

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC 27 - DREAM INCUBATION

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June 26th 1976

Dear Mr. Nolte

As you know, I took a short leave of absence about three months ago to settle some family business that was becoming too urgent to neglect any longer. Though I had to devote most of time to that, I was able to keep a lifeline open to my various projects, begun earlier this year, and I'd like to write about one of these, which drew to a close about the middle of last month.

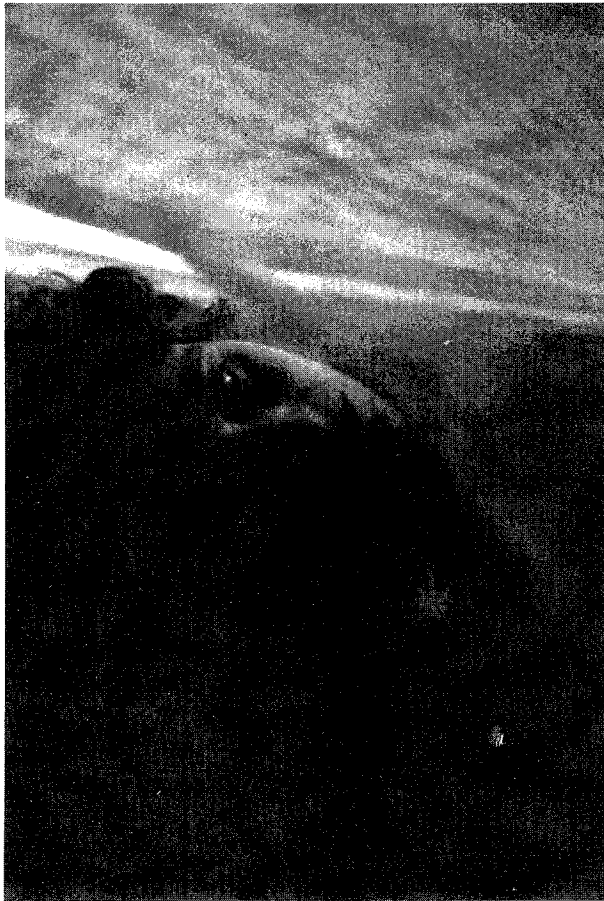
In KC 24 I mentioned some of the preliminary work I had done in December of last year with a group of people, all of whom were interested in dreams. Two members of this group were psychologists, one a researcher, the other a therapist. We continued to meet regularly through most of January and February, and although the makeup of the group kept changing, and the work proceeded in a completely informal way, I was able to try out some interesting techniques which were to prove useful later on when I started to prepare a more formal presentation.

The basic premise with which we all began was that it was possible to create forms and ceremonies that would enable us to communicate with that part of ourselves that was the source of dreams. As usual, I was fascinated by the uses of space. We were working in the loft, converted to living, of the therapist, who lived on E. 17 Street, in New York. The front part of the loft had been conventionally renovated as a living room/kitchen/sleeping area. But the back part had been left as clear space, and was an ideal small studio. One member of the group, an actor, had been taking lessons from a Japanese teacher of movement, and brought in the suggestion one day that we begin as he began, by "cleaning the space". At first no one could see the point of it, least of all our hostess, who had thought she kept a fairly tidy household. But in the spirit of experimentation with which we had all agreed to work, we picked up brooms, mops, and cleaning rags, and went over ever inch of the studio floor. It was a very simple exercise in concentration, for if you let your irritation with the humble work, and your impatience

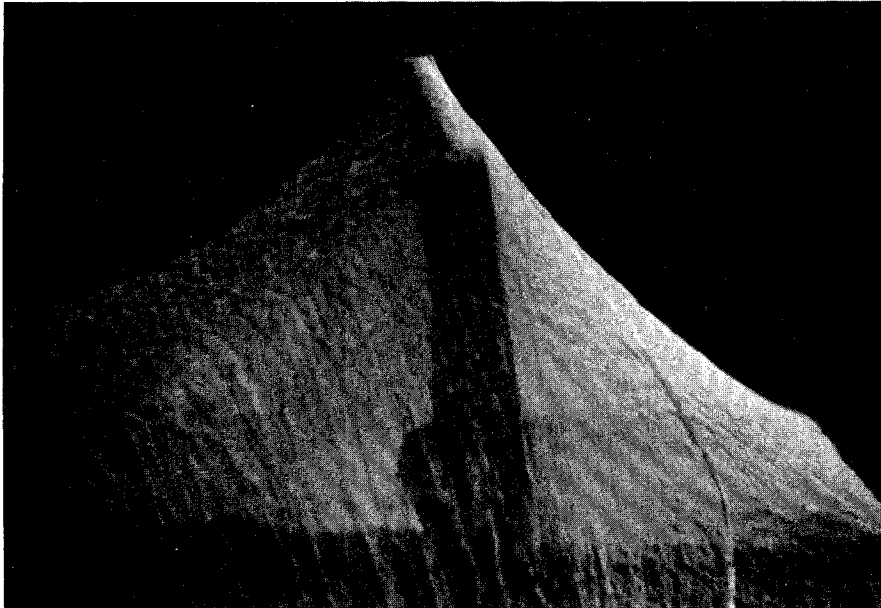
Kenneth Cavander is an Institute Fellow exploring in theatrical form our past and present mythologies and our capacities for transformation.

