

CONTEMPORARY ART SOCIETY

Study Day: Portals, Art and Spirituality (9 May 11:00 - 16:00)

Swendenborg House, 20-21 Bloomsbury Way, London, WC1A 2TH

Report by Henry Palmer

For their second in-person study day since before the pandemic, the focus on the connection between the material and the spiritual was at the heart of the Contemporary Art Society's 'Portals, Art and Spirituality'. This was a day for people to acknowledge the importance of being present. And, fittingly, the day's subject reflected the growing interest, that artists and art institutions have, in the inseparable connection between art and spirituality and in the spiritual condition of human beings. Throughout the day, these ideas were explored to scrutinise what has often seemed to be lacking in atheistic societies. The aim was to present a variety of approaches to spiritual practices and spiritual beliefs within contemporary art and culture that may encourage and produce changes in consciousness that in turn can create an opportunity to change society.

Swedenborg House was a suitable location for the event as it has been host to conversations on spiritualism and its role in public life since the Swedenborg Society acquired the building in 1924. C.A.S. Director, Caroline Douglas, welcomed a busy hall and used the opportunity to remind everyone of C.A.S.'s historic mission, dating back to 1910, to champion artists and support their member museums by helping to fill their galleries with important work that will best represent the communities they serve. The various approaches of the C.A.S. have shifted with time. Currently, an emphasis is being placed on decolonising institutions. However, the values remain the same: to act as a progressive and supportive link between artists and institutions, and offer solutions to the curatorial challenges that institutions are currently faced with.

This introduction was followed by Dr Paula Zambrano, the leading curator of the day's programme, who gave further context to the proceedings. The global art world is witnessing a strong interest for artistic research that looks closely at spiritual and ritual practices, including: ancestral knowledge, shamanism, astrology and mysticism. Artists are exploring the metaphysical realms in order to open up new perspectives and present alternative methodologies as resistance to suppressed esoteric knowledge. This trend reflects the strong bond that there is, and has always been, between the human practice of art and the spiritual condition that defines human beings. Importantly, there are socio-political questions that are consistently raised. Can magic be used to confront the social issues of the present, the conflicts, wars, inequality and environmental degradation? And how does a more cosmological and magical approach challenge the dominant cultural forms and ideologies that no longer serve us?

Gallery spaces, artists, and publishers have noticeably responded to this shift by increasing programming and publications that take an interest in these subjects. There remains some important analysis of institutions themselves that could deepen their own practices and knowledges and provide a transformative experience for their visitors. This approach would imagine galleries and museums as ritual sites, with sacred social significance, like contemporary temples, that reflect on spirituality but also allow visitors to discover their own meaning without a narrative being forced upon them. Portals, in other words, that produce something inexplicable and take you to an unknown place.

The first guest talk of the day came from Lisa Blackman, Professor of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths College, who developed a theoretical framework to better understand the question of affective curating. Lisa's talk was rich with ideas, experiences and references outlining how her past activism with the Hearing Voices Network informed her academic research. Voices are not meaningless, nor are they a disease, but they have meaning if we had the means to understand or interpret what is happening. The Hearing Voices Network was established to encourage this approach and still exists today to raise awareness of the diversity of voices, visions and similar experiences people have, as well as, challenge negative stereotypes, stigma and discrimination around voice hearing. This approach found itself in conflict with contemporary practices of psychotherapy. Instead of rejecting an existing reality for voice hearers, there is great value in understanding this phenomena as being part of a spiritual practice of sorts. In this way, a broken narrative can be uncovered to tell a story.

Similarly, museums and galleries may benefit from accepting that there is a strange incongruity in their intersection of art, philanthropy and public information. They are hybrid objects, far more detailed than simply places of information. But where this is considered an abnormal perception - undesirable and possibly deviant - an affective turn in museums allows for an openness and a more open-ended experience. What Lisa called Threshold Phenomena, experiences which breach the subject boundaries, blurring the borders of the conscious and unconscious, are possible once it is accepted that there are diffuse inputs on your emotions. This 'becoming available' approach may incite a more transformative experience that is more aware and considerate of other ways of experiencing museums. An open-ended method of curating that is less concerned with presenting a predetermined narrative and more interested in allowing the unconscious, the unknown and the undefinable to be present. Caution, however, is advised as this affective curatorship can, and is, often coopted and sanitised. Emotion can easily be captured as part of an experience economy that extracts emotion, for profit, as a capitalist mode of production.

For the next session, art critic and curator, Michael Bracewell, led a conversation with Jennifer Higgie about her latest book 'The Other Side: A Journey into Women, Art and the Spirit World'. Michael introduced the book as timely and historically valuable - offering an important and overlooked perspective on women artists, their work and their motivations. It follows Jennifer's ongoing interest in female artists, and in particular, those women who were overlooked or dismissed in their own lifetimes. Notably, however, the book is not presented as a complete history and does more than simply pander to a marketing opportunity from a current trend of looking at underrepresented women artists. Instead, the act of writing is for Jennifer a form of praxis whereby the act of uncovering connects to a personal discovery of a new approach for thinking about art making. This method finds portals to new ways of seeing and thinking about the purpose of art. Where there are examples of unexplained phenomena or extraterrestrial experiences by artists the veracity of their claims is not as important as the act of doing it.

