

Lia Chavez: Water the Earth

Curatorial Statement

What might it look like to embody a wellspring of spiritual consciousness for a world grappling with its deeply misguided materialist culture? *Water the Earth*, a durational performance commissioned by the Foundation for Spirituality and the Arts from American multimedia artist Lia Chavez, offers a profound response to this question. Inspired by ancient, medieval, and contemporary relationships between spirituality, cosmology, mysticism, and environmental consciousness, Chavez's performance on November 18th at the Chapel of the Good Shepherd at General Theological Seminary in New York City considers the expression of tears as a sacred act – making the invisible visible. Summoning the cumulative power of her years of personal cognitive, neurological, and horticultural experimentations, fasting, and meditation practices, Chavez will weep for five hours in communion with the Divine Feminine, commonly referred to by multiple spiritual traditions also as Mary, the ultimate symbol of Mother Earth, and therefore Divine Nature.

Chavez's vulnerable and purgative performance of weeping echoes the collective tears of Nature and humanity. According to Chavez, "the performance approaches the act of releasing tears in the breadth and depth of its confounding, and infinite, potential—as a transmission of universal healing. Our tears combine with the tears of all the mothers, the tears of the whole cosmos, and the tears of Divine Wisdom herself as a regenerative offering to the wholeness of what is."

A novel companion to this commission is a twelve-week "Re-divinization Protocol" created by Chavez in collaboration with FSA Director of Programs Leeza Ahmady and Foundation Manager Julie Hamilton – a complimentary wellness program offered in advance of the November performance. Analogous to the Fluxus scripts of simple, repetitive actions, these daily rituals reconsecrate everyday activities and materials, bringing together mindfulness, meditation, and enlightenment – not unlike the earlier movement that nourished and encouraged creativity, fluidity, and openness. Conceived as a beauty regime for the soul, FSA names these meditative moments "re-divinization" as a nod to the practice of theosis, the transformative process of becoming more spiritually unified with the Divine. Here is one such example from Week IV's protocol script:

Part IV: Participatory Sculpture: "Icon 1"

This week, we will establish a network of objects that serve as contemplative icons for how human consciousness refracts and magnifies spiritual light. Fill a tall, clear drinking glass to 3/4 with water and place it before a tea light. (The vessel must be made of glass, not plastic.) Before bedtime, turn off the lights and illuminate the tea light. Sitting before your sculpture, take seven deep, complete breaths. Use this sculpture as a contemplative icon for the next nine weeks to invite spiritual light into your mind. Replace water every Saturday."

In the 4th century treatise *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, Athanasius of Alexandria wrote that the logos (Wisdom) became part of Nature - incarnate in human flesh, so that humanity might become God. Athanasius saw this as a cosmic act with a universal impact on society and ecology. This understanding of theosis, or divinization, is the practice that Chavez, Ahmady, and Hamilton invoke in the *Water the Earth's* preliminary protocol practices, inviting the audience to participate by engaging in the process of illumination themselves. Thus, this protocol intimately prepares a core group of the performance's audience – harnessing a collective of spiritual, psychological, and emotional energy, a Holy Communion.

Activating the sacred space of the Chapel of the Good Shepherd, Chavez will sit alone in front of the altar amidst an olfactory component of frankincense - a resin used in ancient healing and burial practices. In liturgical settings, incense is distributed via thurbiles, incorporated on holy days such as Easter and Christmas. For visitors, sitting quietly with Chavez for an extended period echoes the Catholic devotion of Adoration, a practice of Eucharistic meditation with the Blessed Sacrament. Analogous to the Real Presence, this typologically conveys a priestly role that Lia Chavez embodies in this performance – her tears are a vehicle for revelation and healing.