with not being able to get on immediately to more 'serious' work, interfere with the cleaning, the cleaning would take longer. It established a connection with the physical properties of the space; it made a simple task serve a larger purpose, and it became a regular feature of our work there.

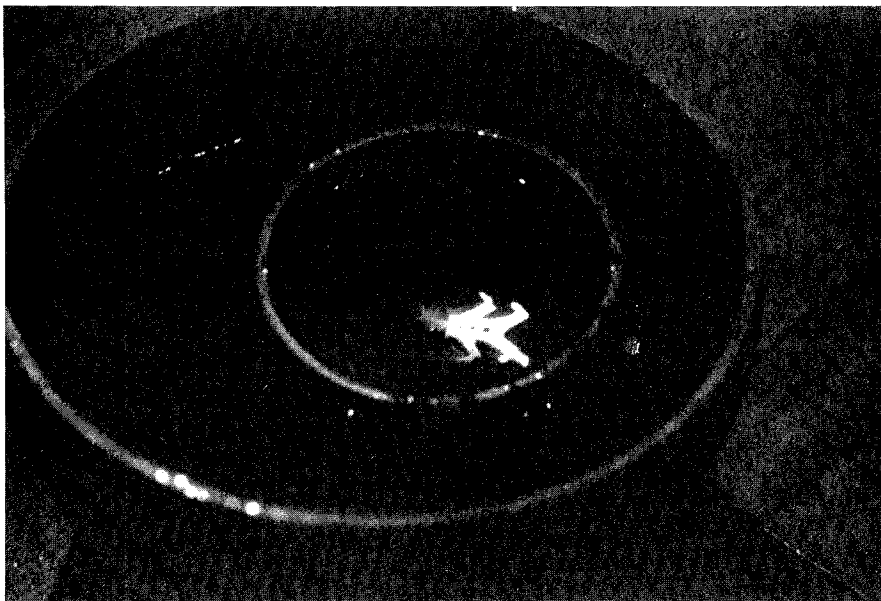
Someone brought in a roll of gauze one day. It was very long, longer than any I had ever seen, about six feet wide, stretching to eight or nine, and maybe a couple of hundred feet long. We started to use it as a maze, then as an environment with different areas which we named - the place of danger, the place of solitude, the place of surprises and so on ... Lit in patches from one or two light sources, the gauze enabled people to appear and disappear, to feel alone yet connected. Some day I would like to perform a whole theatre piece in which both audience and performers inhabit the same misty landscape this provided. People would half disappear into it, and become lost in a reverie ...



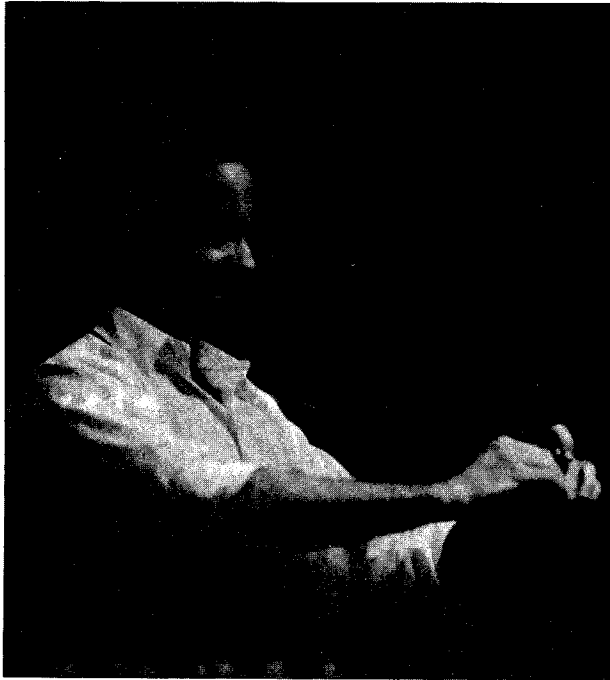
Or we would cover a natural object, or a piece of furniture with it, and form a space with special properties.



Water became important in the work. Water, with its intense presence, something indubitably alive, seemed the perfect image for the dream we were trying to incubate. It fascinated me to see how many associations I could create for an audience with this one element. Dissolve, cook, wash, boil, drown, baptise, irrigate, reflect, cool ...