Jennifer discussed some examples of the artists she had researched. This included, Georgiana Houghton, whose work is an example of early abstraction, but whose motivations were guided not by a commercial or art historical interest but by encounters with spirits while participating in seances. During a time when women had limited agency this spirit guidance offered some exploration about being and meaning beyond the human world whilst, importantly, making space for non-conformist gestures. Spiritual exploration, grief and revolt are common themes of the works discussed in the book. These deep personal reasons for art making should be understood as of equal artistic merit to the more institutionalised forms and practices. Art in this case has an intrinsic value that is transformative, transcendental and esoteric, and furthermore, this is something we should willingly engage with and unpack. Commonality can be found beyond the Western world too. There is something universal in esoteric experiences. Another example discussed was indigenous Aboriginal women from the Martu

region of Western Australia whose large painting, Yarrkalpa, maps their knowledge on an abstract landscape. It has aesthetic value but beyond its surface beauty it says much about community and ancient wisdom. Female creativity has always been central to community support.

After lunch the lights of the hall dimmed for artist Sammy Lee and writer Sarah Shin to present an extract of Sammy's video work 'Cornucopia' or 'Memory of the World'. A three-dimensional frame within the screen contained an arrangement of morphing brightly coloured objects. Abstract but somehow familiar. Each arrangement brought together disparate objects that would come together to display a dreamlike vision that gave the impression of meaning beyond the sum of its parts. The fluidity of the images evoked visions of an inter-dimensional time traveller. A soundtrack of stuttering tones and harmonic drones accompanied the video. Traces of analogue sounds are integrated into the palette of a digital soundscape. As the video played Sarah read out a fragment of her text 'Eclipse', written in direct response to Sammy's video: a story-like dream-world interpretation of the video that imagined a technology of consciousness called the 'Codex'.

Sammy and Sarah then opened their own conversation about what they were doing. It was not a pre-arranged conversation. Rather, an organic opportunity to demonstrate their methods of working, to interpret each other's process and production, and to uncover something that would have been unimaginable previously. This method, they explained, was a response to the didactic nature of exhibition descriptions that are often too precise. And similarly, curators are often too determined to set the parameters of an experience. This work had originally been displayed as a diptych at the UNESCO Centre for Documentary Heritage in South Korea as part of the memory of the World Archive. It is a playful and thought-provoking piece that comfortably layers ideas and visuals into a final whole that is not entirely clear but gives ample space to imagination, idiosyncratic interpretation and the unknown. Dreams are an individual mythology and this presupposes a method that allows ideas to come into being. This methodology is essential to the work as opposed to complete or finished work as the product.

In its exhibited form this artwork would have included prints of stills from the video representing the residue of the dreamworld Sammy created. As an extension of the visuals in the video that were both computer generated and scanned objects, a circular relation is put in motion between analogue and digital. These stills were then categorised to represent the different cards of a Tarot deck, which was presented on the speakers' table. Questions were taken from the floor. The first, 'How can we use magic politically?' was answered by the Hermit card that was randomly drawn from the deck. The read description was then interpreted by the audience.

The final session of the day was delivered by writer and online curator, Stephen Ellcock, who presented a selection of images from his archive called 'Visual Encyclopedia of Everything', which he has been developing for over a decade. This collection strives to find a correspondence between images and cultures. The selection he presented here demonstrated how celestial and occult imagery has been ever-present in popular culture throughout recent history. The internet, Stephen told us, has been his portal into a world of imagery and cultural history. But before the ubiquity of the internet, a similar portal could be found all across the media landscape. From Penguin book covers found in shops in motorway service stations to political magazines at the local newsagents, BBC children's television programmes and advertising, popular culture has always taken delight in exploring the outer reaches of the imagination. Expressionism and surrealism found a natural home here. Ancient mythological imagery and the canonical works of romantic painters found themselves repurposed for a new audience.

Often times there is an intrinsic link between counter-cultural activities and fantasy imagery. These visual interventions are now documents of a cultural imagining of a moment in history. They gave a visual representation, and voice, to the anxieties of the modern world via a commercial medium.

Stephen's archive showed how society was searching beyond its given meaning, striving to explore alternative ways of being, seeing, feeling and thinking. This exploration was and is persistent, we were reminded. Art that transcends will always find interest. What was uncovered through Stephen's archive was a continuation of the rebelliousness we had discussed earlier in the day. The same search for meaning and agency. And the same tension between formal art institutions and the outsider, or, the amateur and the professional. The presentation ended, fittingly, with an image by self-taught artist Madge Gill. An artist whose life was both remarkable and ordinary, full of hardship, grief, spiritual perseverance and artistic complexity. A poignant reminder of art's capacity to transform the predicaments in our lives.

A stimulating and enlightening day drew to a close. The audience was given time to discuss the day's proceedings and digest the breadth of presentations: from Lisa Blackman's theoretical entry point into the challenges of institutional curating to Michael Bracewell and Jennifer Higgin's historical insights into the defiant entanglement between women and spirituality to a playful exploration of magic through contemporary work by Sammy Lee and Sarah Shin, to, finally, Stephen Ellcock's summation of magic, spirituality, art and counter-culture in his inexhaustible collection of virtual images. The result was the formation of new connections between these approaches, adding new perspectives to this field of research to the wider discussions on contemporary art discourse. We learned there is not just an alliance between art and spirituality, but a deep historical and ever-present resonance between art, spirituality and social and political change. This resonance can be found and expressed across academic, literary, artistic, curatorial and musicological engagements. Institutions can engage with these ideas and concepts knowing there is a mandate and an audience for their materialization as practices. At a time when there is a conspicuous lack, certainly in the UK, of new political ideas about the future, the presence of spirituality in contemporary art discourse may offer a portal necessary to imagine an alternative.