

# CONVERSATIONS IN THE FIELD

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 3, 2010

## *Art and Otherness: An Enquiry into the Experience of the "Other" in Painting*

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### *Introduction*

The first part of this paper discusses the raw art of the naïve and primitive "Outsider" in relation to the development of early modernist art. The intention is to elucidate the significance of this art for the development of modernist aesthetics and to offer some insights as to why this art held such a fascination for the modernist avant-garde. Following this we trace later modernist developments, leading to the current postmodern cultural position. Throughout this enquiry, the intention is to present a case for the importance and preservation of a sense of otherness within the arts, where otherness is seen as a container for depth experience touching on the numinous and the spiritual.

### *Skeletons in Closets*

In 1948 the French painter Jean Dubuffet openly championed the artistic significance of the untrained intuitive and visionary (Dubuffet, in Harrison & Wood, 1992, pp. 593-595). When Dubuffet first coined the term *Art Brut* as an appropriate term to represent such art, he was effectively challenging the aesthetic values held by the mainstream cultures of Europe and America. In effect, Dubuffet was building on discernible movements in this direction begun much earlier within avant-garde art. Both the surrealist and expressionist movements drew inspiration from primitive art and the works that were then beginning to emerge from the mental asylums of Europe in the early years of the twentieth century (Prinzhorn, 1972). Fundamental to Dubuffet's project was his passionate, no compromise appeal to what he considered the superior foundational truth of these works as genuine expressions of an art untainted by any perceived cultural compromise. What Dubuffet was doing by following this course was actively undermining establishment artistic values, values that for him represented little more than insincere compromises that were incapable of touching at the core of the human condition. Perhaps, like some of the artists before him, Dubuffet had begun to sense something very special within the strange, often disturbing and unsettling expression found within this art? What then was, or is, this special something, and why did the art containing it have such a profound influence on the development of modern art and aesthetics?

Professor Roger Cardinal, the author of *Outsider Art*, the English language equivalent to *Art Brut*, writes:

[I]t is that radical flavour of secrecy *slowly* becoming openness, of individuality *slowly* becoming community, which guarantees aesthetic integrity, communicating an eerie beauty born of a tension between our unsettlement and our simultaneous sense of reaching back, nostalgically, to a place we somehow remember. (Cardinal, in Hall & Metcalf, 1994, p. 39)



It is in those key words, *secrecy*, *eerie beauty* and *unsettlement* along with that *reaching back*, that one can sense being witness to artistic values rooted in the a-cultural or pre-cultural modes of imaginative engagement. It must therefore be highly significant that the art of the outsider had infiltrated and influenced the cultural mainstream of Europe and America. What then were the particular qualities that attracted the modernist *avant-garde* to imagery and sources that appeared to follow no rules regarding artistic or cultural precedents? What aesthetic interest did outsider art contain, given the largely disenfranchised marginal positions of many Outsider practitioners?

#### *The Expressionist and Surrealist Sensibility*

Within the history of modern art, the impact of primitive art and artefacts on nineteenth and twentieth century art and culture is well documented. These influences can be seen throughout the Expressionist and Surrealist movements, both of which had been captivated by the raw emotional effect and mysterious power of the primitive outsider. It comes as no surprise, then, that, the art of the outsider, coming from the closed world of the mental asylum or from within other, perhaps less traumatic but nevertheless equally disenfranchising marginal positions would also attract interest from the new intellectual and artistic *avant-garde*. We can therefore conclude that Outsider Art and artefacts entered and affected (some might say infected) western art and culture, thereby re-defining in the process what was to be of aesthetic and cultural value to modernism. This indicates that the underlying aesthetics of this art had a tight hold on the imaginations of the cultural *avant-garde*, thus providing a rich source of expression and a vital and necessary sense of otherness deemed to be of great value to the development of an art of meaningful resonance and depth. The disturbing and strangely non-rational nature of this art held a deep fascination for the early modernists, promoting that “. . . *eerie beauty*. . . and . . . *reaching back* . . .” hinted at in later years by Cardinal. Through an appreciation for the imaginative world of the outsider, working outside the restrictive confines of cultural normality, artists began to test the boundaries between what is culturally acceptable and what is beyond or outside the dominant culture. This aesthetic proved to be a powerful magnet for *avant-garde* artists in the early years of the twentieth century.

#### *Abstract Painting and Late Modernism*

Just as the early modernists were fascinated by the other found in what later became known as Outsider art, so later modernist abstract painters such as the American abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman (1905-1970) also saw a power and depth in the primitive, as Newman stated:

The new painter is in the position of the primitive artist, who since he was always face-to-face with the mystery of life, was always more concerned with presenting his wonder, his terror before it or the majesty of its forces, rather than with plastic qualities of surface, texture, etc. The primitive artist practiced a non-voluptuous art and concerned himself with the expression of his concepts. The new painter, similarly, is anxious to act as medium for the muse to link the beholder with essences.

(Newman, 1992, p. 145)

Newman, when likening the modern painter to the primitive artist begins to explain the underlying source for the connection. The wonder, terror or mystery of which he speaks seems to have profound similarities with

concepts of the “numinous” and the “wholly other” described by theologian Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). For Otto the wholly other is a spiritual or transcendent experience, something so other to normal experience that it appears, or is felt to be, beyond comprehension whilst still offering the possibility of profound meaning.

For Otto the numinous offers an experience of the wholly other, remaining ultimately irreducible and unfathomable to the mind, forming the essence or core of all religions. Using the terms “mystery” and “wonder” (both used by Barnett Newman) Otto (1953) writes about the sense of awe associated with the wholly other or numinous:

Taken in the religious sense, that which is “mysterious” is . . . the “wholly other” . . . that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar . . . filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment. (p. 40)

It would seem probable that this was the type of experience to which Barnett Newman was alluding when he sought to establish a connection between “new” American artists and the primitive artist. Otto could see the danger of organised religion losing sight of its original numinous core, and Newman felt this to be the case with art, hence the appeal of the primitive. The irony of this is that Newman’s large expanses of single colours, divided only by his trademark “zip” (or line) of another colour, would later become representative of an institutionalised style of modernist abstraction and pave the way for later minimalist art, this can be seen in paintings such as *Be I* (1949) or *Adam* (1951).

While both early and later modernist painters shared an interest in a sense of otherness, there was a shift in the attitude of the early modernist painters to those representative of later modernism, a shift from optimism to either pessimism or realism. Critic Donald Kuspit (2000) describes this divide:

For all the nightmarishness of modern materialistic society, Kandinsky and Mondrian are optimistic that it can be awakened to the spiritual truth by means of abstract painting, while Rothko and Motherwell have no such expectation or illusion. (pp. 68-69)

Kuspit would even go as far as to call this earlier optimism “absurd and naive” (pp. 68-69). However, beneath what seem irreconcilable oppositions, what still unites these artists is a sense that, however different their views about how society could be changed via an art of spiritual depth or otherness, all still at least shared the view that this form of art was possible. There are many now who believe that in a postmodern era the idea of a spiritual or wholly other art is now impossible. To explore the problems facing the contemporary abstract painter seeking this type of depth we can trace two approaches used by modernist artists to explore the spiritual or wholly other and look at the postmodern complications associated with these strategies. These two approaches were defined by Kuspit as “silence and alchemy.” He stated:

the means by which today’s best abstract art achieves its spiritual integrity are the same as they were when abstract art first originated, but they are now insisted upon with great urgency: silence and alchemy. (Kuspit, in Tuchman, 1986, p. 314)

What Kuspit means by “silence and alchemy” perhaps needs a brief explanation here. Silence as used within abstract painting could be termed emptiness. Artists such as Kasimir Malevich (1879-1935) and Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) tended toward a reductive approach in painting, using ideas such as absence and emptiness, this can be seen in paintings such as Malevich’s famous *White Square on White* (1918) or in any number of Mondrian’s paintings such as *Composition with Red, Blue, Yellow and Black*, (1929) in which he reduces the pictorial language down to a few simple horizontal and vertical lines and primary colours. Critics such as Robert Rosenblum in *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* (1975) have noted an earlier use of this type of emptied out picture space in painters from the Romantic era. This can be seen in the work of painters such as Caspar David Friedrich in paintings such as his almost entirely empty *Monk by the Sea*, (c. 1809) or J. M. W. Turner in many of his misty, dissolving landscapes such as *Snowstorm* (1842). Alongside this, another strand of painting runs concurrently, with an emphasis on the physical and the expressive potential of paint and could be viewed as a type of expressionism. It can be seen in paintings such as Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* (1889), Emile Nolde’s *Drifting Heavy-Weather Clouds* (1928), Chaim Soutine’s *Hill at Ceret* (c. 1921) or in the later abstract expressionist movement, in the paintings of Willem De Kooning such as *Woman I* (1950-1952) or *Whose Name Was Writ in Water* (1975). All of these painters share a deep concern with the physical, expressive capacity of paint, which in part is what Kuspit refers to as “alchemy.” This view of painting emphasizes paint as substance and its transformation by the artist, which then in turn transforms the artist via the process of painting.

