

Report on “The Search for Humanity in Contemporary Art,” August 13-15, Hudson, NY



The conference took place in the “Basilica Industria” in the small but bustling town of Hudson, New York. I was surprised to find that Hudson over the last 25 years (since I had last been there) had turned into a very lively place with its main street lined with art galleries, antiques stores, and restaurants (apparently fueled by personal, tourist, and cultural relationships with New York City). The “Basilica” location itself seemed to play an appropriate role: It was not an academic classroom or an art gallery setting (although there was a next-door exhibition space, Raising Matter, that was also used by the conference), but rather a huge, semi-converted factory/warehouse building with hopelessly high ceilings, exposed girders and infrastructure, tall windows, cracked concrete floors, and many signs of decades of heavy use (the conversion to various cultural uses having been undertaken by the owner Patrick Doyle, who had just sold the building and also attended much of the conference). In the mainstream artworld such re-tooled industrial spaces have increasingly been used over the last few decades for art galleries, museum spaces, and artist’s studios (perhaps fittingly if one aspect of postmodernism is in part a change from an industrial society to a society of information).

*Our meeting space in the North Hall featured on one side a large installation of angularly stacked wood pieces and cloth by Martin Summer (*The Ascent*) crowned with a sequence of seven small painted wood objects and four paintings (*Saturn Sun Moon Earth*), by Laura Summer. On the other side a sequence of hanging painted cloth banners titled *Gestures of Gratitude* by Laura, and 9 paintings by six local artists hanging in irregular places on the walls. (see photographs). A variety of hanging cloths, banners, and curtains were continuously manipulated and repositioned to adapt to the circumstances of almost every event. The tiered seating featured a wide variety of types of chairs in numerous 20th-century styles (perhaps appropriate for a multicultural, multi-stylistic, interdisciplinary outlook like postmodernism). In the adjoining “Large Room” (the bulk of the original factory/warehouse space) were not only refreshments and small-group meeting space but some additional imaginative objects by the new forms project (such as a multi-person polygonal hanging swing).*



Even the Raising Matter Gallery was at least partly used by Laura as a setting for an ongoing innovative conceptual, interactive group-participation exercise, where conference participants were invited to observe and notate on slips of paper the qualities of 5 paintings she had created trying to identify with and interpret the artistic approach and "questions" of five mainstream contemporary artists who work in other, non-painting media, (Marina Abramovic, Wenda Gu, Tony Orsler, Gillian Wearing and Julien Le Verdiere). The slips were tacked up in the adjoining back room of the gallery next to charts presenting a photographic and verbal record of the artistic process that generated each painting as well as information about the contemporary artists being worked with.

*Every major event was accompanied by original music on cello and viola composed and played by Jonah Thomas and (usually) Jonathan Talbot (5 "mini-concerts" in all), adding a strong musical component to a conference that in part considered Rudolf Steiner's statements that the visual arts must become more like the musical or performing arts. A variety of projected videos were shown "after hours" in the evening as an optional activity. The first night included features from the PBS *art:21* series on artists Janine Antoni, James Turrell, and Ann Hamilton along with a piece of performance art titled *X-Reasons = Y* by Japanese/British performance artist/eurythmist Kaya Kitani-Scratchley from the 2005 "Eurythmy Today" festival at The Haag in The Netherlands, "an attempt to explore the human need for meaning." There were a wide range of ages among the approximately 60 participants, including numerous young people in their twenties.*

*The first evening's lecture by Nathaniel Williams was titled "The Subtle Terror and the Growing Self" and presented aspects of the thinking of several postmodern theorists. He began with the two images of Goethe's reaction to first seeing ancient Greek art ("Here is Truth, here is God") contrasted with Marcel Duchamp's 1912 exhibition of the readymade *Fountain*, a urinal, as a work of art. Turning to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Nathaniel described how*

he had been a pupil of German philosopher Martin Heidegger in his search to understand the nature of being, but also how he abandoned that work when Heidegger supported the Nazis, asking, "What if the very pursuit of truth and reality leads in human communities to terror and oppression of my fellow human beings?" He determined to replace Heidegger's search for ultimate truth with the idea of "love thy neighbor as thyself." The latter was actually the primary nature of the human being and had to be cultivated before undertaking the search for truth.

