



THE SACRED IN ART?

The fact that we are living in an age that is so unconcernedly profane – and artistically profaning –, the mere fact that an artist's first public manifestation vindicates the contrasting and uncomfortable notion of the sacred as the conceptual basis for a contemporary art installation is worthy of our attention. Indeed, it stands out for its unashamed defence, free from verbal rhetoric, of a trend that swims determinedly against the tide of today's artistic proposals. We must therefore welcome this intrepid turn of concept – not form, representing a breath of fresh air, freedom and broadened horizons that challenges the conceptual uses and traditions that continue to prevail in what is still termed as the “avant-garde”, which, it must be said, when examined more closely, is mere formal mannerism camouflaged under the brilliance of the innovative discoveries of early 20th century artists whose mission was not only to transform art, but also humankind and society.

Although the inspiration for this exhibition denotes a clear desire for change – thereby linking it to the established norm whereby the avant-garde must always join the quest for something “new” and different – the chosen concept is undeniably and apparently “reactionary”, in the most commonly-used sense of the term “sacred”.

Yet what exactly do our contemporaries understand by the notion of the sacred? The Spanish Royal Academy dictionary defines it quite simply as everything that “is dedicated to God and the worship of the divine”, or alternatively, “worthy of veneration and respect”. An essen

tially frugal explanation that limits its vast range of meanings and interpretation, constraining it simply to its everyday use; which, undoubtedly, reflects the real impact of the term on the Hispanic collective subconscious, historically steeped in the most rancid forms of Catholicism. To the extent that a term boasting such a wealth of anthropological significance should here be reduced to an enclosed system of religious beliefs overseen by the ecclesiastical curia. In short, it represents precisely the opposite of the vast field of spiritual notions that echo around this bared symbolic space that the exhibition hall of Pollensa's convent has now become; where the vision of the sacred is now associated with the unknown, rather than the familiar. For far from appealing to recognisable dogmas or beliefs, the intention is to arouse a sense of lost reverence, a subtle call for the need to become aware of the mystery that exudes all that that transcends us.

The truth is that it is impossible to find a definition for the sacred. It is therefore also impossible to deny it, in the same way that a eunuch cannot give an opinion about orgasm. The sacred is experience in its purest form. It is not visible. It cannot be found in objects or places. It dwells entirely in inner abodes, in non-transferable mental spaces capable of inhabiting a physical dimension yet whose defining nature will always be metaphysical. So is it possible to lend form and representation to these invisible abodes without betraying their mystery and transcendence?

It is clear that the profane societies of today are unable (or unwilling) to comprehend considerations such as these. They are so far removed from this modest and profound intimacy with the notion of mystery – which underlines all religious

doctrine – so far removed from what Blake termed the “wisdom of Imagination”, so absorbed in the endless succession of today's exterior dictates, egotisms and distractions, that any inner space, and unfamiliar sense of intensity that occurs within,



provokes a vertiginous impact that must be immediately neutralised in order to still any unnerving form of mental reflection.

A few months ago, when I visited London's New Tate Modern, I noticed that the visitors to the museum – clearly of all origins and types – drawn by a desire to discover the art of our times, wandered through an endless succession of rooms, yet hardly ever stopped to observe the works. They seemed incapable of empathising with anything on display there. It seemed as though they were merely complying with an obligation, an enforced visit as part of their condition as tourists or a boring distraction that could well be reduced to a cute photo on Facebook that would remind them of their visit. Why did they bother to go? In the early 20th century Kandinsky posed the same question as he watched the affluent classes of the day touring museums and occasionally stopping to exclaim in delight before a realistic still life painting that appeared to give them an appetite. I wonder what these modern-day visitors will think and feel. Most likely the feelings of estrangement that characterises our age.

Yet I would like to think that the human spirit, always avid for life and authenticity, is also in need of works of art that resound in its interior, transporting it, albeit momentarily, beyond the tedium vitae that prevails in industrialised countries. A situation noted by Baudelaire back in the mid 19th century in his *Little Poems in Prose* or *Paris Spleen*.

Nevertheless, the fact that the majority of contemporary artworks appear incapable of empathising with us is not due to their daring or shockingly innovative perspective, as occurred in the last century, but rather because of their excessively mental, ideological and artificial nature, or because they are encapsulated in cold, harsh formalisms that are both distant and insipid.

What is the sense of art in this age of crisis? Should it continue to be a plentiful source for the ideologies, horrors, business, cynicism or jests that comprise the current age? At all events, art has become overly mental, and artificiality will inevitably turn sterile. It lacks sentiment, sensitivity, beauty – not necessarily aesthetic – inner depth and soul. It lacks the feminine attributes of embracing, empathising and enjoying. A world (or art) without sentiment is a world (or art) without drive. Our renewal requires us to drink once again from living sources.

Discourse-dependent art is entirely removed from sentiment and lacks heart. It is true that sentimentalism has always been its principal caricature, the manifestation of its clearest weaknesses and the reason for its downfall, but today it is essential to vindicate all that we lack through art and a sense of the heart, just as Marta Moriarty does in this exhibition. We are so tired of that smug cynicism, and it must be said, that accepted vulgarity, that we have forgotten the simplest and most glaring of truths, such as the feminine principle on which the meaning of life is based. We have forgotten that depth of sentiment is what confers sense and value on the world. It has a capacity for internalising and humanising, spreading empathy, a principle of participation that forms an essential element for the development of human societies.

All in all, now that contemporary artistic trends appear to be leaning increasingly towards a less object-based approach, Marta Moriarty's conceptual work posits an alternative idea, namely that art is not merely a *cosa mentale*. It invites us to delve into an ancient sense of the abstract that counters the profane relativism of our age.

In this sense, rather than repeating the familiar social rituals of the art gallery, she proposes re-consecrating a Dominican convent – which had ceased to be a consecrated



site in 1833 in order to be converted into a museum –to transform the current exhibition space into a sacred site, in the broadest sense of the term, with the sole aim of its contemplation as a purely symbolic setting.

Twelve circular clay recipients, twelve candles made from pure beeswax, twelve fan palm estormies (round baskets), a circular screen featuring a loop projection of twilight at sea and a recipient containing small folded pieces of paper with texts with references to the sacred by writers, philosophers and mystics from various continents. These are the sole elements included in the installation. There are no forms of justification or discourse of any type. Everything hinges on a mystery, the famous phrase from the Vedanta: “Thou art that”. After all, the origins of art are centred on the sacred. And on mystery. And this in itself is a journey back to the origins.

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