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# Transpersonal Art—Does It Bite?

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This article addresses the question of whether or not political perspective and content enrich transpersonal art and studies. The artist's argument for making the range of the transpersonal inclusive, not just transcendent but also immanent, employs examples from her art as well as descriptions of her process. She sets the discussion in three contexts: that of art criticism, contemporary and traditional; that of art production; and that of the field of transpersonal studies. In regard to the latter, she both defines and examines the role of spiritual bypass, and argues the importance of resisting the temptation to take refuge in a form of introspection that bypasses sociopolitical concerns. By examining in detail her portrayal of Erland Josephson in his latter years, she addresses a question bridging the transcendent and imminent: How does one read a face and discern/portray a person's relation to the inner and outer worlds?

**Keywords:** *transpersonal, figurative art, political art, computer art, psychology, portrait, spiritual bypass, feminist, Jewish, Ingmar Bergman, Erland Josephson, Leon Golub*

During the Vietnam War, Leon Golub and Nancy Spero, his partner, were anti-war activists. Their paintings emphasized content with a sociopolitical bite: Building upon his Vietnam series, Golub would eventually portray mercenaries and inquisitors, drawn to heroic scale, grinning as they tormented political prisoners. Spero's work was also political early on, and evolved by the 1970s into explicitly feminist work. To a collection of his writings Golub gave the title *Do Paintings Bite?* (1997). The title addressed an implied controversy: In the opinion of leading artists and critics, art history had advanced beyond content (for pro and con cf. Rosenberg, 1975, pp. 227-235). Europe had watched abstract art of various kinds rise to ascendancy, and the United States, in the 1940s and '50s, gave proud birth to abstract expressionism. Golub's insistence on content from the beginning of his career onward was denounced as retrograde. The sanctioned approach excluded content while anointing rhythm, form, color, texture, and, most importantly, in abstract expressionist works, the *process* of the painter who deployed these elements. A proper painter, like Jackson Pollock, would busy himself with dripping, spraying, and throwing paint. He would create from out of the existential void.

Like Golub, I ask whether art—in this case *transpersonal* art—bites. Is transpersonal art enriched by political content? For decades, transpersonalists have grappled with what eventually came to be called *spiritual bypass*. It is easy enough to perform: One

remains high-minded even when confronted with low behavior. Under a pretense of spiritual attainment, one indulges in avoidance. There is the understandable but perhaps misguided hope that one may safely pursue self-development in such a way as to avoid politics, that is, the life of the polity. In contradistinction to such an approach, I would cite the views of a Jungian such as James Hillman, who wrote, *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy—And the World's Getting Worse* (Hillman & Ventura, 1992); he argued that introspection should supplement a citizen's concern, not replace it. Maslow, a founding father of the field, expressed political concerns in his 1968 interview *Being Abraham Maslow* (Zweig, L. & Bennis, W., 1968/2007). Buddhists such as Joanna Macy and Thich Nhat Hanh, though "awakened" to intimacy with the All, have not abandoned the immanent for the transcendent; they include in their vision the social, political, economic, and ecological worlds, all sacred (Hanh, 2013; Macy & Young Brown, 2014). In short, I would argue that both the transpersonal field itself and transpersonal art stand to benefit from accommodating a citizen's concern.

The first work I proffer, *The People Cry Out!* (Figure 1), I created on an iPad; it is up-to-the-minute, then, in terms of its medium. I cannot indicate its size: An advantage of this medium is that the image is scalable. The digital file can produce what looks like a print—is in fact a hand-held inkjet print—or it can produce, from that same reconfigured file, a piece as large as a poster.



Figure 1. The People Cry Out! iPad drawing.

Though contemporary in these ways, *The People Cry Out!* draws nourishment from a long tradition of political art works. It alludes to Kathe Kollwitz's now-famous poster: *Nie Wieder Krieg!* (*Never Again War!*). The Kollwitz portrayal, image and words, appeared in 1924 and was embraced by many in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Likewise, the woman in my own work protests: She raises her arms against incessant violence and the destruction of the planet. She cries out, too, against a quieter betrayal, that is to say, the ongoing and global transfer of wealth, out of the pockets of the poor and middle class into the coffers of the top one percent, impoverishing millions to make a few obscenely rich (cf. the argument by Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor, in his 2014 film *Inequality for All*). To create my own protesting woman I looked inward, with a transpersonal *psychology* orientation; and, when I did so, my pain on behalf of the many—the *polity*—asked for expression.

