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**THE SPIRITUAL SPARK IN ART: EXAMINING VISUAL CULTURE AND
SPIRITUALITY FROM FRESH PERSPECTIVES**

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Abstract: Review of Susan B. Barnes. *Visual Spirituality. Art, Mediums, and Cognitive Dissociation*, New York, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang, XVI, 2022 (216p).

Key words: Art, Spirituality, Media Ecology, Art History, Visual Culture, Psychology, Susan Barnes.

Most of the significant twentieth century art trends were undoubtedly influenced by spirituality which has always played a critical role in human civilization. While the *Spirituality* term is broadly inclusive of religious beliefs and personal experiences these impacts however have not always been culturally acknowledged. Starting from these observations, Susan Barnes' book sets out to examine visual culture and spirituality from the fresh perspectives of media ecology, art history, and psychology. The central tenet of the volume is that the deep spiritual aspect of great art is innate, hence more attention must be paid to the spiritual spark in art which might be understood as a quest for knowledge that goes beyond the confining conventional. In so doing, while looking deeply within oneself, the spiritual artist transforms the invisible into a visible piece of art.

The book describes the personal and reflexive expressions of visual art and articulates the need to acknowledge the role of the spiritual – as well as embrace it – in contemporary visual culture. Structured in eleven chapters, the focus of the volume rests on paintings and drawings covering cultural themes, artists, art trends, psychology, and art processes, whereas performance art remains outside its stated scope. In its introductory sections, the conceptualization of *Spirituality* brings to the fore two of its alternative meanings, that of connectedness to sacred forces and/or transcendent awareness on the one hand, and of dogmatism and rigidity of religion, on the other. In her reconciling approach, Barnes fathoms *Spirituality* not as a rigid private search but as a flexible group quest for sacredness that mobilizes a growth-oriented belief system and significantly influences modern art.

The first Chapter, *Revealing the Spiritual in Visual Culture*, draws on the role and understanding of art from a conflicting spiritual-secular perspective and reviews concepts like Spirituality, materialism, media ecology, visual culture, and technology and their roles in the comprehension of aesthetic developments. Within a chronological approach to visual culture, Barnes contends that the twenty-first century is beginning to restore the spiritual in art and society, while materialism still remains deeply entrenched.

The second Chapter, *Spiritual Crisis and Communication Theory*, continues the author's analysis on the role and impact of media and technology on culture and people's awareness of the messages communicated in a technological world. Taking a chronological view, Barnes discusses structure-based communication which, by not factoring human feelings into its texture, neglects the spiritual, inner awareness and pathos of its mechanical models. On the other hand, art, being the opposite to advertising and public relations, allows the artist to contrive situations that displace the mind into awareness in visual communication. Two prevalent communication theories, Mc Luhan's and Postman's, are

contrasted and their models are analyzed relative to their impact on how art is understood today.

Taking the discussion even further, Chapter 3, entitled *Spirituality and Modern Art*, shifts the focus from technology to art movements and contends that the elimination of the spiritual in art history has not provided any cultural leads to comprehend abstract images. In addition, the chapter addresses spiritual impacts on modern art programs from perspectives coming from occultism, thought-forms, theosophy, and spiritualism. Chapters 4 and 5, *Abstract Spiritual Artists* and *Spirituality and Non-abstract Art* respectively, examine abstraction as a (non) dominant vehicle for spiritually concerned artists and art works and address the connections between mystical concepts in both abstract and non-abstract art.

Chapter 6, *Spiritualism and Art*, provides an overview of several style forms, such as trance art, spirit portraits, automatic drawings, aura graphs and precipitated paintings, that are not recorded in art history but which, through their art-altering psychic and spiritual energies, can set spiritualist art apart from any other art tradition. In the same vein, Barnes takes up outsider art in Chapter 7 (*Outsider Art*) to tackle the spiritually inspired individuals who have no formal artistic training, who exist outside the dominant world and provide in their artworks a glimpse into the unconscious mind of the artist. Against this backdrop, the author discusses the Surrealists' interest in outsider art, automatic drawing and primitive art which represent different, by all means profound, artistic options from mainstream cultures.

Chapter 8, *Art, Psychology, and Spirituality*, extends the exploration of spirituality in art through a psychological lens that connects trance, automatic writing and dissociation in art with archetypes, the collective unconscious and active imagination. The section argues that symbolic creation and the design of pictures often occur in forms of (un)controlled dissociative process and condition.

The focus of Chapter 9, *Changing Perspectives, Visual Culture in the Twenty-First Century*, rests on the examination of how various perspectives on spirituality can facilitate new understandings of art and its relationship to society. The media ecological approach here argues that cultural attitudes influence every type of medium and technique hence art concepts and techniques for understanding the contemporary technological world can (and often do) change cultural concepts about art and creativity. Spirituality is here examined in its present-day complexity being shaped by the new cultural narratives that are associated with marketing practices, commercial culture, mediumship, technological culture and religious artifacts and which make it increasingly reflect corporate not individual interests. However, Barnes holds, art has the potential to oppose the effects of technological society and consumer culture and, by involving viewers more directly in the creative process of

their art, such as Andy Warhol for example, can change the socially encouraged thinking patterns of conventional communication into catalyzed spiritual experience, balance and crystallized emotion.

Chapter 10, *Creating Art: A Spiritual Path*, views art more practically, through art techniques that require an individual to disengage from their logical mind to find a space where creativity can flow. Such applied methods (awakening spiritual life and spirituality, drawing through awareness of different modes of thinking, omniphism, exploration of the psyche, etc.) allow working with art to uncover deeper meanings within oneself and culture.

The last Chapter (11) is a concluding section that brings the reader full circle in understanding visual Spirituality. Underscoring the fact that spiritual concepts offset materialistic views by providing moral ideas for human behaviour, art therefore remains an extension of the unconscious mind that meets people's social, psychological and spiritual needs.

The volume holds the readers' attention to a wide range of art processes and perceptions and while it is a dense intensive reading, it is also a clarifying and rewarding good read. Of all the areas of modern art abstraction, the spiritual has been amongst the most enduring and yet the least clearly defined which makes this book at once a useful aid for art critics, curators and historians, etc. and an effective guide for all those accepting spirituality in their lives to become more balanced individuals.

Acknowledgements: Project financed by Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu & Hasso Plattner Foundation research grants LBUS-IRG-2021-07.

References:

Barnes, Susan B. 2022. *Visual Spirituality. Art, Mediums, and Cognitive Dissociation*. New York, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang.