
Not to believe or not to be believed: A review of the exhibition, *Traces du sacré*, 7 May to 11 August 2008, Centre Pompidou, Paris

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*Le sacré, voilà l'ennemi!*¹ (translated as 'The sacred, that is the enemy!') is the title of a special edition of *art press 2* (May/June/July 2008, trimestriel No 9) on the exhibition, *Traces du sacré*, that shows at the Centre Pompidou in Paris from 7 May to 11 August 2008. This outcry of disgust at the choice of concept of the mega-exhibition expressed through an exploration of the relationship of art to religion, similar to Gauguin's old question on human beings' destiny (*Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?*²), is an outright demonstration of the depth and width of the nihilism and agnosticism of our time.

The central question *Traces du sacré* aims to explore is the relationship of Western art to the spiritual in a wide range of works spanning from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Three hundred-and-fifty sculptures, paintings, drawings, installations, films and new media works – many of them not seen in France before – by almost two hundred artists of international repute are on show. The exhibition is divided into twenty-two themes, such as *Sacrifices; Doors of perception; Eros and Thanatos; Apocalypse; Elevations; Absolute; Eden; Forms of the sacred; and Homo novus*.

The curators of the exhibition -- Alfred Paquement, the general curator and director of the Musée national d'art moderne; Jean de Loisy, curator; and Angela Lampe, co-curator – state in the Centre Pompidou's marketing brochure on the exhibition that it offers a historical survey which demonstrates how, with or without God, with or without religion, a considerable part of twentieth-century art has continued to be informed by the questions of destiny, life, death and the sacred. In the editorial foreword to the *art press 2* publication, Jacques Henric (2008:6) thrashes the handling of the exhibition's rationale

¹ *Le sacré, voilà l'ennemi!* originally was a slogan that was written on a wall in Nanterre during the 1968 student revolts and subsequently acquired neo-Marxist and leftist connotations.

² **Paul Gauguin**, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (translated from the French), 1897–1898. Oil on canvas, 139.1 x 374.6 cm. Collection: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

as “spiritual quests and dodgy magic ... all rolled up together in a sweeping survey that blithely ignored the intellectual issues that one might have expected such an event to raise. No theological thought to be found (or precious little), but a good helping of kitsch and sociology”. He credits the journal, *art press*, for dealing with the notion of the sacred since its inception, but what renders his views suspicious is his avowal that they (the editors of this issue of the journal) have not “seen the show or read the catalogue yet” (Henric 2008:6); they had simply seen the exhibition checklist. The mere idea of the sacred seems to have been enough to create a furor in the offices of the journal and to have induced the publication of a special anthology of texts on aspects of the theme of the sacred that have featured in *art press* over the years, together with three news essays.

In the mentioned marketing brochure, the curators defend the rationale for the exhibition as an investigation of a connection between art and the sacred that in the West has unraveled over centuries and which the secularisation of societies in modern times did not put an end to. They quote Max Weber’s line of “the disenchantment of the world” (a strong influence on Suzi Gablik’s “the disenchantment of art” later on in the century) and accord seminal importance to the roles of Friedrich Nietzsche (a major influence on modernistic thought) and George Bataille (a major influence on postmodern thought), not so much in shaping cultures of disbelief, but in instigating Dionysian questioning and seeking worlds through an emphasis on language and what words can *do*, not so much what they *mean*.

These influences the curators trace in the work of several artists such as Masson, Picasso, Kandinsky, Mondrian and Marinetti, who demonstrated that they were eager to invent a so-called ‘new world’ that subverted the principles of balance, logic, order and proportion premised in the scientific rationalism of previous centuries. Dadaist works such as those of Man Ray and Duchamp are allied with works dealing with trance and sexuality such as the shamanic works of Joseph Beuys and Marina Abramovic in their explorations of alternative dimensions of the real and the testing of existential boundaries. Yet, Henric (2008:6) argues that the Pompidou exhibition seems to “ignore ... the ideological and political manipulation to which this noble notion of the sacred has been subjected [to] over the centuries. ... The sacred has been a fig leaf for all kinds of idiocy, censorship, prohibition and even crime. Religion, the family, children, the

father/motherland, the king's body, the presidency – yep, they're all sacred. So, of course, is art”.

