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Sense Experience as the Source of Art

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Dear Conference Participants!

My talk today is, firstly, a kind of introduction to this year's Ascension conference of the Visual Art Section, during which the works of contemporary artists will be presented and discussed. But over and above this immediate occasion I would like to offer some food for thought for the work of the Section in general, as it seeks to balance creatively between engagement with Rudolf Steiner's artistic work, and inquiry into new, so far untraveled paths of a spiritually oriented art. Here my comments will follow the clear thread of seven remarks by Steiner which are, perhaps unjustifiably, too little known. During the course of my work over many years as the publisher of Rudolf Steiner's artistic oeuvre within the Collected Works, the perspective these remarks offer has become increasingly important to me. The aspects contained in them seem to me very apt as fruitful guidelines for creating, viewing and judging art in the anthroposophic context. And, as a figure who assuredly knew something about art once said, "Only what is fruitful can be true."

The first of these aspects concerns one of the cultural parameters necessary here, in our case the history of art in the 20th century. As long as we do not think this is simply a history of decline (starting perhaps already with the end of the Renaissance) but instead a deeply founded evolution closely allied with the evolution of human consciousness and of all culture - which can therefore scarcely be adequately described in terms of 'good' or 'bad' - then we will regard Steiner's emphasis on the evolutionary aspect as illuminating. In a lecture he gave to artists of various schools in Munich on 17 February 1918¹, he said this:

I [...] I believe that art must continually advance along with our generally advancing life of soul."

Here he very carefully stresses the close connection of art with a 'generally advancing life of soul'. This intimate relationship between art and the human psyche, in a cultural context informed by its era, already indicates that art does not and should not lead a separate existence from social conditions in general, but rather proceeds from inner experiences that are in dialogue with their respective society and culture, are influenced by these, engage with them or also actively intervene in them, and in the process develop experiential insights. He is not speaking here, either, of a specifically anthroposophic art, but of art as such; nor is the expression 'advance' employed in the naïve sense in which all development is seen as an improvement on the past. Instead he uses the word initially in the sense of change and transformation.

If we relate this statement to the artworks that Steiner conceived, supervised or himself created between 1907 and 1924, we can conclude that these likewise did not stand outside the cultural milieu of the time, but were part of the general development of culture and of human interiority. If we take just one 'type' of such work, for instance his sketches, changes

in their artistic form between 1907 and 1924 can be described as a development which we can even subdivide into several phases ². The same is true of the field of architecture, where, in relation solely to buildings for the Goetheanum Hill, we can trace developments from the first Goetheanum through its adjoining buildings to the model for the second Goetheanum. In this trajectory, the most striking sign of advance is probably that from a largely rounded organic building style to one whose form language is polygonal, without any immediate motive for such development apparent in the phenomena themselves. Rudolf Steiner himself indirectly addressed this aspect of the change when – already at the time of the first Goetheanum building – he stressed in public that he would design a second such building differently from the first (as he demonstrated after the first Goetheanum fire when he conceived the model for the second), and a third differently again ³.

In the case of the Goetheanum buildings, these changes and advances can be understood in terms of aspects that Steiner himself already suggested, such as a more intimate familiarity with the whole Dornach surroundings developed through years of living there. This intimacy, which Steiner described as love for this landscape, was articulated in the second building, conceived in 1924, through its evidently greater affinity with the geological forms of the Swiss Jura. But it is also absolutely legitimate to ask whether the developing architecture of the early 20th century between 1913 and 1924 might not also show signs of what we have described already as a general advance in the human psyche.

At the same time, the scope of such an advance may allow the specific nature of Steiner's work to become still more clearly apparent. While the first Goetheanum showed some affinity with the waning days of art nouveau ⁴, the second Goetheanum can easily be placed into the diverse context of Expressionist architecture ⁵. This does not mean of course that Steiner's works are thereby robbed of their individuality and originality simply by being assigned, and thus subordinated, to a general cultural tendency. Actually, the reverse is true: art movements such as art nouveau and Expressionism can be interpreted as symptoms of altered or entirely new values in a particular culture or society that point in turn to deeper spiritual transformations.

The turn towards abstraction from 1907 onwards and ultimately to non-representational art around 1910, the emergence of many diverse art movements in the second decade of the 20th century which exerted an influence well beyond the two world wars, the development of "pure" forms by Javlensky, Malevich or Brancusi – all this and a great deal more formed the context within which Steiner's works must be considered. Against the backdrop of this complex situation we can discover and demonstrate specific potentials that still retain their validity today. We also encounter the theme of advance in Rudolf Steiner's second quotation, in which he expressly advises his audience to participate in developments in contemporary art, and to learn to sense the impulses at work there. Yet in no way does he regard such efforts to understand modern art as a marginal luxury, a secondary undertaking to be practised alongside one's own artistic work, but rather as a habit that should be cultivated and developed. Thus in a lecture that Steiner gave in Munich only a few days previously to the first quote, on 15 February ⁶, he says:

II “[...] and the more we accustom ourselves to gaining a living sense of the new impulses in art, the more this will signify a genuine advance such as we also of course endeavour to realise in the domain of anthroposophic spiritual science.”

'Genuine advance' is here seen as the common denominator of a living, feeling involvement both in contemporary art and anthroposophic work. Why does Steiner here stress the 'genuine' nature of such advance? Perhaps because a living, feeling involvement in modern art will always confront us with something new that cannot be derived from anything we have previously known. Habituating ourselves to engage with ever new phenomena in a living way, and meet these with interest and lack of prejudice, is the only way to avoid pursuing an entirely predetermined path. Steiner himself offered several instances of lively participation in the contemporary art of his time, such as his visit to the studio of the Swede Frank Heyman, little known today, who was creating Cubist sculptures as early as 1908/9 and must therefore be counted amongst the avant-garde of that era. Better known are Steiner's encounters with artists from the contemporary art scene in Munich, such as the pupil of Kandinsky, Maria Giesler, through to Alexei Javlensky. In relation to Heyman, Steiner himself once illuminatingly expressed the impression made on a spiritual researcher by his artworks:

These are figures that strike the realistic sensibility of our age in a way that we might perhaps characterise as follows: „What kind of crazy painter is this? We see here a few colossal figures whose heads appear in prismatic rather than regularly conceived shape. The hands, gestures, in short the whole figure, are composed of all kinds of angles and corners. But this figure makes a different impression on the esoteric researcher. He is immediately struck by the fact that this art is drawn from apprehension of a higher world. If one knows the real secrets of the human etheric body, if one knows how this etheric body is a body of forces underlying the physical body, how every movement expressed by the latter is always accompanied by a quite specific movement in the etheric body, then one has the sense that this artist was creating out of the forces of the etheric body and that his forms are drawn from supersensible experiences ⁷“

These passages seem to me exemplary in their engagement with works that present us with hitherto unknown aspects, things we are not used to. At first sight we may make negative judgements because a work is so different from what past experience has taught us to recognise and value. Those who do not, like Steiner, possess the capacity for esoteric perception, may nevertheless at least gain from this perspective a sense of respect towards something unfamiliar, which does not necessarily disclose its nature fully at a first encounter, or even after further acquaintance. This stance can also help to counter the very prevalent view that something new we are presented with, which we neither understand nor immediately feel to be aesthetic, must necessarily have arisen from a superficial and therefore inartistic sensibility.

Even great artists are not safe from such prejudices. The young Wassily Kandinsky, for instance, reacted with indignation to his first sight of one of Monet's haystacks, saying that the painter "had no right to paint so imprecisely" ⁸. In a clearly spontaneous outburst he interpreted Monet's approach to painting as a violation of the moral duty of all painters to present clearly discernible objects to their viewers. And those who do not comply with this are committing a social act with their work in which they transgress the values of society. In my experience, when encountering phenomena previously unknown to us, the most fruitful attitude is to assume that the work before us is founded on actual experiences, and that the artist must have been serious in his intentions even if there is a playful, ironic or provocative intention at work in it.

But even when conversation with an artist inclines us to the view that he is handling his experiences and the artistic material in a merely superficial or frivolous way, a masterly eye can turn, quite irrespective of this appraisal, to the experiences underlying it, and at a certain moment perhaps even ideally understand an artist better than he understands himself and the world. The viewer may even be able to do this more easily because he himself did not create the work. Thus the judgement of a work of art is something entirely different from the artist's own self-appraisal. From a certain point of view in fact we might say that the latter is simply one of the viewers of his work. Mere responsibility for its creation does not mean that a viewer must intrinsically accept or even submit to the artist's own estimation of his work and himself. In the same way there is absolutely no need to share Nietzsche's view of himself in order to acknowledge the fruitfulness of his works; the same is true of Villa-Lobos in the realm of music, or of Salvador Dali in painting.