The idea of truth, particularly when conceived as a harmonious totality and applied to society, often leads to an oppressive mechanical order and even war. By contrast, Levinas supported the absolute uniqueness and "otherness" of every person. Both philosophy and statecraft must come to support ideals of individual freedom and empathetic social life. In a similar vein, Nathaniel referred to Maurice Blanchot, who noted philosopher Hegel's assent to the pillage of Napoleon's armies in the cause of human progress toward "absolute knowledge," even though this caused him to "sense the subtle terror." Also in respect to contemporary American military exploits, Nathaniel concluded that what people have been raised to believe is worth all their efforts could actually lead to the most horrible atrocities.

*Turning next to Jean François Lyotard and his influential 1979 book, *The Postmodern Condition*, Nathaniel quoted Lyotard's definition of modernism as always "different from what is accepted." Thus, postmodernism, as opposed to yesterday's culture, is also part of modernism. As championing the "always new," modernism is continually at its end. It continually searches for new presentations that can impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. The work of art does not follow philosophical rules and laws, but searches for them. Thus, the artwork has the character of an event rather than an object., which Lyotard also related to Kant's idea of the sublime. Art can feed the nostalgia for the whole, the one unified system, but only provides illusion, not reality, at the cost of a subtle terror." "Let us wage a war on totality and be witness to the unrepresentable," wrote Lyotard. Nathaniel also referred to German painter Gerhard Richter's exploration of the Baader-Meinhof Gang as an example of ideology leading to madness and violence, noting how the will to truth too often leads to the will to power.*

Roland Barthes's concept of the "death of the author" came next, with its emphasis on the complex preexistence of language, which speaks far more than any individual author. "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author," wrote Barthes (where author can also mean artist). "The work always arrives too early for the author." In terms of visual art, this could mean that the practice of art involves taking existing images into new contexts, where the created works will hope to receive their authorship and meaning from the reception in those contexts.

Finally, Nathaniel discussed philosopher Jacques Deleuze, who also does not believe in the totality, only in singularity and the individual search for meaning. The artist begins with the monochrome plane, with zero, and seeks the infinitely varied infinity, especially through color. In this process the human being passes into color and strives to make the cosmic invisible forces visible. In this connection Nathaniel referred to the situation of the painter Johannes in Steiner's Mystery Dramas, where he suddenly experiences the spiritual world around him, including the beasts of the abyss, and begins to expand or fly out of himself into the elements. Nathaniel noted that these kinds of experiences are happening to people today in our postmodern age, where the experience of the subtle terror and the expanding self occurs without full consciousness or understanding.



The next morning Patrick Stolfo presented his slide lecture, "Art Now – In a Historical Context," replacing artist/teacher Zvi Szir from Basel, who could not get a visa to come. While today all truths are often regarded as relative, this was not the case in the past, when truth was combined with beauty and goodness (for example, at Stonehenge). With the effort to understand the spiritual history of humanity in order to better know the present, Patrick sketched out and illustrated with artistic examples the three large periods of cultural/artistic development corresponding to the epochs of the Sentient-Soul, Intellectual-Soul, and Consciousness-Soul. He characterized each era with the terms Rudolf Steiner adapted from the philosopher Hegel.

The most ancient period from about 2900 B.C. to 747 B.C. (also related to the childhood period from birth to age 7), the period of the "Symbolic," was illustrated with the "threshold experiences" of the Egyptian temple and tomb statuary. IN that age the practice of the artist was closely regulated and art was a kind of talisman, holding higher forces. Architecture was the dominant art form. The following "Classical" period, beginning around 747 B.C. in ancient

Greece and continuing through the Gothic style at the end of the Middle Ages, grasped the spirit most easily through ideas. Thoughts, a higher reality, were perceptible, while the physical world was only a shadow of the real. The artist instinctively sensed the human etheric body, imprinting its beauty from the cosmos onto the human form, which was reflected in Greek sculpture (the dominant art form). The artist still tended to follow authority (e.g., Polyclitus's "Canon"), and this period corresponds to ages 7 to 14 in child development. Later in medieval Christian art this impulse was reduced to storytelling for primarily religious purposes.

