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Five Critics Weigh LACMA's

THE SPIRITUAL IN ART

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"The Spiritual in Art" raises so many issues that a proper response demands a great deal more time and space than a newspaper like this can offer. The problem, then, is where to begin? One obvious starting point is to consider the show as a whole, but even after the most cursory of inspections all the various curatorial premises, choices, placements and omissions begin to unravel in so many directions that we soon need charts and diagrams to keep all the loose ends in mind. And those charts and diagrams each represent potential discussions concerning the show's merits.

To get a sense of the dimensions of the job at hand, let's briefly consider some examples. First of all, there is the unforgivable Eurocentrism of the entire enterprise. Should we not, at this stage, perhaps consider the spiritual uses to which other cultures put art-making? Or is such work not of sufficient interest to the mania for collection that governs the operations of any museum? Then there is the equally unforgivable phallocentrism guiding the selection of work. Should we quietly accept the idea that only eight women were found to be spiritual enough to be included in an exhibition that includes work by 95 artists? Or is it perhaps the case that women artists concerned with spiritual issues do not make work that is of sufficient interest to the mania for collection that governs museum operation?

These questions lead us to ask why an exhibition about the spiritual in art, about the desire to transcend the base materiality of everyday life, concerns itself only with painting, the most material of art media. Are we to assume that other manifestations of the spiritual are not to be properly considered art? Are five tiny paintinglike works by Joseph Beuys a better representation of his work than an installation like that to be seen at the Temporary Contemporary? Is Mario Merz better served by showing one small painting rather than one of his full-scale spiral constructions? Would it not be more interesting to see one of Eric Orr's fire and water pieces, or a performance by Matt Mullican, rather than a single painting? Is there really a case for including five paintings by Jasper Johns, aside from their appeal as most-valuable-art-objects-in-recent-memory? (The inclusion of one "Target" painting, raising the contentious issue of iconographical resemblance — is it a target or a mandala? — would be justifiable and interesting; but five?) And nobody will ever convince me that Ellsworth Kelly is committed to anything more (or less) than the achievement of a formal perfection, or that Dorothea Rockburne considers the Golden Section anything more than a convenient intellectual system upon which to base her operations, or that Sigmar Polke's transcendent-

talisms are about anything besides the excesses of consumer culture as manifest in the nightmare lunacy of drug culture.

Again the question leads back to the issue of collectibility. Why do I harp on about this? Because the design of the new building at LACMA insists. From the street the facade is undistinguished except for the void that announces the entrance. The bands of pink stone, green terra cotta and translucent glassbrick simply read as the fancy articulation of a fancy arch enclosing a grand stairway leading to . . . a ticket booth? The entire emphasis of the building is on this uplifting promenade, whose main feature is its wailing wall, a vast and dreary monument to the donors, sponsors and sundry benefactors who made it all possible. The galleries appear an afterthought, a series of small rooms slipped into the side of the triumphal arch commemorating the generosity of Los Angeles art patrons. No wonder I'm convinced something stinks in this exhibition.

Another way of approaching the show is to talk about the catalog, an ambitious book with contributions from 19 eminent art historians (18 interpretative and historical essays, and one bizarre chronology identifying important moments, "spiritually" speaking, in the lives of the artists shown). One might look at the methodologies used, from the least inspired gropings after the nominally inspirational, to the more generally competent arguments attempting to reconfirm the spiritual motive in the impulse toward an abstract art (and as Donald Kuspit mentions, the more recent contrary impulse in the face of abstraction's susceptibility to the blandishments of the market). One might want to discuss the usefulness of dredging up minor artists of little caliber (who benefits aside from a couple of entrepreneurs?), or discuss the gaps between an artist's intentions and results (are some spiritual paintings to be taken as actual religious objects, or merely as illustrations of them?), or discuss what is meant by influence (is someone a spiritualist because he or she once read a book on the subject?), or pry apart the issue of illustration versus authenticity. But if you want to think about some of these meaty issues, don't buy this book; you will only be buried under a heap of mostly indiscriminate information.

Any one of these topics could stand investigation, but most of all I would want to unpack the ideology of the entire project, expose the bourgeois philistinism of it all. Because what this exhibition attempts to do is tame abstract art, make it an attractive curio like the very collectible illustrated treatises that actually provide most of the aesthetic buzz in the first rooms of the exhibit. At its best, abstract art is difficult to talk about: Its strength is



Sound of Trumpets, by Wassily Kandinsky (1911).

that it privileges the visual and the tactile over language, and this particular transcendence (over the limitations imposed by language) can arguably be linked to the goals of certain spiritualist enterprises. But too many art historians and critics are outraged by this attempt to gain a degree of cultural autonomy. In the name of the authorities they want to regain control, and so, avoiding contact with the work itself, they pore over the artists' stated intentions, and the evidence to be gleaned from their associations and reading lists, studiously reducing the import of this information so they can come out with the simply understood lie that the meaning of abstract art can be understood as a bogus little puzzle involving a relatively small number of arcane symbols.

That LACMA should host such a massive assault on the radicality of Modernism comes as no surprise — an institution's architecture is its destiny, and the County Museum's buildings say it all. But Los Angeles need not feel too privileged: In these still balmy days of the Reagan empire any major institution might stage something similar — indeed, MoMA's "Primitivism" show can be seen as taking part in a similar revisionism. The difference is that in New York the issues raised by that show were discussed, with varying degrees of attention and seriousness, in the daily papers, the weeklies, and all the various art magazines and intellectual journals, with the result that the museum was denied the last word. Sadly, Los Angeles does not seem yet capable of supporting that kind of extended, public debate.

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