But now let us turn very specifically to a few qualities that, in Rudolf Steiner's view, distinguish the advance of art in its connection with general human advances. In February 1918 in Munich ⁹, once again, he says the following:

III "[...] one has the sense that what actually occurs in art, or in artistic creativity and its appreciation, must today be raised higher in our consciousness than was the case in earlier eras of art."

This sentence is formulated in a strikingly open way, and therefore allows very diverse interpretations. It can be understood firstly to refer to reflection on artworks of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century which Steiner himself has seen, which had given him the impression that the creators of these works could sense the need – more or less unconsciously – to become more aware than previously of the process of artistic creation and its appreciation. Or we can also understand it to mean that such a need is acknowledged only by those who seek "genuine" advances in art and the science of the spirit, and wish to pursue these more consciously.

Or again we can understand the sentence very intuitively as referring to the fact that, since instinctual artistic capacities are increasingly failing as time continues, many things, activities and processes that were accomplished in the past in an unconscious or even instinctive way are now becoming, and must become, ever more conscious. As instinctive abilities wane, art too will fail if it looks only to the past. Frank Heyman's works, specifically, could stand as an example here of artists raising deeper and subtler apprehensions of their own constitution to the surface, and bringing this to consciousness in their artworks despite the isolation and misunderstanding this may bring them.

On the other hand, these works also need viewers who have prepared themselves to receive them, who are willing to raise the process of aesthetic experience into ever greater awareness. This requires a beholder who is willing to engage in such forward development; to actively free himself, above all, from traditional aesthetic criteria which may no longer correspond to newly created works, and to consciously cultivate independence from them. The way in which these new works affect the beholder is in fact not distinct from the latter, nor from his readiness or otherwise to encounter the new and unknown.

In his writings and lectures Rudolf Steiner repeatedly spoke of processes that lie beneath the surface of ordinary awareness, not only in relation to what happens during artistic creation but also in the aesthetic experience of the beholder. On this occasion I want to highlight just a few themes that can clarify how Steiner's aesthetic inquiries anticipate certain developments in 20th century art and also render them comprehensible. These developments can certainly be seen in connection with the "generally advancing life of soul" in this era.

In the spring of 1909, in advance of the first summer play performances that began in Munich in 1909 with the staging of Edouard Schuré's *The Children of Lucifer*, Steiner decided to reissue the edited text of a lecture he had given in 1888 at Vienna's Goethe Association, on "Goethe as Father of a New Aesthetics". The decision to cultivate aesthetic reflections alongside the performance of artistic works can be seen to accord with Steiner's view, cited above, that processes involved in creating and engaging with art should be raised increasingly into consciousness. In the autumn of the same year, in a talk for the first time entitled "Anthroposophy", given during the annual general meeting of the Theosophical Society in Berlin, Steiner elaborated a view of the senses that extends beyond the accepted scope of the five senses to include additional "lower" and "upper" senses.

In an additional lecture not originally included in the programme, entitled "The Nature of the Arts", he went further in his Goethe-related thoughts on aesthetics by firstly locating the sources of different art forms in different sensory realms, and secondly elucidating the connection between artistic work and diverse spiritual beings. The latter he said were both connected with the origins of the sensory organs and also work through these in artistic activity. These lectures which have proven controversial chiefly because of their imaginative and, to some, seemingly allegorical mode of presentation, are of particular interest in that Steiner here anticipates perspectives which in retrospect grew to be of ever greater importance for 20th century art. Given the statement that processes connected with artistic work will become ever more conscious, it is illuminating to recognise that, on the one hand, 20th century art increasingly discovered and opened up the human body as field of perception, and on the other that it extended artistic articulation into the realm of the upper senses.

In his 1909 lecture, however, Steiner basically accomplishes nothing other than concretise something he included in the "definition" of beauty formulated in 1888 as "a reality in the sense world"¹⁰, by asking what such sensory reality can encompass. The various forms of art, in this view, do not simply take up outward sensory perceptions so as to endow them with the character of spirit in artistic activity but instead, in dance, in mime and all movement arts, they also invoke the internal bodily perceptions of the sense of balance, movement and life.