Finally, the "Romantic" period began with the Renaissance in Europe, with Giotto perhaps being the first modern artist. This ushered in our present age of the "onlooker," the Consciousness-Soul Age, in which we feel present within ourselves and look out from there onto the outer world. The emphasis on looking brings painting into the position of the dominant art form. Artists strive to become more independent and free, sometimes at the cost of becoming anti-social (or at least isolated, also corresponding to the teenage phase of human development). Patrick cited such examples as Rembrandt, Monet, Delacroix, Gauguin, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Picasso, Brancusi, and Kandinsky, as well as the development of photography. The continuing development out of the free will of the artist may yet lead to a reuniting of art, science, and religion.



Following Patrick's talk, all the participants convened in a large circle and were asked to briefly state the question(s) they came to the conference with and the question(s) they may have now after the first part of the conference. Here is a selection of the questions raised: How has commercialism changed the work of artists? How long do we still have to endure the idea of the artist as a bohemian always breaking new ground? Because most anthroposophical art today has a sense of nostalgia for the early 20th century, are we revolutionary enough now or just repeating what we're comfortable with? Where do themes for art come

from in terms of the relationship between form and content? Is there a new experience today that artists can put into their work to wake people up? What is the medium of postmodernism and of the social art? How can art develop the capacities people have? Why is art such an exclusive and elitist endeavor? What about digital delivery of art? Has the role of art as separated from science and art played itself out? Will postmodernism break the stranglehold of commerce on art? How do we develop a living culture without trying to contradict the economic and political spheres? How can we look at postmodern artists with a phenomenological, non-judgmental observation? If art is not really about fame, wealth, or shock value, how can we be artistic today? How can we be artistic in the economy? Can we create collaborative or collective art? How can we realize etheric form in matter?

That afternoon I presented my slide lecture on the characteristics and history of postmodern art and its relationship to anthroposophy. My basic assumption was that there has been a fundamental change in our culture beginning in the late 1960s (two 33 1/3-year Christic periods since the end of Kali Yuga in 1899), which is called postmodernism. I briefly summarized the characteristics of the modernist era as well as the postmodern reaction to this. In abbreviated, overview form and primarily through multiple artistic examples I presented the three phases of the development of postmodern art:

1. Late-1960s to 1970s – Rebellious younger artists either represented previously forbidden figural content or else worked in new or hybrid forms of artistic practice that did not produce traditional unique, precious art objects (process/installation art, earth art, performance art, and conceptual art).

2. 1980s to mid-1990s – The commercial and critical triumph of postmodernist art, which has (at least) 14 characteristics:

A. Art works are considered “texts” within an existing cultural intertextuality.

B. Pluralism, Eclecticism, Multiculturalism.

C. Contingent (vs. transcendent or essential).

D. Consciously involved with “representation,” the system of ideas, codes, symbols, and beliefs by which a culture justifies itself and persuades.

E. Use of appropriation or “quoting” of existing imagery from both high and low sources in order to deconstruct or recontextualize them.

F. Decentered, impure mediums; use of hybrid or combined art mediums.

G. Prominent role of theory and writing, in which the visual and verbal are of equal importance.

H. Favors new (often temporal) art forms that do not produce a precious, salable art object.

I. De-emphasizes the role of the artist and his/her self-expression and emphasizes the role of the viewer/participant in determining the meaning of an artwork.

J. Emphasis on content more than formal qualities.

K. Criticizes and discredits the art gallery and professional artworld, often in favor of alternative settings for art.

L. Undermines (but also can be complicit with) the art market and consumer society.

M. Subversion of mass media imagery to help art enter the cultural and political mainstream of life.

N. Emphasis on photography, video, and new digital image mediums vs. traditional handmade mediums.

3. Mid-1990s to Today – No longer negative in tone or thematizing most of the above characteristics, newer postmodernist art takes them for granted as a common background of artist and viewer. Installation art is directed toward the participant experiences of the viewers in an open-ended way. The creation of complete immersion environments tends to replace the traditional art object. A common theme works with the dislocations between physical space and digital “space.”

