

BOOK REVIEW

Contemplations of the Spiritual in Art (Cultural Interactions: Studies in the Relationship Between the Arts). Edited by Rina Arya. Bern: Peter Lang, 2013, 254 pp. Softback, £42

Around the time of the conference held in Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral, *Contemplations of the Spiritual in Contemporary Art*, of which this book is a partial record, there had been something of a resurgence of interest in the nature of the church's relationship with the arts. Similar events ran in Durham and Salisbury, while the Society for Theology chose *Theology and the Arts* as its conference theme that year. At these events art was discussed in its relation to theology, or its potential role within, or as, liturgy, or else ideas were mooted more generally concerning the place of the church in modern culture and the viability of contemporary visual arts as a medium for forms of spirituality. At Liverpool it was this last tricky theme that provided substance for debate among the assembled artists, clergy and academics.

Spirituality entered the language of modern art through abstraction, and above all that progenitor of modern abstraction, Kandinsky. For Kandinsky abstract painting was a 'mystical-spiritual enterprise', independent of religious practices and belief – a mode of transcendence reliant upon sensation not symbolism.¹ In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky's famous text on the subject, the spiritual in art is whatever feeds the inner life of the spirit, rather than something that points to some kind of divine reality. Indeed, from Kandinsky onwards, common consensus on the nature of 'the spiritual' in art has stressed its distinction from anything we might call 'the religious'. As such, spirituality may be aligned with religion, but not wholly and not necessarily. In more recent decades, the notion that spirituality might act as a foil or even a proxy for religious belief was revived by the groundbreaking exhibition, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. In an essay written for the exhibition catalogue Donald Kuspit opened with the blunt assertion that 'The "spiritual" is a problem concept in contemporary art'. Comparing Kandinsky's identification of the spiritual in art with more modern formulations he suggested that 'Today art does not seem so mighty an element in spiritual life, and spiritual life does not seem so evident in art or in general'.² Arguably, nearly thirty years on, we might still accede to Kuspit's first statement yet contest the second. The importance of art to 'spiritual life', and vice versa, seems remarkably undiminished. The testimony of the aforementioned conferences as well as the persistent presence of religious and spiritual themes within the contemporary art world, however shallowly understood or banally expressed, would seem to corroborate this suspicion.

Attempts to sever the ties between religion and spirituality make no sense within the church, of course, where the 'Spirit' has a very specific meaning within religious belief. In the introduction to *Contemplations of the Spiritual in Art* Rina Arya stresses that the temptation to polarise the spiritual and religious must always be set against religion's inherent spirituality (p. 2). But equally she acknowledges the advantages of the imprecise language of the spiritual whenever something seems to exceed the material or rational, even if such catholic possibilities bring with them their own difficulties. As she admits, its 'elasticity... contributes to its convenience of use but also to its somewhat vague and nebulous nature' (p. 1). Such difficulties aside, what the book contends is that, whether conceived in religious terms or not, the spiritual is rudimentary to human existence and given sensuous form through art.

Arya's own definition of the spiritual in art retains that link with religion (albeit a very broad notion of religion) by taking inspiration from Tillich's preferred term,

ultimate concern. This is spirituality as ‘a continuing concern and commitment to questioning the nature and condition of humanity in an ever-changing world’ (p. 197). As for the specific remit of the book, Arya summarises it thus: ‘how and why does art convey spirituality and, conversely, why and how is spirituality made manifest in works of art?’ (p. 1). In other words, is art able to convey some sense of the spiritual? Is there such a thing as ‘spiritual art’? As Judith LeGrove puts it, citing an earlier essay by Arya, ‘while the “religious” component of an artwork can be decoded through context and symbolism, the elusive quality of the spiritual “is activated in the experiential and therefore cannot be extrapolated as a thing-in-itself”’ (p. 152).³ An engagement with spirituality as experiential is precisely what Arya finds in the work of Francis Bacon. His overt use of religious symbolism, she claims, is a vehicle for his anthropological visualisation of the human condition, and thus a candidate for spiritual art in her terms.

One of the virtues of this book is that each of the art practitioners, historians and theorists who have contributed to it propose widely divergent approaches to spirituality, attesting to its conceptual variance. Furthermore, whether considering the ‘spiritual impulse’ of artists as diverse as Newman, Clarke, Bacon, Kiefer or Spencer, or discussing their own art practice as a kind of spiritual exercise, or equating the priestly function with artistic vocation, each adds to this sense of the enduring place of the spiritual in art. For one, taking so-called Outsider Art as their model, it involves non-cognitive experience, thereby positing a close correspondence between the spiritual and the psychological. For another, it signifies a form of detachment, reworking Simone Weil’s reflections on attention as central to spiritual development into an ethical enquiry as it relates to artistic practice. For a third, the spiritual in art is associated with ‘affect’, visualising art as a form of encounter, an idea that accords with one of the artists represented here, for whom the spiritual is emotive rather than cognitive, existential rather than creedal, kenotic rather than substantive. As such, it is claimed, it cannot be confined to religion, the latter simply embodying one of the many possible forms of spirituality. Citing James Elkins’ diagnosis of a ‘buried spiritual content’ in modern and contemporary art, Michael Evans offers a succinct definition of spiritual experience as ‘an encounter with a profound sense of “meaningfulness” without necessarily having a rational or conceptual framework with which to define this experience’ (p. 81). Matthew Rowe’s opening essay bravely, though somewhat prosaically, attempts to provide just such a conceptual framework for the spiritual as it relates to the work of art, underpinned by a recognition of the important difference between ‘a spiritual artwork’ and ‘a spiritual experience of an artwork’ (p. 12). His conclusion, equating the spiritual with the aesthetic, presupposes a certain aesthetic standard to be indispensable to spiritual art, thus barring certain genres of art from admittance to spirituality, an idea with which many would find much to disagree. In a different vein, this emphasis on the aesthetic is taken up by Franco Cirulli’s fascinating paper on Schlegel’s aesthetics. Cirulli dispenses almost entirely with the spiritual as a categorical term in favour of an argument that tests art’s capacity as a vehicle for transcendence through beauty. Cirulli argues somewhat against the tenor of the book by showing how, apropos of Schlegel, figurative painting is able to fulfil this role. By contrast, others are more swayed by abstraction’s liberating potential for finding new means of transmitting the spiritual, whether through a modernist reduction to simplified values, as in Barnett Newman’s *Stations of the Cross*, or through the allusive, even mystical, symbolism of Geoffrey Clarke’s sculptures.

Although this collection suffers to some extent the failings of many conference proceedings – that what makes for a varied and interesting conference can result in a fragmented text – Arya has largely pre-empted this objection by dropping the word ‘contemporary’. Where some of the conference delegates had struggled to fit their ideas to its contemporary theme, the book allows for a broader range of ideas. For those who,

like myself, attended the conference, it is a welcome reminder of some of the papers presented, but is sufficiently judicious in its selection to produce a cohesive argument of its own, independent of the earlier event.

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¹ D. Kuspit, 'Abstract Painting and the Spiritual Unconscious', in S. Newton and B. Taylor [eds], *Painting, Sculpture and the Spiritual Dimension*, London: Oneiros Books, 2003, p. 78

² D. Kuspit, 'Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art', in M. Tuchman [ed.], *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Los Angeles, California: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and New York: Abbeville Press, 1986, p. 313

³ See R. Arya, 'Contemplations of the Spiritual in Visual Art', *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 1 [1], 2011, pp. 76-93