

COLETTE, A Beautiful Dreamer, The Transformative Persona

By Sarah Berry Tschinkel

"The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life..." (Jung, v. 15).

This paper will begin with a small excerpt from a documentary on the artist, Colette, that I wrote the copy for and narrated in 1992. It is my hope that this short clip will orient you to Colette and her art as an amplification of my topic - The Transformative Persona... I will weave portions of a recent interview with older clips from the program, and illustrate my paper with images from her work.



I have been fascinated by Colette and her art since writing the text and narrating this program in 1992, twenty-three years ago. As you can see from this excerpt, Colette, herself, conveys the archetypal. I am intrigued by Colette for many reasons... Not only am I a lover of art, but also love all things theatrical-imagination, character, costume, audience and play! But perhaps the most compelling reason I have followed and studied this artist is her relationship to psyche-how she embodies and gives manifest form to psychic contents through the making of her art and, most notably for this presentation, in the creation and dissolution of her personas. Through an inspired blend of autobiography, imagination, personal agency, and spirit, Colette takes the bits and pieces of her life and creates fantastic worlds that she and her personas inhabit. Jung says of the artist, "...The creative urge lives and grows in (her) like a tree in the earth from which it draws its nourishment. We would do well, therefore, to think of the creative process as a living thing implanted in the human psyche..." (Jung, v. 15, p. 75). This idea speaks directly to Colette's art as a 'living thing' in a relationship of reciprocity with psyche- both drawing nourishment from and feeding her at the same time.

As detailed earlier, in this paper I will weave portions of a recent interview with Colette with older clips from the program made in 1992. These excerpts, along with images from her work, will illustrate and amplify my exploration of Colette's persona as a bridge between inner and outer life- a creative 'skin' of sorts that both celebrates and protects her, but can and must be shed, allowing the movement of psyche to be revealed in a continual and fluid relationship between creation and destruction. I will contrast Jung's understanding of the persona function as mask, both protecting and hiding the 'real' self, with the idea of mask as 'sacred' bridge to the divine. In addition, I will discuss how Colette's personas and environments reflect the archetypal energies of Aphrodite in

her role of bringing the divine and the earthly together through the cultivation of beauty. And I will conclude with a brief exploration of how the persona function in our culture has evolved, and how Colette's art presages this evolution. Here again is Colette:



From the beginning of time, it seems, human beings, but perhaps particularly women, have 'played' with their appearance and attempted to enhance or beautify themselves, as well as their environments, giving creative expression to the realm of the transitory or temporal. A flower in one's hair, red lipstick, or a great dress can be a form of joyful expression, giving pleasure to oneself, as well as to others who are open to an experience of the senses. While this cosmetic realm has a substantial shadow side, quite evident in our culture, and well known to our analytic practices, it also has much of value, often overlooked, which Colette's art can help us to better understand and

appreciate.

Persona is a carrier of this expression and experimentation, providing a bridge to deeper aspects of self by allowing both women and men to expand their notions of self by altering dress, hair, or body, adorning themselves in a shifting array of possibilities. In contrast, loss of libido, diminishment of self-care, or 'letting oneself go', as well as a rigidly held or fixed persona, has long been a marker for psychic disturbance. Both depression and anxiety can 'dull' or distort the senses, often radically changing appearance and demeanor, 'flattening' affect and destroying creativity and playfulness.

Colette's sequential personas are playful, creative and progressive expressions of self, yet, as alter egos, also a vehicle for complex artistic ideas and concepts. Like aspects of our understanding of persona, her creations, in part, are deliberately and consciously crafted, embodying philosophical and artistic ideas, as well as responding to time, location and space. Differing from our conventional notion of persona, each of her creations seems to emerge from her creative process, a complex weave of her 'inner life' as well as own personal agency. They serve a connective function between inside and outside, as well as in facilitating transformation from one state of being to another. From Colette to Justine, Mata Hari to Countess Reichenbach, Olympia to, now, Lumiere, she creates and then embodies each persona, using it as a vehicular structure to communicate, maneuver and perform in the world, and then sheds them, like a snake sheds its skin. She notes sometimes the personas overlap or 'bleed' one into the other, and sometimes there is a solid line of demarcation between the death of one persona and the emergence of another.