I noted that there are a variety of understandings and explanations of postmodernism, including scientific, socio-economic, technological, cultural, and philosophical. These and the thoughts of many of the major postmodern theorists and philosophers were summarized in an 8-page handout I had prepared. Probably its most fundamental characteristic is the rejection of the modernist, Cartesian “onlooker” view of knowledge with its absolute distinction between subject and object. Grand, totalizing systems and one-sided metaphysical truths are doubted, while all meanings and values are mediated or “interpreted.” Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism was “incredulity toward meta-narratives.” In this respect anthroposophy is a kind of postmodernist philosophy, teaching that it is human thinking or creative spiritual activity that dynamically creates all knowledge, including the polar concepts of subject and object. Also, anthroposophy is likewise based on the recognition that there are always multiple points of view or meanings valid for any phenomenon (at least twelve). The contemporary trend toward creating full-immersion, interactive environments of moving colored light and music phenomena can be considered a longing for (or substitute for) the immersive spiritual experiences Steiner spoke about.

Suggesting that Steiner’s Goetheanum interiors and 1907 Munich Congress artwork could also be seen as a kind of installation art, I pointed out several of Steiner’s key predictions for the future of the visual arts that seemed to apply to postmodern art:

1. The true work of art is the invisible experience in the soul of the viewer, not the outer object.

2. The visual arts must become more like the musical/performing arts (and vice versa).

3. More movement, mobility, and metamorphosis must be brought into the static visual arts.

4. More (ahrimanic) ugliness and less illusory (luciferic) beauty must enter art.
 5. Art must overcome the use of art exhibitions.
 6. Art should not be so elitist, but rather more integrated into the general life of society and civilization.
- Is anthroposophical visual art moving toward this future or is it primarily repeating the (modernist) past?*

*At this point my lecture morphed into a concluding ten-minute piece of performance art (titled *Because Postmodernism Is*) involving speaking, gestures, chanting, a dream image, slides of artworks by Joseph Beuys, Robert Morris, and Bill Viola, musical and rhythmic accompaniment on Manfred Bleffert instruments, and a bit of minor choreography with my assistant Laura Summer.*

After this, the conference broke up into four smaller discussion groups. I was part of the group guided by Michael Howard, in which we conversed about seeing in art the signs today of humanity crossing the threshold unconsciously and how the old visual art tradition has been broken down over the past hundred years so that it is no longer shocking nor do we any longer have to struggle with that, only to work with it. We considered the contrast of collective identity versus individual identity, where the latter is what is necessary both for the experience of truth and for the expression of empathy and compassion. Do the anthroposophical convictions that unite us also tend to prevent us from really meeting other people, also with our art? It helps to know all human beings as striving persons in their own way. Yet how do we build a new social life today when every individual is like a "chief" or "pharaoh," when there is so much emphasis on freedom but so little on spirituality? While modernism was about revolutions, how can postmodernism or anthroposophy come to terms with evolution?

On Sunday morning Michael Howard presented the final lecture, titled "The Art of Spirit Self." He stated that what Steiner said about future human evolution can be very inspiring and even practical, although we may have to adjust our expectations about how much of the distant future (e.g., sixth epoch) can actually be realized now rather than in future incarnations. While human life is defined by polarities (including the contrasts of modernism and postmodernism), it is more challenging and more essentially human to live with the tension in between (or encompassing) both sides of such polarities as matter and spirit, individual and community, freedom and responsibility.

*While in art we typically say modernism has existed about a hundred years and postmodernism about 50 years, we can also trace the beginnings of modernism (and the Consciousness-Soul) back as far as the Renaissance. Michael contrasted a picture of Leonardo's *Last Supper* with a Gothic painting of the same theme from about a hundred years earlier. One of the most obvious differences was the new use of linear perspective to create the realistic spatial illusions in Leonardo's painting, representing a new identification by people of their selves*

with their physical bodies in space and with the materialist, scientific world view in general. At that time it was expression in the visual arts that helped advance this new bodily identification and step in the evolution of consciousness.

Today a different side of our human nature is striving to awaken, and postmodernism is one symptom of the search for this. Alongside what scientific work can offer, the arts will become even more important in developing the capacities humanity needs for the future. In postmodernism art is no longer a matter of expressing something but of becoming, where the real work of art is myself. Thus, all areas of life need to be art. Steiner says that the development of the new “Royal Art” (which will be a social art) involves achieving control of the etheric forces. We will need to bring living forces into the affairs of social life. This will be the next stage in the great work of transforming the earth itself into a work of art.