#### *Modernist Silence*

Let us return to Otto with his rather beautiful definition of silence and the void in Chinese painting. Otto (1953) says:

there are very many pictures . . . which impress the observer with the feeling that the void itself is . . . indeed the main subject of the picture. We can only understand this by recalling . . . the “nothingness” and the “void” of the mystics . . . For “void” is, like darkness and silence, a negation, but a negation that does away with every “this” and “here,” in order that the “wholly other” may become actual. (pp. 84-85)

Although Otto wrote this at a time well before the abstract expressionist use of emptiness by artists such as Mark Rothko (1903-1970), Barnett Newman (1905-1970) or Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967), this serves as a good definition for the spiritual or wholly other use of emptiness or silence in painting. Indeed, it rather strangely predicts the type of abstraction practiced by these three painters. In Rothko’s late paintings, housed in the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, Rothko empties out almost everything from the picture, leaving the viewer only with a luminous field of colour with only subtle and slight variations. Reinhardt takes this even further with his black paintings, typified by *Abstract Painting No. 5* (1962) which undercut even Rothko’s sense of emptiness by removing many of the traces of brushstrokes that still animate the surface of a Rothko painting. It is not inappropriate to think of the void and negation here, for Reinhardt was interested in Buddhism and some of his writings on painting bear a striking similarity with Buddhist methods of apophatic thought, they also have a striking resemblance to aspects of negative theology found in early Christian mysticism.

### *Modernist Alchemy*

Kuspit says of art and alchemy: “The alchemical approach emphasizes art’s . . . power of transforming materials by locating them in an aesthetic order of perception . . .” (Kuspit, in Tuchman, 1986, p. 315) paint being one such material. Writer James Elkins (2000) focuses on the actual material of paint and the process of working with it when he refers to alchemy. Elkins also uses the term hypostasis:

[Hypostasis] properly speaking, is a religious concept . . . a descent from an incorporeal state into ordinary matter, or in general an infusion of spirit into something inert . . . . Hypostasis is the feeling that something as dead as paint might also be deeply alive, full of thought and expressive meaning. (p. 44)

Thus, this second approach, rooted in the physical world of matter and substances can also be seen as a method of engaging with the wholly other and another pathway to what may be considered a spiritual experience.

These are two modes of engaging with the spiritual or other for the modernist painter and two problem areas for the postmodern painter. There is, however, a strand of postmodernism that seems caught up in irony and critique. As Elkins points out, much contemporary (postmodern) art struggles with the religious or spiritual as “irony must pervade the art, must be the air it breathes” (p. 47).

### *Post Modern Silence*

In a certain type of postmodern context silence or emptiness becomes a problem for the painter. No longer can the modernist strategy of using absence to indicate presence, or the transcending of the everyday reality of appearances for a truer, deeper reality, be used unquestioningly. Emptiness no longer necessarily means a space pregnant with potential. Rather, emptiness may just be blankness, as critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe has discussed in *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (1999). For him the smooth, blank surfaces of the world of contemporary objects (typified by automobile design) represent a real challenge to the older model of the spiritually emptied out, silent forms of abstraction. In car design blankness for Gilbert-Rolfe (1999) is “tied not to contemplation but speed . . . one recognizes blankness as a property of the surface, which has to be flawless and, therefore, cannot be said to present blankness as any kind of lack” (p. 120).

All this leads to the conclusion that emptiness can now be viewed in an ambivalent way. We can recall its rich history and contemplative potential, a once seldom visited territory, a rarefied atmosphere. Now it could be compared to the slopes of Everest, once remote and isolated, to walk there signalled a rare and difficult achievement, but now it is covered in rubbish. The territory of emptiness has become extremely crowded.

### *Post Modern Alchemy*

A focus on the physical and transformative nature of paint is often achieved within modernist painting by the expressive brushstroke or gesture. Its currency was tied to spontaneity and the unconscious processes involved in making “authentic” marks and gestures. Within this mode of painting, as with emptiness, the gestural painter now faces the problem of having prior knowledge of what this type of painting looks like. Art critic Timo Valjakka writing in a catalogue about the work of the contemporary British abstract painter Ian



McKeever (born 1946) muses on the problems facing the contemporary painter dealing with surface and gesture:

. . . how does one proceed in a situation where virtually all gestures and marks have been used, becoming inscribed into the long history of painting? How should one spread paint on the canvas to ensure that the spectator sees the painting as it is, and not just as a web of references, quotations and pre-existing meanings? (Valjakka, in McKeever, 1997, p. 16)