When discussing the emergence of Justine, her first persona, Colette says, "Justine was a surprise" as she was, initially, very angry. This persona embodied unexpected archetypal energies-aggressively, she threw things at her audience, and she

cursed and screamed at them during performances. Yet Colette says that as Justine 'found her place', she 'settled' and then there was a return to aspects of Colette--or 'Colette ways'. This suggests an incorporation of the new and unexpected aspects of the persona or a blending and merging of the two, embodying our alchemical understanding of 'coagulation'. Colette's creations are a liberating experience in several ways: they allow expression out of deeper and unknown aspects of self and function in the consolidation of these new aspects, and at the same time they provide the freedom that comes from creating another, apart from oneself, as a vehicle for expression in the world.

The early Jung defined persona as a 'mask', a function that helps one to navigate in the world in a more protected and skillful way. He says, "The persona is a complicated system of relations between the individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual...society expects...every individual to play the part assigned to him as perfectly as possible..." (Jung, v. 7, para. 305). The persona, for Jung, was a limited construct, serving the individual within the collective, and associated almost exclusively with the ego. This notion of persona had little relationship to one's inner world, and if overly identified with, could even inhibit that relationship. Yet he considered it an adaptive, and even vital function. I would agree with its vital nature, and that an examination of persona is a necessary psychological task. According to The Book of Symbols, "...Sorting this out, in other words becoming aware of one's masks and identifications, the "living masquerade", what is hidden and what is revealed, what is unduly pressured by conformity, and what is emergent and true, is part of the work of individuation." (The

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Book of Symbols, p. 724).

What Jung's conception of ' persona as mask' does not emphasize is the sacred nature of the mask and its timeless and vital role within ceremony and ritual; in particular, religious, initiation and/or healing ritual. Throughout history, the mask has wielded great power and was handled with reverence and care. It was most often worn by shamans and healers, and held magical, otherworldly properties. The Book of Symbols says, "the mask, far from merely concealing its wearer, provides a bridge, opening psychological experience towards "the spirits", the instinctual, archetypal factors of the personality, by providing "temporary housing" for the gods" (p. 722). This conception of mask, as sacred object functioning as a bridge, offers different possibilities for the wearer, and suggests a transformative potential that extends Jung's concept. The mask as bridge aligns the inner world with the outer in a fluid exchange, much like the transcendent function, and much like the creation and maintenance of Colette's personas.

The mask as 'holy' bridge to the transcendant, or powerful instrument for transformation, is best illustrated by a story from the renowned experimental theatre director, Peter Brook. Brook, whose productions often included the use of mask and ritual elements, traveled with his theatre troupe to Bali to work with Balinese actors. He described an encounter during their stay:

When the masks arrived, the Balinese actor who was with us laid them out. All the actors, like children, threw themselves on the masks, started roaring with laughter, looking at one another, looking in the mirror, fooling around--having a ball, like children when you open up the dressing-up hamper. I looked at the Balinese actor. He was appalled; he was standing there shell-shocked-because for him the masks were sacred. He gave me a pleading look, and I stopped everybody short...because our group had worked long enough under different forms, the potential respect was there; it was just that in our typical Western way, one forgets. (Hopke, p. 190).

This story illustrates how necessary it is to be psychologically open or available in order for the experience of the mask to be numinous or transformative. What is also important, though in the circumstances, misused, is the child's play behind mask: 'like children when you open up the dressing-up hamper'. To play is to suspend one's sense of the world as it is, and to fully imagine another. The ability to play is aided by the mask, as it allows for a suspension of the known self, and a taking on of some other quality or characteristic. Jung says, "The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves." (v. 6, para. 197).

In her devotion to beauty, Colette 'plays with' or engages the archetypal energies we associate with Aphrodite as she makes everything around her, including herself, desirable and beautiful. She states her goal in doing so is to elevate the spirit. Mirroring good analytic process, there is no hierarchy in Colette's world; she believes everything from the couch to one's hair must be treated with care. Each object--from the telephone to the walls--is imbued with significance and treated accordingly. Nothing is considered mundane. The ordinary becomes extraordinary through her ministrations.



Figure 1 Mata Hari

For example, during her stay in Berlin, Colette transformed the potato by creating hundreds of gold replicas, giving them out as 'art objects'. For her, the humble potato was a rich symbol for that which is supremely ordinary, yet by imbuing it with attention and care, making it gold, her potato becomes a sacred symbol of nourishment readily available for all to ingest... This calls to mind the alchemical 'gold' in the dung—that which is seemingly insignificant or even ugly, devalued, or stunted in the psyche often has riches to mine. Mining happens through careful cultivation, a process of analytic circumambulation of the matter in the personality that would seem to be lowly but nevertheless is the very stuff that can be transformed into the gold of new potential and unleashed libido.



