disciplines, a new field of research might open up.

The term philosophy and philosopher for the purposes of Woody's work, are therefore, taken in the broader sense of the word, including as his main sources of study of the works of Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche. Still it needs to be mentioned that some of the most interesting and cutting edge concepts and practices are currently found in the field of transpersonal psychology, recurring to the works of, amongst others, C.G. Jung, Wilhelm Reich, Stanislav Grof, Roberto Assagioli, Abraham Maslow, Ervin Laszlo and Ken Wilber.

Further, Woody's affiliation with philosophy ends whenever it is stipulated that in order to philosophize one needs to have a system – which is something he does not claim for himself. It is in this respect that he follows those who define philosophy not by a certain system or syntax but via its content: philosophy is the (critical) preoccupation with questions of truth and freedom. He asserts that his work is the result of an activity or movement: the movement by which, not without uncertainty are also dreams not illusions. Because when one detaches oneself from what is accepted as true and seeks other rules – that is philosophy. In short, he contends that displacement and transformation is simply the framework of thinking, the changing of received values is to become other than what one is – that too, is philosophy.

On his own trajectory, Woody understands philosophically, that he so remains without regret, an assembler who takes what he needs but also has no qualms to cut and continue with something else, if what previously has been found no longer fits the purpose. It is in this sense that he takes serious a debt of thanks to those reminding him of the strings that come attached if one takes up the mantle of the academic discipline of philosophy.



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Since Woody has no intention of letting this work be pulled by those strings, he prefers to sever them right away and choose a path which, while perhaps more eclectic, hopefully is no less meaningful.

Consequently, the method he employs for creating could perhaps best be described as a circle of transpositions an inter-textual, cross-boundary or transversal transfer, in the sense of a leap from one code, field or axis into another, not merely in the quantitative mode of plural multiplications, but rather in the qualitative sense of complex multiplicities. It is not just a matter of weaving together different strands, variations on a themes (color and paint strokes), but rather of playing the positivity of difference as a specific theme. As a term in music, transposition indicates variations and shifts of scale in a discontinuous but harmonious pattern. It is thus created as an in-between space of zigzagging and of crossing, non-linear but not chaotic, nomadic, yet accountable and committed.

It can be concluded that Woody's present work is an art of the transpersonal self because it: (1) acknowledge the individual person as one form of experienced existence, yet also (2) intuites larger frames of reference, as for example, the notion of an aesthetic-energetic sphere which will be developed throughout this dissertation.

#### The origins of transpersonal thinking.

Transpersonal psychology is one of the disciplines considered by Boucovolas (1999), in listing how transpersonal psychology may relate to other areas of transpersonal study. In writing about Transpersonal Art, Boucovolas begins by make note how, according to Breccia, the definitions employed by the International Transpersonal Association in 1971, Transpersonal Art may be understood as art work that is drawn upon by important themes beyond the individual self, such as the transpersonal consciousness.

This makes Transpersonal Art criticism germane to mystical approaches to creativity. Transpersonal Art criticism, as Boucovolas notes, can be considered that which claims conventional art criticism has been too committed to stressing rational dimensions of art and has subsequently said little on art's spiritual dimensions or as that which holds art work has a meaning beyond the individual person.



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Certain aspects of the psychology of Carl Jung, as well as movements such as music therapy and art therapy may also relate to the field. Boucovolas' paper cites Breccia (1971) as an early example of Transpersonal Art and claims that at the time his article appeared, philosopher Ken Wilber had made recent contributions to the field.

The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology in 2005, Volume 37, launched a special edition devoted to the media, which contained articles on film criticism that can be related to this field. By common consent, the following branches are considered to be transpersonal psychological schools: Jungian psychology, depth psychology (more recently rephrased as the archetypal psychology of James Hillman), the spiritual psychology of Robert Sardello, (2001), psychosynthesis founded by Roberto Assagioli, and the theories of Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof, Ken Wilber, and Michael Washburn. Amongst certain thinkers who are considered to have set the stage for transpersonal studies are William James, Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, and Roberto Assagioli (Cowley & Derezotes, 1994; Miller, 1998; Davis, 2003). Research by Vich (1988) suggests that earliest usage of the term "transpersonal" can be found in lecture notes which William James who had prepared for a semester at Harvard University in 1905-6.

A major motivating factor behind the initiative to establish a school of psychology was Abraham Maslow's who had already published work regarding human peak experiences. Maslow's work grew out of the humanistic movement of the 1960's, and gradually the term "transpersonal" was associated with a distinct school of psychology within the humanistic movement. In 1969, Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof and Anthony Sutich were the initiators behind the publication of the first issue of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, the leading academic journal in the field. Historical note, Transpersonal psychology was first announced and defined with the publication of The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology in 1969. This was soon to be followed by the founding of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology (ATP) in 1972.

Transpersonal perspectives are also now being applied to such diverse fields as psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, sociology, pharmacology, cross-cultural studies.



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Currently, transpersonal psychology, especially the schools of Jungian and Archetypal psychology, is integrated at least to some extent into many psychology departments in American and European Universities. Transpersonal therapies are also included in many therapeutic practices. Institutions of higher learning that have adopted insights from transpersonal psychology include: The Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (US), California Institute of Integral Studies (US), John F. Kennedy University (US), Burlington College (US), Liverpool John Moores University (UK), the University of Northampton (UK), and Naropa University (CO).