Performers would be absorbed in the playful qualities of the water, and I kept coming back in my mind to the image of Proteus, the mythological guardian of sea creatures, who could tell you the secrets of your life - if only you could pin him down long enough. And that was difficult, for Proteus could assume any shape he wished, and the longer you tried to grasp him, the more elusive he became - like dreams ...



We spent some more time devising uses for the idea of building an altar - the same process as I described in KC 26, when it was called creating a piece of 'free-form sculpture out of found objects'. The altar concept meant to me, earth, rootedness, just as the water suggested dreams, and I felt we needed some connection with the everyday world, some Ariadne's thread connecting us to reality, in that maze of the Protean landscape. It also worked the other way around, as I shall describe later; we needed a representative object to carry us into the dream world. Someone hit upon the idea of wrapping the objects up before we used them. Part of the action was to unwrap an object, having chosen it blind, and to discover what you had been led to by the process of selection - which was not entirely blind. For if you confronted the wrapped-up objects with a question in your mind, and sincerely chose with the belief that you would be led to pick an object that would tell you something about the question, when the time came to unwrap the object it often strikingly and soberingly reflected what had been going on in your mind.

In due course, I began to talk about the possibility of presenting some of this work more publicly, rehearsing it as if it were a short play, and inviting an audience in for a few performances. Some of the people didn't feel they could prepare themselves for this, and preferred to continue in a more relaxed way. But one or two others, actors, were ready for a trial run of the material, and so, about the middle of March we began to meet two or three times a week, as and when our schedules allowed, with the intention of presenting a "Dream Incubation Ceremony", designed to evoke a dream for each individual taking part. This included the "audience" who would be invited to share in the experience in a number of ways. The dramatic part of it would be intended to initiate a dialogue between our waking and our dreaming selves. That would be the public part of the ceremony. There was also a secret part. The secret lay in the particular message which the dream communicates to every participant.

Originally we hoped to have a double session - a second meeting at which the audience present at the first session would return to recount, or witness re-enacted, dreams, either their own, or those of others. This turned out to be too difficult to arrange, and so we will have to wait to see whether it could ever work out as an idea. I found a building on First Avenue, in the 60s, called the Foundation Church of the Millenium, once a building devoted to TV and photographic work, now the New York headquarters of a religious order especially interested in healing and unconscious processes. One of their spaces, which they called "the Sanctum", was in fact a small, quite well-equipped theatre. They gave us the use of it for two successive Sundays at 10.30 p.m. in May.

I wouldn't say that we did more than scratch the surface of the possibilities of this kind of ceremonial invocation (which is the closest description I can give of it). We mingled a number of styles and deliberately switched from the most personal and intimate to the most formal and presentational. The people who came often thought it was improvised; in fact it was rehearsed as carefully as we could in the time. We went from passages of straight instruction given in a conversational tone to story-telling, done in a rather stylised way. This was a deliberate strategy; it was also disturbing, for both performers and spectators. I wouldn't do it exactly the same way again; but as a result of it I'm convinced that something constructed along these lines can allow people to have an entree to their own dream worlds, and that it need not be a passive, actor-audience situation. Almost anyone can do it, though I'd caution against trying it as a parlor game.

Although it's hard to convey the feeling of what we did

in a descriptive letter, I can take you through the scenario that evolved, and try to explain what we were after as I go along.

We used a carpeted, almost exactly square space. It was bare except for a small low table close to where people sat. Performers entered, and waited. At a signal, the start of a piece of abstract music, they quickly brought into the space, and dropped on to the carpet, a number of small objects, wrapped up so that it was impossible to tell what they were ... brought them quickly, urgently, comically ... They lay there on the carpet. Mysterious. Hidden gifts.

The performers retreated to the periphery. Silence. The objects held stage. Inside the wrappings, we knew, there were things like ... a seashell, a ring, a candle, a magnifying glass, fifteen or twenty such things ... The intention of the ceremony was stated - an invitation to dreams, then one by one the performers joined the objects in the central space. One of the actors began to speak ...

"All around us are objects, wrapped up so that you can't see what they are. Go touch the objects gently, and without unwrapping them, find one that you're comfortable with." The audience was invited to do the same. Some did. "Touch them gently, let one of the objects choose you ... Let the object rest in your hands ..."