Such contentiousness and polemic around the notion of the sacred to me seem to be part of exactly what the curators intended to capture with this exhibition: not to provide answers or solutions or to be subversive, but simply to state, demonstrate and document in Bataille way that art as a form of language continues to convey a sense of spirituality and the sacred in various ways. In his article 'Religion, the sacred and some misunderstandings' in the afore-mentioned issue of *art press* 2, French philosopher Guy Lardreau (2008:81) articulates the idea of the sacred as “linked to that of the imagination by a simple connection: if there is such a thing as transcendental imagination, then it is easy to turn it into a transcendent imagination”. The curators have managed to present a comprehensive selection of artworks that demonstrate the continuation of the rendering of an experience and even a belief in a personalised, subjective sacred in spite of the deep inroads of disbelief and doubt that deconstruction and scepticism have caused in our time. However, the exhibition does not purport to reiterate well known philosophies and theories on the subject of the spiritual and the sacred, but references them concisely and conjunctly and lets the artworks do the talking instead.

The decision to arrange and categorise the artworks in themes was a necessary one in order to attempt to rationalise different manifestations of the phenomenon, which of course also enforces the very concept of the exhibition. As such the exhibition covers a wide range of experiences, views and manifestations of the sacred, the transcendent or the spiritual, or how ever one wishes to describe notions of an alternative dimension. The choices of artworks are not intended at presenting depictions of faith and the traditional terminologies of religions, but include, for instance, Western forms of shamanic ritual; eroticism as an experience outside of self; colour field as contemplative surface and site of meditation; and modern day experiences of sin, loss, faith, faithlessness, despair, hope, hopelessness, desire, ecstasy, fate and redemption in the work of contemporary artists such as Andres Serrano, Jean-Michel Alberola and Jonathan Monk.

A critical question that is not pertinently asked but evidently suggested in the exhibition, is what *constitutes* the sacred, especially in view of the fact that we live in a time of prevalent theories that posit that the sacred is a thing of the past, something that modern

consciousness has brought to an end by ‘disenchanted’ the world in killing God. In his article ‘Art against the sacred’ in *art press* 2, French author Philippe Forest (2008:15 - 17) warns that a schema that “posits as self-evident that the sacred died yesterday the better to revive today, should make us very wary. ... Let us simply say that it takes a lot of naivety and arrogance to imagine that in the past the sacred – or what science has recently begun to call by that name – forearmed human consciousness against the vertigo of the void, against the gap of nothingness that is opened up by the absence of the divine, the pathos of which is attested by all great art – from ancient tragedy to Christian painting”.

Lardreau, in an interview with Christian Jambet in January 1990 (Lardreau and Jambet 2008:79-81) argues that what is called the *sacred* is a purely imaginary sense of religion. “The sacred”, he maintains, “is the inscription in the *land* and in *time* of a dimension that is supposed to be free from the soil and from time. It is to give that dimension, which escapes space and time, an image, in the strict sense, in space and time”. Forest (2008:11) reiterates French surrealist writer and ethnographer Michel Leiris’s 1938 postulation on the sacred as an emphasis on the possessive adjective – ‘my’ sacred – and which echoes the Lyotardian notion of a subjective, relative sublime. As a trained ethnologist and being part of an emerging school of French school of activist sociologists from the time of Émile Durkheim, Leiris was deliberately surrealist and subversive being influenced by Bataille and Masson and attempted to induce the assumption of a personal position towards the sacred. A work such as *Simulacre* (1925) confirmed his engagement with a search for another real, long before Baudrillard.

Throughout the exhibition the notion of the sacred is articulated as an unrepresentable, multifarious and mostly personal presence or a ‘something’ that continues to haunt and hold the human imagination in very different ways, a feature reflected in many of the views in the *art press* edition. The prominence that *Traces du sacré* gives to Bataille, a theorist who (often erroneously) became known as a blasphemer, is further evidence that the curators did not fall back on naïve, presumptuous and clichéd notions of the sacred. In his work, Bataille employed a graphic, revelatory writing style that elicits strong viewer response through association. Susan Sontag (Bataille 1977:87) maintains

that his *Story of the Eye by Lord Auch*³, for instance, is aimed at inspiring a set of non-verbal erotic fantasies in which fully formed persons are scorned and language plays an instrumental role. Bataille's erotic order entails a sacred of a different kind, an encounter with "divine totality, the eruptive, exuberant continuity of things" (Botting and Wilson 1997:13). He describes his object of desire as radiating with nocturnal brilliance (Botting and Wilson 1997:120), embodied in *Story of the Eye* in the figure of Madame Edwarda, for instance. She is God, but God reconfigured as a public whore (Bataille 1997:235).