It is important to note, there is a strong connection between the transpersonal and the humanistic perspective. This is not surprising since transpersonal psychology started off within humanistic psychology (Aanstoos, Serlin & Greening, 2000).

### What is the historic reference for Transpersonal Art?

*"It is well known that paints and pigments can be approached as ritual objects, magical energetic substances to help create a space for manifestation. The act of painting or the ownership of them can be a meditative ritual, a ritual of affirmation and manifestation. With Transpersonal Art and in life, there is space and opportunity at every phase for invention, as with life no part of the art creation should be merely rushing from A to Z without appreciating the journey in its fullness along the way because every moment is complete in itself".* **James e. Woody**

According to a fundamental magical belief throughout the ages, the part is integral with the whole. (Larouse Encyclopedia of Prehistoric and Ancient Art), Transpersonal Art primitive origins originated from an expression that sought to intimate the shamanic, mystical, spiritual realms of consciousness, realms beyond -yet including- the personal, entering into the subtle, collective and universal fields of nature, realms accessible to consciousness that is healing, is moving toward wholeness and experience of oneness with the unbounded, interconnected, quantum-coherent universe.



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Within the realms of prehistory, we find that art was much more fundamental than a mere pastime, a simple way to reflect social concerns.

Historically, art has its center, the process of connection with life, enabling the participant to cooperate with his environment through his religion and magic. **Reference:** Boucovolas, M. (1999). [Journal of Transpersonal Psychology](#), 31 (1) 27-39 Wikipedia information about Transpersonal Art. It uses material from the [Wikipedia article "Transpersonal psychology."](#)

### The evolution; the relationship between art & neuroscience?

*"My paintings incorporate many of the philosophies and elements found in Transpersonal thinking, as they are the symbolic reenactment of an abstract imagination, images of a timeless and internal universe that are reflective in accordance with the knowledge of our time, organic expressions that demonstrate the eternal magic of the human condition.*

*Transpersonal Art accurately reflects the multiplicity of our reality, by expressing the realm of our primary meaning, a universal mode of consciousness that envisions life as sacred. These images may appear mystical, literal or conceptual, because the abstract elements vary as representation of the known, the less known, and the unknown.*

*Whether you view my work as simply a mirror of ordinary biological urges or as contact with other worlds filled with living beings, what is certain, is they are collective dreams and visions, the dramatic personae of your own imagination realized as an independent entity with a life of its own". James e. Woody © 1988*

Neuroesthetics (or neuroaesthetics) is a relatively recent sub-discipline of empirical aesthetics. Empirical aesthetics is now taking a scientific approach to the study of what happens to art when it enters the brain: how our brains reconstruct, assess, and fasten judgment to works of art.



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This includes not only bottom-up flows (sensory input moving higher and higher, up into the cortex), but also top-down flows (expectations influencing the viewing or listening process; jogged memories coloring our incoming perceptions).

These flows are what the vast majority of current neuroaesthetics research is concerned with and indeed what most books concerning art and the brain investigate. Their approach is most interested in is perception and analysis of basic aesthetic details: how we see color, detect motion, hear sound, recognize faces, feel rhythm, and what the peculiarities of each perceptual system tell us about the way the brain stitches these properties together.

Then, at the next level, we can begin to untangle emotional and executive areas of the brain and their involvement in making and viewing art. Art's effects can be correlated with the production of fear via the amygdala, pleasure in the nucleus accumbens, mystery/problem solving in the prefrontal cortex, disgust in the insula. Also involved at these higher levels is our empathetic connection to the work, be it a character in a film, or a melody in a song, and the top-down control it has over the perception of the work at hand.

#### The perception of art by the brain

Some visual neuroaesthetics are working with painters, who are interested in the relationship between two disciplines, noteworthy names will include: [Livingstone](#), [Zeki](#), and [Ramachandran](#). Many of these concepts are derived from non-scientific writings of [Santiago Ramón y Cajal](#), the Nobel Prize-winning "father of modern neuroscience".

#### Conclusion

Ken Wilber wrote an essay called "[To See A World--Art and the I of the Beholder](#)", in summary he states that the reason art in the postmodern age is lacking in its reflection of the human condition, is because the existential world has reached something of a cul-de-sac and not that art itself is exhausted, but that the existential worldview is.



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While the idealism of Woody's artwork and concepts do share many commonalities with the work of Wilber (as indeed the very terms transpersonal signify), one crucial difference is with regards to the question of those developmental hierarchies are set against Woody's personal horizons, intuited by his personal experiences.

The general consensus is that Transpersonal Art will continue as a growing trend among academics because it focuses on self-realization and design psychology and these will become the tools used increasingly to create inspiring places. One might say, spiritual considerations and psychology are now the principal design tools used to create aesthetically and functionally beautiful places, emotionally and socially fulfilling spaces.

- *What do you think the quintessential art movement will be that accurately reflects the moments of our time?*
- *How will our collective creative visions survive the external, the digital and the cyber-worlds?*
- *What is the imagination when the ego is anaesthetized, can we behold the world anew?*

### Want more information?

1. [Can Art Be Neuro-Scientifically Diagrammed?](#) (How Does Art Work?)
2. [What is Design Psychology?](#) (What is it?)
3. [What is Art Therapy?](#) (FAQ's)
4. [Woody's Bibliography](#) (Summary)