All this is not to suggest that postmodernism signalled the end of all possibilities except irony, but rather to demonstrate the current complexity of the situation. The Contemporary German artist Gerhard Richter (born 1932) is famous for his semi-mechanically produced abstract paintings, produced by a process of repeatedly dragging wet oil paint across the surface of a painting often with beautiful results as can be seen in paintings such as *St. John* (1988) or *Blue* (1988). Richter acknowledges the unease with which the contemporary painter faces the expressive gesture (and the whole notion of authenticity) when talking about his own work:

. . . there is . . . something about these [my] paintings that sometimes look like great gestural painting but also suggests that there is a lack of conviction that it is possible to paint like that. Unlike people like [Franz] Kline and others who could paint an expressionist painting with conviction . . . They had the conviction that what they were doing was good and right . . . I lack that in every stroke. (Richter, in Storr, 2002, p. 181)

However, Richter still paints, and even with his sense of profound doubt he still finds meaning of some sort within the activity. Perhaps the very act of his continuing to paint demonstrates an underlying optimism and faith within Richter which Hans Kung would define as “the expression of an ultimately sustained basic trust” (Kung, 1981, p. 33).

British painter Ian McKeever produces large-scale abstract paintings very different from those of Richter. McKeever’s recent paintings such as *Sentinel XI* (2004) often have large overlapping areas of translucent white which produce delicate, highly complex and multi layered spaces. Although powerful, his paintings maintain a sense of fragility. McKeever (2005), does not exhibit the same level of pessimism found in Richter but still sees both the potential and the difficulty involved in contemporary painting, saying, “The question for the painter, in our contemporary world full of likenesses, is not how to make yet another likeness, but how to paint the real thing” (p. 50). What is encouraging about this stance is that McKeever still has a sense of the underlying “real thing,” a sense of a continuing deeper aspect of reality to which the artist may occasionally bear witness.

#### *The Importance of Preserving the “Wholly Other”*

This brings us back to the heart of the matter. Now that we have looked at modernist and postmodernist interest in aspects of the other or wholly other, the question now arises as to why this is important? What makes it important to preserve our experience of the wholly other? Art and religion have offered ways of approaching (or enduring) what is at the edge of our understanding, offering a method or

discipline capable of mediating the potentially hazardous wholly other. The secular mind, stripped of these tools may find the other distressing, resulting in an encounter with something like the “void state” of which Paul Ashton talks (Ashton, 2007). David Tacey has also pointed to the hostility with which the numinous or wholly other may be met by a secular ego dominated mind and the associated potential threat that it represents. Sadly the art world is no exception to this:

As soon as anyone touches on the numinous, a kind of spiritual complex is triggered in the culture, which immediately sets up a resistance. Jung said “the gods have become diseases” . . . and they are treated by the modern ego like pathogens in the body. The ego’s anxiety triggers an automatic defence reaction, activating forces of resistance. As with any unconscious complex, the spiritual complex is triggered automatically and is hard to detect. (Casement & Tacey, 2006, p. 219)

The parallel here with the strategies of irony presented by some postmodern art is hard to miss. Perhaps depth psychology can help preserve one of the most fundamental aspects of art precisely by resisting secondary interpretation and addressing direct experience. It can help those who do not know, have forgotten, or are busy forgetting, to understand the importance of the numinous, the unknown or the wholly other. Depth psychology could play an important part in articulating a deeper understanding (or experiencing) of the arts. Rather than adding to the already numerous methods for interpreting the arts, it can engage on a level that explores art’s greatest potential, allowing it the full dignity of being an irreducible experience. Being able to live with uncertainty, without full knowledge of self or world, and to accept that sometimes, through this failure of knowledge or understanding, new meaning or experience may emerge, can be a difficult but worthwhile goal. Depth Psychology is, of course, fundamentally a therapeutic practice, and it is in the interface between Depth Psychology and art that we find common ground regarding what is irreducible and what is, at the same time, transformative.

#### *Culture or Therapy?*

Writing in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* on art making as a therapeutic tool to Self discovery, Jung (1992) states:

He [the patient] is no longer dependent on his dreams or on his doctor’s knowledge, but can give form to his own inner experience by painting it. For what he paints are active fantasies – it is that which activates him. And that which activates within himself, but not in the sense of his previous error when he mistook his personal ego for the self; it is himself in a new sense, *for his ego now appears as an object actuated by the life-forces within. He strives to represent as fully as possible in his picture-series that which works within him, only to discover in the end that it is the eternally unknown and alien – the hidden foundations of psychic life* [italics added]. (p. 80)