Lea Bismuth (2008:95) refers to Bataille's paradoxical definition of the sacred as a site of transgression and is idea that that the absence of God can be found in all of us. This aspect is rendered in several artists' works, according to Bismuth especially in the self-portraits on exhibition, since this is where the question of the sacred becomes a test of the self and maybe a loss of self. According to Bismuth (2008:99), "The 'death of God' prophesied by Nietzsche is simply the conceptual formulation of something that has always been involved in human expression. There is no historical rupture between so-called classical and so-called modern art; only a mind exclusively conditioned by a progressivist vision of art could imagine that modern art was founded on the ruins of the death of God for which it mourns. When Bataille recognizes the death of God, and the vacancy of Heaven, it is above all to uphold a mystic experience that must be a lived one: the organizing within of oneself of the divine absence".

On exhibition at *Traces du sacré* is Lea Pane's photograph, *Situation ideale. Terre-Artiste-Ciel, Écos (Eure)*, 1969, in which the female artist is presented standing right in the middle of the photograph's horizon line and in the middle between heaven of earth, depicting the attainment of a perfect equilibrium. She is in control, dominant and stands relaxed with her hands in her pockets. The void in the self is filled; she is the centre of the universe. In contrast, in Francis Bacon's *Untitled (Crouching Nude)*, 1950, the self is presented in crucified position as a pitiful bundle of flesh and mortality, almost as the crucified Christ embodied. As such, through the power of transcendent imagination, the work can be seen as presenting the unrepresentable suffering of God as God become human, signified by way of a lump of meat trembling on a catch. Bismuth (2008:102) remarks that: "Thus the absence of God, his death, must be sought above all in

³ Hereafter referred to as *Story of the Eye*.

ourselves, where God is that which must be lost, what must be taken out of us. The traces of sacrifice, ... whether silent screams, the execution of identity, pestilent flesh or the body's refuse, are nothing but wounds produced by a sacred that is unrepresentable and impossible to experience".

Other works on exhibition include an entirely black work of Damien Hirst with the ambiguous title, *Forgive me father for I have sinned* (2006) and a surface resembling an uneven thick crust of black sugar, that deals with guilt and acquiescence; an example of the performance works of Marina Abramovic that she is currently re-performing and re-producing in higher quality technology in the form of *Thomas Lips*, dealing with empathy and repentance, first presented and filmed in 1975 at Gallery Krinzinger in Innsbruck and re-presented and refilmed in 2005 at Gallery Serge Le Borgne in Paris; figurative work of Mondrian and Kandinsky, dealing with identity and evolution; a monochrome white work dated 1958 of Yves Klein -- known for his conceptual colour reductionism and minimalism -- but given the context of the exhibition allows for a reading of redemptive white-washing and spiritual cleansing; and a film of a performance on Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* of 1970 in Utah of a figure running and stumbling over the rocks of the spiral construct and reaching a dead-end, which adds a totally different personal, nihilistic slant to the well know land artwork. Unexpected from Bruce Nauman, who is not known for clichéd nor conventional statements, is a large neon work at the entrance to the exhibition which states: "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths". This sounds more like nineteenth-century romantic or symbolist vernacular, but the work represents but one example of what the exhibition manages to bring to the fore in terms of the unexpected, the contested and the contentious.

In the end, the premature and rash editorial jabber in *art press 2* apart, the intellectual debates ensuing in the articles of the journal echo much of what is presented in visual form by *Traces du sacré*. Ironically, the exhibition presents human beings' ongoing and persistent will to believe in a transcendent real, albeit a matter of finding it in the self, but it does not share Durkheim's concern of nearly a century ago of how to maintain integrity and coherence in a time when things such as shared religious ideas and moral codes have ceased to exist. A particular feature of the exhibition is that it is full of little marvels that, in a time of high-tech globalisation and anonymity, allow a glimpse through the crevice into the human reality of artists' existential experiences.

More information on the exhibition can be found on internet at

<http://www.centrepompidou.fr/>

Sources quoted

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