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# INTRODUCTION

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DAWN PERLMUTTER and DEBRA KOPPMAN

From Walt Disney World to *Natural Born Killers* this book explores uncommon indicators of the spiritual in contemporary art and culture. In this volume, we draw on a diversity of perspectives in philosophy and aesthetics to highlight conscious and unconscious manifestations of the sacred in art, and to make a compelling case for its continued contemporary relevance. Our investigations grew out of our mutual fascination with what appeared to us to be a significant and growing trend in contemporary art, and a curious and concomitant dearth of discussion on the subject among artists, critics, philosophers, and historians. We began by looking at the wealth of historical and cross-cultural models of the intimate relationship between art and the sacred, and attempted to understand the apparent non-existence of this relationship in the present. We came to the conclusion that in spite of the fact that a large part of the world's art and artlike production has been integrally intertwined with either specific religious practices or more generalized beliefs connected with numinous, non-visible, non-rational experiences many would ascribe to a difficult-to-define realm of the sacred, the majority of contemporary Western practitioners of art, criticism, and philosophy appear to be involved in what is perceived as a completely secular activity.

This is not to say that we were alone in noticing this trend. The fact that contemporary art is replete with references to a variously defined "sacred" has been noted and discussed from a variety of viewpoints, most interestingly to us by Lucy R. Lippard and Suzi Gablik. In *Overlay*:

*Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, Lippard looked at various manifestations in contemporary art of what she identified as the tendency to “primitivize art.” She interpreted this trend as arising from a need of artists to reenvision the integration of art and society in an age of dehumanized technology. In this context, she described artists as the “keepers of racial memory,” “natural archeologists” who by reinterpreting images of the past in the present evoke memories of lost symbols and myth which can provide insights into contemporary life. In a similar vein, Suzi Gablik, in *The Reenchantment of Art*, analyzed the work of contemporary artists who are trying to expand the social and environmental contexts of art in what she interpreted as a collective process of connectivity, reenchantment, and spiritual healing. According to Gablik, artists are attempting to regain a sense of the divine side of life and an ability to perceive the world as magical through the powers of imagination and vision.

Through our collaboration, we hope to contribute to the ongoing work of artists and theoreticians exploring contemporary connections between art and the sacred. Multiple perspectives are included to articulate dimensions of the spiritual which continue to be largely overlooked in mainstream philosophy and criticism. Western theories in philosophy and aesthetics are interwoven with examples of Native American, Latin American, and African American aesthetic and spiritual precepts and practices to provide a sense of the myriad cultural influences at play. Connections are made between art and issues of cultural, ethnic, and gender identity to suggest the possibility of both affirmative and subversive relationships between art, artists, and spiritual traditions.

Through this volume, readers will become familiar with a wide variety of contemporary ideas, artists, and art forms flourishing outside of the framework of the “official” artworld. They will also become aware of the ways traditional spiritual practices and sacred ideas are potentially influential in an apparently secular American context. Wide-ranging discussions include references to the work of both well-known and unknown artists working in sculpture, painting, performance, and film.

Sources such as the Old Testament are used to illuminate the meaning of the work of contemporary earthwork and performance artists in chapter 1, “The Subjugation of the Spiritual in Art.” In this chapter it is suggested that the subjugation of the spiritual in art grew out of, and continues to be, a political battle for control over what is deemed sacred from Biblical prohibitions of images to the National Endowment for the Arts. Censorship is demonstrated to be a manifestation of a conflict over religious ideology. Earthworks, ritual art, and postmodern spiritual objects are used to illustrate the struggle between monotheistic and polytheistic doctrines.

A spiritual perspective on the human body in Western art is considered in chapter 2, "Venus/Intra-Venus: Art against and as the Body." It is claimed throughout the chapter that the spiritualization of the sensuous body can only be achieved by the denigration of the physical body and its subsequent violent idealization. This is exemplified in Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Chris Burden's violent performance art, and Orlan's reconstructive surgeries. The affirmation of the body and the recovery of the animal body is depicted in Rembrandt's paintings, Piero Manzoni's use of excrement in his work, and the performances of Hannah Wilke.

Walt Disney World is considered an American, twentieth-century secular pilgrimage site in chapter 3, "Mickey, Minnie, and Mecca: Destination Disney World, Pilgrimage in the Twentieth Century." The concept, definitions, and theories of pilgrimage rituals are applied to travelers' experiences of the Magic Kingdom. An analogy made between Disney World and the medieval pilgrimage center of Santiago de Compostela provides compelling insights into the phenomenology of sacred worship.

Chapter 4, "Feminist Revisions," offers feminist redefinitions of the sacred as a basis for a reexamination of contemporary manifestations of the sacred in art. It is demonstrated that both feminist visions of the sacred and contemporary artists' concepts of the sacred are influenced by cross-cultural traditions. Feminist approaches to art criticism and spirituality are introduced citing major theories in their respective disciplines. Finally, it is suggested that feminist reconstructions of the meaning of the sacred in language will effect interpretations of the sacred in art.