Figure 2 Mata Hari Billboard



Figure 3 The Bedroom, Tokyo

Even the ceilings and walls of Colette's spaces offer correspondence with psychic process. Her walls and ceilings are emphasized; draped, pleated and ruched with soft fabrics, they call to mind a womb, a place of gestation, a sanctuary of repose. They embody that space in the psyche reserved for dreaming and reverie; that inner space of the mind both soft and permeable, so layered with emotion, meaning and memory, folding in and over itself in a continuous, fluctuating pattern. Psyche has this layered, rippled quality; evident in emotional oscillations, textured with our senses, housing the ebbs and flows of libido, and offering both delicate and sturdy aspects of being, an aesthetic that evokes the archetypal image of Aphrodite.

Colette's process as an artist, using her body, her lovers, and the realm of her home, as well as the themes of seduction, desire, beauty, and culture, invite a renewed interest in this goddess. Aphrodite and her realm of the everyday, embodied choices of our lives, aligned with the beauty of nature and culture, have much to offer clinical practice in terms of how we see, experience and work with the realm of the senses. In our Jungian realm, it has seemed that the embodied, as well as the small details of lived life, are not held with the same care and attention as 'the big dream' or the mythic quest. We often amplify our understanding of our patients and their inner lives by going far afield from the particulars of their daily experience--ignoring the mundane or everyday aspects of their existence. In this way, we can miss how the ordinary is imbued with the archetypal.



Figure 4 The Sleeping Gypsy

The art of Colette and the realm of Aphrodite offer the perspective that the smallest details matter; the creative choices in one's home or a new hairstyle have significance, if one is open to it and responsive. These small details are often the conduit to much deeper layers of psychic process. Rilke says, "...If you hold close to nature, to what is simple in it, to the small things people hardly see and which all of a sudden can become great and immeasurable; if you have this love for what is slight...then everything will grow easier, more unified and somehow more conciliatory, not perhaps in the intellect, which amazed remains a step behind, but in your deepest consciousness, watchfulness and knowledge..." (p. 24). What Rilke brings to our attention is that the intellect may need to 'take a back seat' in this realm of the embodied, the ordinary, and

the everyday, in order to really see the beauty in these 'small things' and to make room for the divine and the numinous.

For Colette, the weaving of the mundane and the spiritual, the somatic and the psychic, and her conscious and unconscious world though cultivation of what is beautiful has profound significance. However, like the nature of Aphrodite, the decorative as well as erotic nature of Colette's work is often misunderstood or trivialized. To do so misses the archetypal dimensions that both Colette and Aphrodite offer our time; which suffers loss of the sacred, life affirming, joyful realm that pleases the senses, aligns us with our instinctive life, and reminds us that we are alive for a finite amount of time.



Figure 5 Botticelli's Venus

The Orphic myth imagines Aphrodite at the beginning of the process of creationbegat by the genitals of Ouranos (Heaven), who was castrated by his son Chronos at the behest of his mother, Gaia (Earth). Aphrodite's birth came from this estrangement of

heaven and earth--a ripping asunder--she was the 'first fruit of the separation of heaven and earth". This myth imagines her as rising from the soft sea foam, her birth drawing back together heaven and earth, which had been parted. As such, creation from destruction was her birthright--suggesting her archetypal realm is a fitting one for Colette. As a child of the beginning of creation, Aphrodite's provenance is that "bond that exists between human beings and animals and, indeed, all of nature", as well as the arts, culture's celebration of nature and all that is beautiful. Called 'The Queen of Heaven and Earth' Aphrodite brings the divine down to meet the everyday world. However, Aphrodite's place in the mythological canon has continued to diminish over time, "sacrificed to what Erich Neumann (over half a century ago) describes as the patriarchal sexualization of the feminine". (Baring and Cashford; Ginet, p. 352).

In an ongoing parallel to Aphrodite's diminished role and to the devaluation of the feminine, Colette's art has been hard to define and her subject matter has often been misunderstood. The art world in the early to mid 70's was a male one, with the macho artist as the primary, Apollonian archetype. Colette's male contemporaries were known for their large-scale minimalist works using car parts, corton steel and railroad ties. Colette's palate and materials included silks, satins, crinolines and cosmetics, as well as the use of her nude body.