In his lecture “Preparing for the Sixth Epoch” (which will begin to arise ca. 3,500 A.D.) Steiner speaks of three qualities that must be developed for this age of Spirit Self: a soul life of brotherliness, freedom of thought, knowledge of the spirit (pneumatology). The development of Spirit Self involves transforming our astral body, our still-unfree life of thinking, feeling, and willing. Every day we have the opportunity to work on becoming more free in our thinking, feeling, and willing – or in our art with the qualities of color, form, etc.

Finally, Michael briefly discussed the future human qualities that can be worked:

- 1. Perceiving the life forces as qualities (vs. quantities) in the world.*
- 2. Making the whole earth (including humanity) into a work of art*
- 3. Developing empathy, i.e., the capacity to enter into the will of the other*
- 4. Struggling to find the right relationship to everyone’s inner freedom.*
- 5. Capacities to clairvoyantly perceive the spiritual becoming more mainstream (as will spiritual science as a result).*
- 6. Learning to build community on a foundation of free, diverse individuality (vs. on commonality).*

In relation to the arts (“the language of the gods”), Michael pointed out that they provide a schooling to become very exact (beyond the level of personal likes and dislikes) in perceiving the qualitative dimension (for example, qualities of colors, forms, etc.). Although this perception occurs on the soul or astral level, it is actually an experience of the etheric world. This can translate in social life to an empathetic ability to live into the nature of others or to act in service to others. He briefly concluded with the example of his own exploration into a kind of “visual music” of colored dot patterns as one way to explore the life forces and showed, as a suggestion of something related to the future of the visual arts, a short video of the amazingly complex and harmonious interweaving flight patterns of a large flock of starlings.

After Michael's lecture the conference concluded with a large plenum discussion. One topic considered was how to bring the spiritual element into art. This must involve moving beyond the personal ego of the artist, perhaps by forming group collaborative situations to create art. Or the right kind of small doses of shock in art may help spark awareness that humanity is crossing the threshold. A couple of persons expressed an interest in pursuing work with Steiner's moving colored "light-play-art" initiative. It also was recommended to move beyond only approaching life through logical thinking. Appreciation was expressed for the influences of the string music by Jonah Thomas played throughout the conference as well as for the artistic work created or hanging in the hall. Several expressed and appreciated that they felt the conference had a strong effect on them and suggested directions for their future work. Others called for more opportunities in future events to meet each other and have social exchanges or group creative projects, also to include more interdisciplinary work. In addition, the question of the uncertain relationship of the community of artists to the rest of the anthroposophical movement was raised.

Somehow the fairly dense schedule for the conference also seemed not fully fixed, a bit ad hoc and up in the air and open to new, spontaneous possibilities. When the "exploration, demonstration, presentation" by the Actors Ensemble (Ted Pugh and Fern Sloan) scheduled for Saturday evening had to be postponed due to illness, we quickly assembled a new program of a short slide talk by me on Steiner's 1918 initiative with Jan Stuten for a projected, moving colored light-play art (to counteract the effects of motion pictures) and films on Meredith Monk and Joseph Beuys. However, instead of the films about half of the group decided to adjourn to the Large Room to have a conversation on issues from the conference, their personal practices as artists, and many other topics. A number of people went back and forth between the films and the conversation group.

It seemed that everything was welcome and could be an important part of the whole experience of the event. Participants looked for new seeds for their future work in a variety of ways. There seemed to be a certain confidence (or at least hope) in many that if they just hung out at the Basilica and talked to the right people, they could acquire all kinds of new visions, directions, and imaginations for future artwork. One felt that there was much that was alive and brewing beneath the surface – future karma, future human connections and working relationships, future artistic creation.

The mood of a creative chaos or an (art)work in progress was not completely unintended by the planners group from the Art Section Council in North America, for whom this was the first event after a major membership expansion last year. They seem to have wanted to take a step toward stimulating something new to further the future of anthroposophical visual arts and felt that such a step had indeed been taken, although to me the process does not yet seem finished.