In this simple statement, written specifically in the context of art as therapeutic healing and not art as cultural aesthetic, Jung is clearly identifying a psychological value in the unknown and alien, curiously though Jung does not equate psychological value with aesthetic value. It would appear that for Jung, cultural art, as a collective expression of value, has no implicit connection to the therapeutic encounter:

Although from time to time my patients produce artistically beautiful creations which might very well be shown in modern “art” exhibitions, I nevertheless treat them as wholly worthless according to the tests of serious art. (p. 79)

The issue here, in relation to art as a mediator of cultural values and therefore collective, and art as a therapeutic tool and hence individual, clearly centres on the relationship between an aesthetic transformation and a therapeutic transformation. What was taking place around Jung outside his consulting room, as seen within the experiments of the modernist avant-garde, represented, in effect, a *therapeutic cultural aesthetic*. This was perhaps a culturally therapeutic corrective to the disturbing social and political values being expressed within the industrialised powers of Europe and America at the time. Does this hypothesis therefore put all “consulting room art” on the same level as cultural art? Clearly, no must be the answer to this question. There is good art and there is bad art, but there is no bad therapeutic art, as such. From the point of view of therapy, if it helps the patient, then it works, and this is all that matters and all that Jung was essentially concerned with *as a doctor*. What transcends individual therapy through art is the collective, cultural dimension. When an artwork manages to transcend the known, the easily assimilated, and to carry a multiplicity of possible meanings through all of its constituent parts, then arguably, it has the potential to be of significant cultural value. In Jungian terms, when an artwork carries and expresses, through its formal and informal properties, significant depth potential, then it will echo an archetypal foundation and therefore transcend the particular individual therapeutic value and address a collective unconscious. The great mystery in this of course is what such depth potential might be? We can offer the following suggestion. In the right frame of mind, and in a state of receptive and imaginative engagement, when ego defences and the will to literal interpretation are suspended, imagination will aid the psyche in a moment of transcendence. This would be both an aesthetic *and* a therapeutic moment for the viewer, therapeutic in the sense that it would promote an unconscious assimilation of the evolving image, one capable of transcending a purely conscious surfacing reading. In the works of the early modernist artists, as exemplified by both Expressionism and Surrealism, we can clearly see signs of this desire to access the unconscious depths and to find a collective expression for those aspects of life experience that better represented a more fully integrated psyche. It would appear however that this was an aspect of modern art that went largely unrecognised by Jung. This then brings us to the problems now facing the artist in the twenty- first century.

### *The Contemporary Dilemma*

Put simply, the contemporary artist is now faced with the problem of finding a way to reach out beyond the assimilated pictorial languages of a cultural mainstream that has safely absorbed the experiments of modernism. If the desire and motivation are to seek out new forms and structures and hence reinvigorate the aesthetic sensibility with a sense of otherness, how might artists move out beyond the all too familiar? It would seem that a trust in the primacy of imagination holds the key, along with a willingness to remain open and responsive to the unfolding images as they appear. By allowing forms and structures to emerge out of visual complexity, the process works as a lucid, constantly shifting, state of imaginative reverie, where what appears to eye and mind seems to move somewhere other than the instantly familiar. What is of value and therefore most meaning-*full*, hints at depth experiences transcending the solely rational. To use an alchemical term the *work* of psychology and the *work* of art, as imaginative processes, cannot be transformative by being



set to reason alone. What moves *within* through revelation is beyond reason, to quote Jung himself from his *Red Book* (2009):

You open the gates of the soul to let the dark flood of chaos flow into your order and meaning. If you marry the order to the chaos you produce the divine child, the supreme meaning beyond meaning and meaninglessness. (p. 235)

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, we would like to suggest a possible response to the situation facing the contemporary artist motivated by a type of meaning deeper than that which seems currently prevalent in the world of contemporary art. We are aware that there are many people who feel the need for the arts to engage with forms of meaning that lie deep within the psyche. For some these are unconscious in import while for others the term spiritual may seem appropriate. Terminology for us is flexible but we believe that there is an area of experience that seems to find great difficulty in having any critical or creative voice within the arts and culture in general. We are therefore attempting to create a forum that gives a voice to those with such concerns, for academically sound, intellectually rigorous (but deeply felt) debate. This network is a platform for academics, artists and anyone interested in such issues to shape serious debate and to allow others to share in ideas and artworks which promote this. Our first step (at the 2010 IAJS & JSSS conference) was to invite expressions of interest by joining our database. For those interested in this initiative, we can be contacted using the email addresses below. When we have gauged the initial interest a Web Site will be launched using this database. We hope this becomes a network which can give voice to those frustrated by the lack of depth in contemporary cultural discourse.

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