Figure 6 Justine in Graz

Her costumes were also quite notable for their outsized or exaggerated aspects of femininity-- a baroque sensibility whose details included hoop skirts, veils, hats and large platform shoes. Further, her use of persona as a venue for new and emerging aspects of self also caused some to question 'who is Colette?' and to ridicule her as playing dress up. Now viewed historically, Colette's characters, aesthetic and environments were a much-needed compensatory response to these minimalist and pop art times where a feminine aesthetic was virtually nonexistent.

While her work gained a following, many other female artists, art historians and even curators viewed the work as 'anti' feminist and were angry at what they understood to be a pandering to the 'male gaze' and a flaunting of her sexuality. Yet, for Colette, Aphrodite's realm of sexuality and desire are domains not for men ONLY to explore or inhabit. By placing her nude body at the center of a frame, whether in a store window or an installation in a museum, Colette takes charge of giving face and voice to her own

experience as a sensual, sexual being, exhibiting her own desire, and inviting others to desire her. In speaking of these times, Colette says, "You had to produce work like a man to get respect in the art world..." Yet, often without respect, she has continued to offer her very singular vision.

While Colette acknowledges her difficulties as a woman in the art world, she describes herself as 'lucky' to have been born during a time where her visions and creativity are celebrated (Interview 2015). The "mediumistic" capacity of the feminine psyche and its expression in personas, characters and visions, has often been pathologized, even by Jung. Yet Jung's experience of it contributed to his understanding of the psyche as plural and evolving, leading him, in part, to explore his own psychic process through the many characters and their narratives he "channeled" through his use of Active Imagination and documented in the Red Book. His theory, which built on this experience, envisions psychic process in the terms of 'dissolve and coagulate', in alchemy referring to the mixing and melding of substances, making new and unexpected combinations.

In describing her own artistic process, Colette says, "there is no beginning and no end to my work, it is an ever evolving process, like an animal that goes through a continual metamorphosis". The word metamorphosis derives from a Greek word meaning 'transformation' or 'transforming'. An animal goes through a transformation, usually safely contained within its habitat. Colette builds her habitats with great care, often creating them so that she 'safely' blends into it. Born in Tunisia, then moving to Nice as a child, she describes being fascinated with a pet chameleon. She credits her intense and ongoing interest in 'mimicking' her environment, or camouflaging herself within it, to this early fascination. She says she has always had an 'urge' to blend into her surroundings.

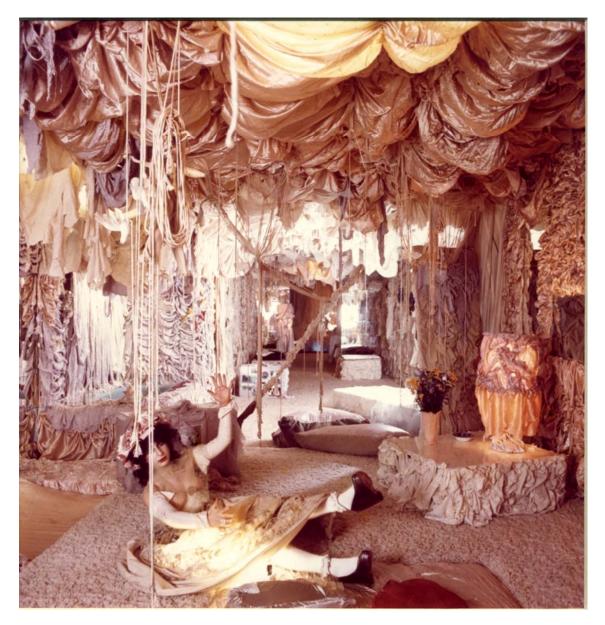


Figure 7 Collette as doll



Figure 8 Ancorra Tu

Metamorphosis implies change and growth--transformation--and it is by careful tending and mining of her unconscious life (inner sight), threaded through the conscious crafting of her art, that we see this transformational process of 'dissolve and coagulate'. Conscious and unconscious content are mixed and then separated, formed and then dissolved, making new and vital combinations, much like the alchemists mixed their metals. In Colette's world, these new 'combinations' become her creations. And it is in Colette's evolving process of transformation and discovery as she moves from one persona to another, like 'a snake sheds its skin', that we see Colette's personas emerge, get 'safely' housed, mature, and then begin to dissolve as something new begins to form and grow.