Chavez stems from a millennia-long lineage of artists whose work concerns the expansion of consciousness. While her durational and ascetic-based performance practices bring a natural comparison to Marina Abramović and other 1970s performance artists, Chavez historically aligns herself with visionaries whose spiritual intuition addressed their contemporaries through varying artistic materials: the 12th century medieval polymath Abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a seminal composer, botanist, poet, and illuminator, whose writings convey the interdependence of Nature and spirituality; William Blake (1757-1827), the prophetic poet and painter who deployed English Romanticism to engage the political and economic climate of London's industrial revolution; Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), the Lebanese-American poet and artist whose Sufi-Christian interfaith mysticism demonstrated the fundamental unity of all religions; Swedish theosophical painter Hilma af Klint (1882-1944), whose occult and scientific fascination drew upon Rosicrucian mysticism, inspiring her contributions to the birth of abstract painting.

As a medicine woman who heals the soul with plants, Chavez explains: "I am working on the broad canvas of culture with the full and voluminous range of ancient herbalist and ceremonial practices for engaging plants to heal the spirit. This work is broadly focused on universal healing." Carefully navigating problematic aspects of cultural appropriation, her global research on past and present

indigenous cultures has revealed sustainable spiritual and ecological practices. Of Navajo and Mayan lineage, Chavez sees herself as a student of this ancient Wisdom, reviving ecological urgency amongst archaic contemporary mindsets.

Formally trained at Oxford and Goldsmiths and by Himalayan yoga and raja-yoga traditions (as taught by Swami Rama and Swami Veda Bhatari in India), Lia Chavez is habituated in meditation practices that expand neurological consciousness. Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty considers the body a "laboratory" for receiving knowledge of the world through sense experience, which he considers to be the primary locus of artistic creativity. Chavez cultivates her performance techniques from this "bodily studio" through somatic habituation, exploring interior space through extended-duration contemplation. This embodied art form is structured around listening, unifying the body and mind through breathing - requiring silence, stillness, and darkness. Within this uncharted landscape of her consciousness, Chavez witnesses neurological light in the form of mystical visions and luminous objects.

"Chavez's on-going collaboration with cognitive neuroscientists at Goldsmiths College in London has yielded innovative and groundbreaking results ("On the Science of Mystical Vision," 2014 - present). Using scientific technology to document the wave generation in Chavez's cerebral cortex, neuroscientists conducted a case study of her performance practices, providing original phenomenological data for science and art - an oft unholy union. Until recently, gamma-waves had been discarded as negligible by-products yet are now being regarded as mysterious 'dark matter' in neuroscience. 'These are generated most effectively,' states Chavez, 'by a deep sort of meditation in which one centers the heart on Love.'" (From an article by freelance writer and FSA Foundation Manager, Julie Hamilton entitled: "Doing as Knowing: The Performance Art of Marina Abramović and Lia Chavez" {2015}).

This cosmic consciousness, particularly as embodied in *Natura Sophia*, Divine Wisdom in female form, undergirds Chavez's pursuit of the sacred in her performance. In addition to her extensive preparatory practices of fasting and meditation, Chavez draws inspiration for *Water the Earth* from her substantial global research on goddess icons and the Divine Feminine, drawing upon Mesoamerican ceremonial statuettes and Medieval European representations of the Virgin Mary as the Seat of Wisdom — as they relate to the numinous universal figure of cosmic Wisdom. Even the white lilies in Chavez's key photographic image for the performance nod to Annunciation iconography, an art historical reference to the archangel Gabriel announcing God's plan to Mary. Yet another symbol of the Holy Mother is the Pietà motif of the weeping Madonna holding the dead Christ in her lap. "This work is a Pietà of sorts," Chavez observes. "It tells the story of the birth pangs the Divine Mother experiences as humanity undergoes the immense spiritual birth demanded of us in our time." Chavez acts as a sacred vessel for *Natura Sophia* — Wisdom incarnate — by evoking the Divine Feminine as a mother that supports the cleansing of this planet, in *Water the Earth*.

Pictured below are Lia Chavez's inspiration boards for this performance.

