

Metaphysical Longings
Clodagh Emoe

Over three evenings in March 2006, Clodagh Emoe staged a series of informal and intimate ‘meditation’ sessions in the modest living room of a typically run-down ‘Pallas Heights’ apartment. Rugs were laid on the floor of this long-since vacated domestic space and guests were encouraged to make the most of the improvised comfort zone, to lie back and relax, to mentally lift-off or drift-off as they pleased, while the soothing recorded voice from a meditation tape intoned directions to a higher plane. Collectively titled *Metaphysical Longings*, these serenely convivial gatherings most obviously sought inspiration from the techniques and philosophies of yoga — Emoe drawing on the widespread Western enchantment with this Eastern form of spiritually - informed self development. Yet there was also evident interest in inflecting these high-minded meetings with the spirit (as it were) of other more obscure and exclusive practices of engaging with the numinous. In assembling groups of like-minded souls for evenings of inner searching, setting the scene for seeking enlightenment in another realm of consciousness, these mystical meetings also aimed to recall the quest for esoteric knowledge undertaken by the secret occultist communities of an earlier era. Emoe chose to invoke in particular, for instance, the mysterious and privileged world of the Theosophists, whose commitment to accessing the divine and the eternal emerged, in large part, as a reaction to the rationalist projects of late nineteenth century modernity.

There is, of course, an irony of sorts — of which Emoe is keenly aware — in situating the supernatural socializing of *Metaphysical Longings* in a physical space so overtly characterized by disintegration. The pursuit of inner harmony facilitated by Emoe takes place in a deserted, dingy flat: a former family home in a ‘failed’ public housing project that is now awaiting demolition. Personal fulfillment and spiritual nourishment become, therefore, dominant concerns despite the immediacy of the surrounding social deprivation. Escape into the ethereal is given priority over troublingly earth-bound realities. Such disjunction between the divine and the derelict and, by implication, between the personal and the political, recalls, perhaps, the argument made in recent years by Slavoj Žižek regarding the immense popularity of what has been termed “Western Buddhism”: that set of (often very subjective) contemporary interpretations of ancient Eastern faith that, Žižek controversially contends, now form “the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism.”ⁱ Though widely trusted as deeply truthful alternatives to the superficial excesses of secular society, ‘New Age’ spiritualities may, Žižek argues, offer a way to “fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it.” Achieving “peace of the inner self” is preferred to addressing the complex conditions of everyday life. Rather than coping with social change, the implication is that one should, instead, ‘let oneself go’, drift along, while retaining an inner distance and indifference toward the mad dance of accelerated process, a distance based on the insight that all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances that do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being.

Yet if Clodagh Emoe’s ‘meditations’ seemed to self-consciously give a sense of something like this ‘inner distance and indifference’, it was also clear that in *Metaphysical Longings* there remained an uneasy but unavoidable relationship with the physical world — with things, lived-in spaces, material traces. Significantly, in the empty upper rooms of the dilapidated apartment, Emoe installed strange objects and evocative images that could be contemplated in the weeks following the three atmospheric evening events, setting up situations in which any yearning for transcendence might be disrupted or frustrated. The cryptic,

disorientating displays in these charged and claustrophobic spaces continued to demonstrate an enthusiasm for the otherworldly, but there was at the same time evidence of increased ambivalence or anxiety regarding realms beyond the empirically verifiable. So, for instance, one room was laid out as if for a lecture, with a (noticeably antiquated) projector screen at the far end of the darkened space showing slides from a presentation on some unspecified, arcane area of mystical enquiry — whatever ‘knowledge’ may have been promised by this scenario was, nevertheless, to remain withheld. No lecture would be given. The glimpsed images would not be explained. And, crucially, this mini-classroom was so cluttered with an absurd excess of mismatched chairs that access was made more or less impossible. If the downstairs meditation area had been the site of a welcoming, inclusive, relational artwork, here, in sharp contrast, was carefully coordinated exclusion. The stubbornly somatic aspect of this awkward situation (however much the mind may have been eager for movement, the body was irksomely impeded) perhaps also provided suitable preparation for the unsettling sensory stimulations of the neighbouring room, where the advanced decrepitude of the building was desperately evident. In a space that was rank with the musty reek of chronic damp, in which fungal growths were flourishing, Emoe introduced (alongside two understated sculptural forms) an image of idyllic nature, pinning a poster scene of an autumnal sunset onto one crumbling, moisture-stained wall. This ‘uplifting’ vision of the sublime and the spiritual in nature was obviously, therefore, matched and marred by potent, albeit mundane, manifestations of physical decay, the ‘ideal’ in this context being undermined by the grim immediacy of the here-and-now.

Clodagh Emoe has undoubtedly become captivated by diverse efforts to imagine or comprehend or contact spheres of existence beyond the familiar and the ‘known’. Yet she is also intriguingly captured by doubt. At times, she seems entranced by questions of the spiritual, but she is equally transported by the discoveries and *mysteriēs* of rational sciences. Included in *Metaphysical Longings*, for instance was a small pencil drawing of that great astronomical enigma, the black hole: so offering a humble representation of the unrepresentable. This allusion to an infinite space beyond, to an indescribable void, is echoed in a key work from the 2006 solo exhibition *I Am Here Somewhere* in which Emoe presented a sly personal update of Yves Klein’s famous photomontage *Saut dans le vide*. Whereas in Klein’s ‘original’ image we were to believe that the artist had confidently taken flight, throwing himself into mid-air from a wall on a Paris Street, Emoe’s revised version — entitled *A Change of Heart* — shows her clambering up (or down?) the same wall, approaching the ‘void’ with a sensation of vertigo. Here, as in so much of her recent work, Emoe demonstrates unyielding fascination for the depths of the unknown, while also showing caution and high anxiety about the wish to “let oneself go”.

Declan Long, 2006

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ⁱⁱ Slavoj Žižek, ‘From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism’ *Cabinet Magazine*, Issue 2 Spring 2001.