Figure 9 Don't Look Back

First conceived by Sabina Speilrein, the idea of the necessity for destruction to enable creation later became a core tenet of Jungian theory. Juliet Miller says, "[Speilrein] had used her own female experiencing to understand a fundamental truth about creativity for both women and men: that destruction in some form was essential. To understand that transformation cannot happen without dissolution or destruction of the previous way of being is fundamental to ideas of transformational healing...This idea of dissolution is also implicit in alchemical writings, which were taken up later by Jung as a model for the process of individuation" (The Creative Feminine p. 76).



According to Colette, shortly before the transition from one persona to another, her work begins to change. This was made clear as she transitioned from Countess Reichenbach to Olympia in an exhibition called "Visits to the Normal World". In this series, The Countess in Transit, 1990 Munich, there was this performance piece. As evidenced by words like visit and transit, suggesting movement and change of place,



Colette describes this particular piece as a turning point, an ending before a beginning, or dissolution before coagulation...

Figure 10 Collette at Table with Ravens

In this image, Colette is seen alone and at the head of a long table, set for twentytwo people with small plates and what appears to be a photograph on each plate. It seems as though the walls have been stripped of artwork, and what remains are the numbers, perhaps of each art piece that has been removed. Only the shadowy outlines remain of what once was there, suggestive of an ending, a dislocation, or a sold out show? She is holding two revolvers pointing directly down the long table at two ravens. Clearly the number two is important, in stark contrast to the singularity of her image, and suggestive of some impending coupling and/or division. Actively pointing two guns, Colette embodies potential aggression and destruction, necessary for transformation. It seems the ravens are her target, and her aim is sure-fire.

There is a provocative aspect to the correspondence in this image: Colette occupies one end of the table and the two ravens are at the opposite end. Is this an act of aggression--the revolver aimed at the ravens? Or does the image suggest a duality in the role of dissolution; the ravens, on one side, symbolic of the more unconscious aspect of transformation, with Colette, on the other, embodying the conscious factor through the act of aggression? Perhaps she is recognizing that both conscious and unconscious aspects of self are necessary for her 'transit'. In this performance piece, food is not here to be consumed, but rather a photograph, implying an ingestion of some image from the past, perhaps the visual narrative of her stay in Munich as Countess Reichenbach. These images belong to the participants (the ravens and Colette) to proffer and consume; eating as a transformational process.

The raven is a rich and important image. As a carrion bird, ravens became associated with the dead and with lost souls. In Greek mythology it is said that Apollo used a raven to spy upon his lover. After discovering infidelity, Apollo turned the raven's

feathers black in his rage. The Book of Symbols calls ravens "ministers of veiled mysteries" and says, "Just so does the…raven daimon perched in our psyches open doors, steal treasures for us from hidden places, and coax us out of our narrow, conventional shells…" (p. 182). The image of the raven evokes the nigredo, and suggests a mortificatio--a continual process of psychic evolution at work.

This particular performance from the series The Countess in Transit, took place as Colette was ending her stay, as well as love affair in Munich. In planning to return to New York or heading to 'the normal world', clearly, one reign (embodied by her as 'head of the table') was ending or dead, symbolized by the carrion crows there on the table picking at the remains...yet, as a bivalent image, the ravens suggest there is also some treasure being proffered, some new door open. By aiming at the raven, a trickster figure, and mediator animal who heralds a transition between one way of life and another, Colette signals she is an equal participant, an active agent in her own transformation, and a force to be reckoned with.

It was during this time as she transitioned from the Countess to Olympia that a new symbol began to appear in her work; that of the suitcase. Marking her as a traveler, and having the equipment necessary for the journey, signaled a shift in preparedness, and perhaps awareness that her journey is an ongoing one. Colette says, "My art leads me...whatever I see, I try to manifest it visually". Her journey alone on her own creative path is marked by this new symbol. It is an arresting one and contained within many artworks from this period of 'The House of Olympia'.



Figure 11 Why Don't We Start Another Life Together

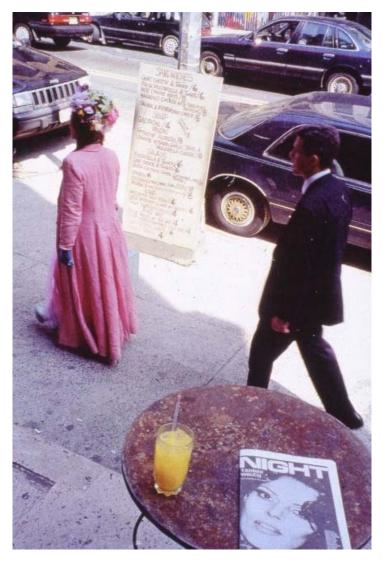


Figure 12 Catch Her if You Can

One particular performance, entitled, is an especially poignant performance piece and another beautiful example of the melding of her autobiographical and creative process, personal and artistic evolution, and psychological transformation. In this piece Olympia (AKA Colette) walked the streets of SoHo with a turquoise briefcase. Containing the words 'Retrieving My History', the suitcase was filled with fragments and pieces of her artistic life. There were fliers displayed around SoHo that said, "Traces of Olympia...catch her if you can!" Written on the flier was both a plea and a warning. It said Olympia would leave clues regarding her whereabouts ONLY for "serious art lovers