The instructions continued for some minutes, ending with the actor suggesting to people that they construct a 'building' with the objects, now unwrapped, and then make a note of where their object was placed in this structure. The last words of this section were a reminder to the audience to fix the outline of the object, and its place in the building, in their minds, and recall it just before they went to sleep that night. The object was to be their guide to the dream world,

The actor who had been speaking these words was now asked by another actor to study the 'altar' that had been built. He was to imagine it as a landscape, and see it as large enough for himself to step inside. Then he was to describe the nature of this world in which he found himself, what its inhabitants were, their customs, their way of sustaining life ... but simultaneously, other voices were telling him that on the outskirts of his vision, in the shadows of the space, someone or something was moving ... Thus his concentration was split and, intentionally, that of audience's - where to look? At the landscape? Or, out of curiosity, to see what was moving in his peripheral vision?

The balance of attention was shifting, though. Into the words about the landscape were dropped suggestions that the time to look at the figure moving in the shadows might be near. But only to look when he was ready ...

"And when you look, make it part of your dream landscape ..."

The actor looked. What he saw, was a rehearsed abstract movement, repetitive and undulating, which was intended as a 'blank screen'. That's to say, the other performers, looking at it, were to speak lines suggesting a specific scene or situation, and at the sound of the words, the actions were to appear to conform to that situation - though in reality they did not change. It's easier to see than to explain in words - and yet it was a hard thing to bring off, and I don't think we did it. The idea came from the concept of Proteus, the ever-changing challenge to the questioner, and again the audience was expected to participate, if only through their attempts to create a specific scene of their own to which they could fit the abstract motion ...

The figure of Proteus became the object of the next episode too. He was lured to the center of the space by a candle, and told to use the candle as the focal point of an exercise in which he would stand outside of himself, and look back at his own face illumined by the candle, and from there speak his own name, call out to himself. So he would be both caller and he who is called. This was staged in such a way that, if they wished, the audience could try the same feat for themselves, but no specific instructions were given that would put any pressure on them to do so. When the actor had taken the time he needed to perform this to his own satisfaction, he was declared "empty", and some^{one} said, "It wants to come in", referring to the dream, and someone else came forward with a large clear bowl of water. The lights went out and the only illumination came from the flame of the candle, reflected in the water ...

The same actor who had been staring at the candle, now invoked the dream, in a speech which took some time to create, and which was still not satisfactory when we performed it. There was a need for something simple, but evocative ... I looked in old alchemical texts and there were many beautiful passages that used the image of water in just the way I wanted, but they were too conscious, too well-wrought, and in the end we tried a collage of brief phrases which suggested dream experiences, but didn't describe them ... falling, flying ... waiting half in, half out the door ... coming down a corridor ... half man, half woman ...

All this while the candle was slowly, slowly being dipped, inch by inch into the water, until at the end, it was extinguished. The other performers, meanwhile, had to counterpoint the words with images that water suggested to them ... its manifold uses and protean nature ... But the strongest element in the whole epi-

sode was the physical struggle of the flame against the water, and its frantic leaping, in the last moments before it sputtered out, to escape up into the air, when it almost seemed to take on a separate life and to detach itself from the wick of the candle as it strained upwards.

In the darkness one of the performers began to tell a story, as if reciting a half remembered dream. The story, which we told in more or less straight dramatic narrative, was presented as a 'bed-time' story, and it was a conscious departure on our part from the rhythm of the previous episodes, where we had been blurring the distinction between fact and fiction. There was no doubt that this was fiction. It was an Irish folk tale which I'd discovered while we were rehearsing, and which at the time seemed to say something about the whole process in which we were involved. The story told how a young girl, herding cattle, one day met a very large frog. She laughed at it, and said: "If you ever give birth, I want to be there." That night a mysterious man came to her house, and led her away, promising to bring her back safe. He took her to a fairy palace, where he led her to an inner chamber, lit by a fire. In the chamber, a woman lay in labor. When the baby was born, the attendants took it and threw it on to the fire, where it burnt to ashes. They rubbed the ashes on to their eyelids, and left. The girl decided to copy them, but only had time to cover one eye with ashes, when the gentleman came to take her home. The woman who had given birth presented the girl with a shawl and some money; both gifts, however, proved dangerous, and the gentleman showed her how to get rid of them. Soon afterwards, at a carnival, the girl saw the man again, and went up to him. "How do you see me?" he asked. "With this eye" said the girl, touching the one on which she had rubbed ashes. "Now you'll see me no more," said the man, and plucked it out.

We played the story as a mixture of grotesque and comic, but in the context of the other events of the ceremony it couldn't help but have a sinister implication. Certainly, it was full of images of the danger of double vision, warnings about the powers of the fairy realm, which were not to be taken lightly, and of the need to be always alert when you go into the dream world ... Perhaps it was a mistake to include it, and I didn't feel it was entirely integrated into the work. On the other hand, there was a need, I thought, for something that reminded the imagination of the workings of that other realm, and this story seemed to have the necessary mystery. Another time, though, I'd be more cautious about using it.

And the dreams? That was the secret part of the ceremony.

Kenneth