The second piece I have chosen is a painting, done in wet and dry pastel on paper, called *What Is a Mensch?: Actor Erland Josephson* (Figure 2). It portrays a member of Ingmar Bergman's acting ensemble, and it comes from a group of my paintings called *The*

*Bergman Suite*. The actors in the Bergman ensemble, Liv Ullmann included, learned over the years to portray worlds of feeling by way of the face in motion. They could even do so in long close-up shots of a head showing—paradoxically—almost *no* motion, yet with a face translucent to the *inner* shifts. I took a freeze frame of Josephson as he was speaking in an interview to Ullmann, his lifelong friend. He is in the process of uttering (and I paraphrase) "Sometimes what is between friends cannot even be put into words."

I present this painting for a few reasons. First, to my mind, this Jewish actor is what is called in Yiddish *a mensch*. A mensch is no saint, all purity, no hero riding a white horse; she or he is there in the flesh—blood, sweat, and tears—is someone who will understand and respond in a crisis; this is *because* of human imperfection, not despite it. Second, an indwelling range of emotions is suggested by way of his differing eyes—the astigmatic one in sunlight and the straightforward one in shadow—and also by the wrinkles and crevices in evidence under both eyes, at the inside and outside corners, and in the forehead just above them. The signature wrinkles give trace evidence of the way the muscles have functioned through the years—whether in moments of anger,





Figure 2. *What Is a Mensch?* Actor Erland Josephson. Wet and dry pastel on paper, 27 in. x 21 in.

kindness, humor, or compassion. The eyes suggest not just a complex and sophisticated sensibility, evolved from a life fully lived, but also a penchant for the direct and simple, as conveyed by their steady blue regard; there is tenderness as well. As to the lips, they are full and sensual, but perhaps less so than in their younger, redder days. Even the way the collar drapes loosely around his neck suggests a man who sits with a certain elegant comfort in his skin.

Another viewer might disagree with what I see; my hope is nevertheless that many would find him sympathetic. Most important, though, is that the stroke that surrounds him is the same stroke from which he emerges. He emerges from and inhabits a fluid medium: Call it matter-energy, process, or life. Does the effect of the color second the effect of the stroke? The variegation of the color that suggests layers of skin, capillary, and nerve—and the way the light and shadow illuminate and shelter Josephson by turns—all of this suggests an

alignment between the man and his world, perhaps even the cosmos. He is nearer to his death than his birth, but life has not been wasted on him.

Although the first piece I presented in this essay reaches out to the public and even cries out, the second has certain private depths. The two pieces differ; they delineate a range. Nevertheless, both take their nourishment from a transpersonal vision that embraces not just the transcendent but also the imminent. *Transpersonal Art—Does It Bite?* Of course it does. Mary McCarthy, author and critic, has said (and demonstrated) that a writer needs a fine indignation (Ackerman, 2011, p. 30). So does a visual artist. After all, there is much in life to offend the caring eye. Transpersonal art—does it kiss? It kisses as well. In fact, the best question of all might be: Transpersonal art—what *doesn't* it do? But that question, grand as it is, begs to start a new exploration. It brings this one, at least for the moment, to an end.

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## About the Artist

*Judy Schavrien, PhD, MFT*, is a psychotherapist, artist, and poet in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. She has received 18 awards for work in the arts, as a psychological theorist, and for her activism, including a Feminist Pioneer Award from the National Association for Women in Psychology and a Founding Mothers Award. Formerly Chair of the global psychology doctoral program at Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, she has published several books: *what rhymes with cancer?*, *Alice at the Rabbithole Café*, and *Everything Voluptuous—The Love Songs 1970-2014*. In her journal publications she focuses on late style/late vision in such authors as Shakespeare and Sophocles. As these playwrights increasingly came to view life in the light of death, both individual and cultural death, they evolved a vision less linear, more cyclical and mystical, and more gender-balanced. Her art and poetry bring such a late vision understanding to portraiture. More information can be found at [www.jesart.net](http://www.jesart.net). Please address feedback and questions to [jesart@comcast.net](mailto:jesart@comcast.net)

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