

Introductory speach at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

January 15th. 2000

Opening the discussion about Art and Spirituality.

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Other participants: Frederik Stjernfeldt, Carl Abrahamson, Morten Søndergaard, Karls Erik Schøllhammer, Rigmor Kappel Schmidt, Dr. Karsten Wollf, Henrik B. Andersen.

It is an odd fact that of the many factors, that have been instrumental in the birth and evolution of modernist art, the most obvious one has also been the most controversial one. Even to the point of suppressing it.

When carefully scrutinized, the modernist aesthetics that were born with Malevich, Mondrian, Kupka and Kandinsky, not only show traces of their engagement in various forms of theosophy, but reveal a degree of interaction with occultism and mysticism, that forces us to reconsider the birth of abstraction as a spiritual event.

It is also quite clear, that as the impetus of first generation abstraction moved from Europe to New York due to the world wars, its spirituality was reckognized and actively transformed by other artist with a deep engagement in spirituality. This change paralleled how they changed the appearance of abstract art. I'm thinking of Rothko and Reinhart in particular.

After the liberation of the European mind from the dogmatic and uncreative spirituality of Christianity, alternative metaphysics could be investigated without fear of prosecution.

Especially after the French revolution a lot of academic research was carried out to determine the common elements in world religion and spirituality. Also pseudo-scientific occult research flourished – and gave birth to numerous societies such as the Rosy-Creutzians, The Spiritists, the Theosophical Society and Athroposophy.

The main tenet was, that religion was an institutionalised version of timeless truths about how man could evolve into a higher being. Christianity was generally considered the worst, because it did not permit of direct cognition of the higher worlds. It only insisted on faith in dogma. And faith and dogma both seemed unscientific and naive.

So last century began developing spirituality as a path of cognition, not as a path of faith, and this change is really one of the fundamentals of modernism.

The openminded engagement in spirituality as a means to transcendental cognition is also one of the reasons it might seem that modernism is non-religious: Apparently we have no faith.

True, there is no faith, because modern spirituality wants direct cognition and in order to get at that picks up a practice here and a principle there, thus combining eastern religion with western theosophy and traditional mysticism in a very free manner.

However since this religio-synkretistic theosphical approach was only just being formulated and organized towards the end of the 19'th century, the symbolist generation was in fact restricted to groping at the metaphysical through symbols. At the end of the century numerous practices offered to take one to enlightenment or to direct perception of the higher worlds, and books offered descriptions of the marvelous experiences people had in those worlds.

So the spiritually searching artists moved from symbolism to some intermediate stage, where they must have considered symbolism shallow, and yearned for some way to give a more direct aesthetic representation of the spiritual levels.

That this was actually the case, we know from all four inventors of non-figurative painting: Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian and Kupka. It was their urge to dive deep into spirituality and express the spiritual in art, that drove them to invent an entirely new form of art: abstraction.

Kandinsky and Kupka crossed the border to abstract painting by reflecting auracolours and thought-forms of theosophy. Mondrian did it by reflecting the theoretical ideas of theosophy and Malevich by reflecting the particularly Russian speculations about the relationship between yogic-samadhi and the fourth dimension as they were outlined in Ouspenskys theosophical psychology.

Rothko and Reinhardt, were not satisfied with the occult or speculative spirituality of the first generation abstracts, and they found Zen-Buddhism offered something deeper. Accordingly, they changed painting to reflect the void of satori and developed the minimalist line of abstract expressionism.

What we should recognize from this insight into the developments of modern art, is that the spiritual yearning in man is not a product of religious fear or indoctrination, nor is it an escapist opiate, but is inborn in man. In some it lives with such power, that they need to not only express it but express it in terms of transformation, since transformation is the essence of such a spiritual impulse.

The principle of transformation is what distinguishes the spiritual seeker from the religious man. The first is restless in his frustrating awareness of his own ignorance and fights to change the situation, the other is passive in his faith in having found the final answer.

When scrutinizing modern art-history with this in mind, we find that many artists, that have been radical innovators, have been driven by such an insatiable urge for spiritual transformation. Undoubtedly there is a connection.

It seems that the spiritual urge in the artist to transcend the limitations of his mind, has also driven him to transcend the limitations of his ability to express his longings. That is to say: has driven him to change the way of painting he has picked up from his contemporaries and change it into something new in the hope a satisfying his spiritual longing through it.

I would like to pose the question here today, wether we would not do more justice to ourselves and our modern cultural heritage, if we were to recognize the inherrent spiritual urge in man as something that lives on despite of the downfall of religion.

This spiritual urge has not been able to find an outlet in art during the post-marxist, so-called post-modern, generation, that has dominated the art scene since the mid 80's.

However the fact that this urge is alive and kicking seems to be proven by the fact that we are here today. And I see todays event as an expression of this urge in the new generation of artists, that I humbly consider myself part of.

Undoubtedly that spiritual transcendental urge will also bring as powerfull changes now as it has done so often before.