A personal account of artmaking as a form of aesthetic prayer in a apophatic spiritual quest is narrated in chapter 5, "(Dis)integration as Theory and Method in an Artmaking Practice." The author, an artist educated in religious studies seeking a path to the spiritual through her art, describes how words became an inadequate language for religious expression. She discovers that nonliturgical enactments, such as the sewing of a quilt or the rhythmic breaking of twigs, become nonrational, non-verbal practices of experiencing the spiritual through art.

Contemporary altars created by European artists Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely are the subject of chapter 6, "Between the Sacred and the Profane: The Altars of Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely." Their works are described as addressing issues of personal and national identity with many references to the technology-based consumer cultures of France and the United States during the postwar years. It is suggested that even though their altars are made of found objects and scrap metal, they continue to represent the altar in the traditional manner as a site that stands at the crossroads of mortality and transcendence.

A proposed multicultural aesthetic framework derived from overlapping and recurring cross-cultural sacred themes is described in chapter 7, "Multiple Visions: Revisioning Aesthetics in a Pluralistic America." Six aesthetic categories are outlined, including an aesthetics of invocation, transformation, process, energy, improvisation, and magic. It is demonstrated that the contemporary Western separation of art from life, from the sacred, and from meaning is not shared cross-culturally and that a multicultural vision can be achieved by an awareness of various cultural perspectives.

The conceptual works of Cuban artist Jose Bedia, Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta, African American artist David Hammons, and German artist Joseph Beuys are the subject of chapter 8, "Blood Relations: Jose Bedia, Joseph Beuys, David Hammons, and Ana Mendieta." It is proposed that the work of these artists, produced outside of the Western mainstream and within the context of cultures more infused with religious activity, has the common objective of giving voice to the artists' experiences as "other" and of revealing a politics of exclusion and negation. Descriptions of their work reveal common characteristics inclusive of the use of nonart materials, a preference for site-specific or temporary installations that involve performance, and the reenactment of ritual practice and symbolism based on ancient cultures. Most significantly, it is illustrated that spirituality is the central, unifying force in every aspect of these artists' lives and that their artmaking echoes shamanistic practices.

The shrine of a Detroit martyr named Malice Green, an unemployed African American steel worker bludgeoned to death by two white Detroit police officers, is the subject of chapter 9, "Malice Green Did Like Jesus: A Detroit Miracle Story." The author describes how the site of Green's murder evolved into a memorial that sanctified the space, inspired pilgrimage, and harnessed the anguish of the community. It began with visitors leaving written messages, flowers, candles, shells, and other objects associated with veneration in African and Christian traditions, and culminated with the addition of a Christlike portrait mural of Malice Green by Bennie White. This chapter is an account of a saint's suffering, death, and odyssey from ordinary human being to potent cultural symbol.

The religious and violent content of the 1994 films *Pulp Fiction* by film maker Quentin Tarantino and *Natural Born Killers* by director Oliver Stone are examined in chapter 10, "Postmodern Idolatry: The Media and Violent Acts of Participation." Building on the theories of Aristotle, René Girard, Edward Whitmont, and Konrad Lorenz, it is demonstrated that historically there is a direct correlation between violence and the sacred, that participation in either actual or signified acts of violence are a significant part of religious ritual, that violence in art and

the media serves as a catharsis for human aggressive drives, and that religious ritual formerly realized this function. It is argued that violence in the media reflects a theological problem of idolatry and that censoring representations of violence is actually serving to perpetuate rather than diminish crime in our society.

The survival of patriarchal myths, which have an essentially religious origin, is described in chapter 11, "Thou Art: The Continuity of Religious Ideology in Modern and Postmodern Theory and Practice." The author refers to these myths as "Intelligent Life," "The Protestant Work Ethic," "The Death of the Author," "The Appropriation Strategy," and the "Myth of the Apocalypse." According to this view, these myths (1) uphold such characteristics of contemporary art as unreadable theory and deliberately incomprehensible art, (2) maintain the ideological separation between high and low art, and (3) validate recent influential theoretical treaties on the deconstruction of authority, the impossibility of originality and creativity, and the philosophical notion of the end of art. The author suggests the possibility of a reintegration of the spiritual in art through the use of multivocal models offering alternative interpretations of the myths of postmodernism.

By addressing the role of the spiritual in art, an issue which has been for the most part ignored or underexamined in contemporary discourse, greater understanding is potentially gained of otherwise obscure contemporary practices. Through the use of specific examples to discuss variously defined terms such as "postmodernism," "religion," and "spirituality," and an expansion of cross-cultural aesthetics and feminist analysis, we hope to create a wider range of interpretative possibility than currently exists. The interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives in this volume reflect the current nature of the reemergence of the sacred in our culture. It is hoped that these voices will provide useful tools to investigate more profoundly the work of both specific artists and contemporary art as a whole.