and true seekers of truth". They were asked to find her by following the clues if they wanted to engage in serious conversation about Art, Love and Money. Further, Olympia said, "It will cost you".

To understand the significance of this particular performance, it is helpful to know one of her first performances as an artist. Colette was a young artist with little to no art background when she arrived in New York in 1970. She wanted to become an artist and a filmmaker. Her desire was to make a film about a young woman from another planet who arrives with her own symbol system of hieroglyphics. Colette was unable to find financing for her film and so began to make designs and symbols--the dot-dash hieroglyphics that she envisioned--painted on the streets in guerilla fashion, often at dawn. Her street paintings were in code expressing "a person who was lost, an alien from outer space, who was sending messages to the other beings there hoping they would find her. " This was conceived as autobiography.

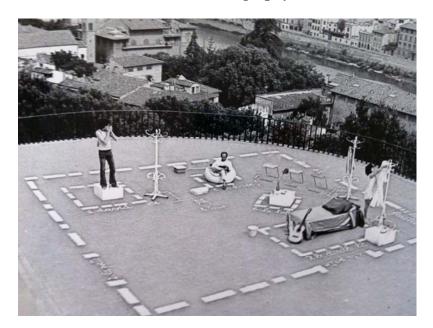


Figure 13 There's No Place Like Home

Indicative of the spiral or cyclical pattern we often see in an individual, where aspects of their psychic process repeatedly come around but each time at a different level, this initial performance from decades earlier is a first 'stop' on Colette's journey; also a visit to the 'normal world', a world that is not her own. Much like her exhibition upon leaving Munich, albeit without a suitcase and a recognizable language, this much earlier stage in her artistic and personal development marks the beginning of her path of attempting communication and communion with others.

In circling back around to "Traces of Olympia...catch her if you can!" created twenty-five years later, there is, again, a searching for like minded others, but with a twist. These 'like minded others' must catch her, implying both desire and pursuit. By clearly articulating who she is seeking, as well as what they need to have in order to commune with her, the experience is more ego near, but also reflective of a more mature awareness of her own value; she is an experienced art world veteran who knows the value of being paid for her work and asks to be taken seriously.... And in retrieving her history, it is clear that Colette is no longer willing to leave her work on the street, but wants to travel with it in her possession; to own and house it with care.

Colette is not the first visual artist to create and embody characters or persona; Andy Warhol lived his persona and created 'The Factory' to house him; yet her sequential cast of personas within the art world is a rarity. The music world has had numerous performers... Currently, there is Lady Gaga and Niki Minaj who inhabit multiple personas in their performances. In a program on NPR news called "Pop Personae: Why do some Women perform in character?" Zoe Chace explores the role of persona for female performers and talks about their fan's adulation and adoration, "...this generation really gets alter egos. After all, they're constantly deploying different

versions of themselves online: one for Facebook, one for Twitter, even one for going out at night" (2010).

More than forty years after Colette's creations, performers such as Gaga and Minaj's personas in popular culture offers an expansive model of subjectivity for their young fans. Our world is a global one, and both the demands, as well as opportunities for engaging with others seem to accelerate daily. Our complex lives involve multiple roles, with varied means of expression as well as shifting, evolving access between ourselves. The notion of persona has changed enormously since Jung wrote... "He takes a name, earns a title, exercises a function, he is this or that..." (v. 7, para. 245).

Colette's art in the form of her personas, a singular process begun more than forty years ago, is prophetic. Her work enables us to see how in our post-modern and even post-post modern world, persona is required to be expansive; perhaps bigger, certainly more fluid, and also with the potential to be more joyful, creative and diverse. But perhaps more importantly, her creations show how persona can, and does include emerging aspects of self, consolidated over time, giving 'face' to the ebb and flow of psyche. As Colette demonstrates, this territory of evolving and/or layered subjectivity continues to unfold throughout a lifetime...

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