Yet with the rationale he develops here, Steiner is by no means implying that we must remain within the confines of traditional art forms. To take just one obvious example, the *Goetheanum* aims to be a work of sculptural, of architecture, which the beholder should perceive in process terms as musical in character. Discovery of the anthropological sources of traditional art forms thus by no means signifies a rejection of cross-genre or new types of art, but instead offers orientation that may allow us to draw on these sources to create new works. These would neither copy old forms nor detach themselves from art's development in the modern era.

In relation to an increasing focus on the human body as medium of experience and articulation, we may perhaps think firstly here of body art, where painting uses the body as a canvas; or also the Anthropometry of Yves Klein, in which the body was used as painting instrument, as brush or printing mould. These are still relatively external ways in which the body is integrated into the visual arts. The early work of Rebecca Horn leads us into deeper regions: here, using body prostheses, she explored the enigma of how human sentience is capable of extending beyond the living body into non-living attachments to (or replacements of) our corporeality. In this context, the English sculptor Anthony Gormley recollected a childhood experience in which, in unusual circumstances, he was able to extend his bodily sentience beyond the normal confines of his physical body, simultaneously having a primal spatial experience of embodiment which has continued to be a theme and question preoccupying him in his life and work.

In the exhibition "Rudolf Steiner and Contemporary Art" in 2011, Anish Kapoor installed a room where each visitor could be massaged individually, and at the same time perceive inwardly appearing colour phenomena. Here colour was not used as a material medium that approaches the beholder from without, but instead was evoked and configured as a phenomenon of bodily experience. And one last example: at the 2013 Venice Biennale, artist Kim Sooja lined the Korean pavilion in coloured, reflecting foil which first transported the viewer into a seemingly bottomless space, thus invoking a fear of falling; the bodily feeling accompanying this was greatly intensified in a further, completely dark and soundproofed room so that – together with inwardly arising after-images of the outward experience – one could have a greatly accentuated experience of one's own breathing and pulse.

In the other direction, the realm of the upper senses was also increasingly discovered in 20th century art as a medium for perceiving and articulating artistic processes. Here, above all, we can first regard the broad field of interpersonal perception and social processes as mediating the sense of I or ego. It is well known that the "social sculpture" work of Joseph Beuys developed social processes into a medium of perception, articulation and wide-ranging reflection. More recently, this field of (I-) perception has been intensified in the actions and performances of the Serbian artist Marina Abramovic (in her action "The Artist is Present" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York) into an immediate encounter between two people no longer in any way impeded by extraneous factors.

Thus we can sum up here as follows: extending the spectrum of experience and articulation towards the "lower", inner-body, and the "upper", social senses, has become a firm part of the development of art in the 20th century. Rudolf Steiner not only theoretically anticipated these developments but, through his innovative insights, also enabled us to locate genuine aesthetic experience within these processes, and illumine their deep anthropological dimensions.

But other aspects too are connected with these developments. If the perceptual realms of art expand beyond hitherto obligatory confines, previously acknowledged borders of aesthetic self-perception will also change. In particular, a gradually awakening interest in everything process-related, also already within the bounds of the visual arts, means that art products and objects recede from their previous primary significance to become instead just a starting point, a material phase or a merely constituent phenomenon of superordinate processes in

which they are embedded. And this is not merely externally so but also inwardly. As far back as Kandinsky's innovative treatise *On the Spiritual in Art*, this key principle was set in motion: no longer to seek the true locus of art naively in an object, as previously, but in the process of beholding it. This has significance initially for aesthetic reflection in our experience of already existing objects but also then necessarily exerts an influence on further artistic creation.

The consequence of this as the 20th century progressed was that art increasingly burst its boundaries, not only in the concept of a 'work' as the start and end point of all aesthetic reflections, but also above all in the development of socially-oriented action art. Here we can no longer speak of a work in the traditional sense, with its clearly definable boundaries, but instead must think in terms of open processes in which the primary and decisive thing are individual and ultimately non-confined perceptions and experiences that cannot in any way be commodified.

This progressive aspect of 20th century art can already be discovered in Steiner's comments on the first Goetheanum, but at the same time also in his astonishingly radical stance towards the status of this aspect. In a lecture on 21 November 1914 in Dornach ¹¹ he says:

IV "[...] and that is the principle, you see, of the new art as opposed to the old art. These old arts were always concerned with what is present in outward space. In the new art this is no longer the concern. [...] This is, I would like to say, the key aspect of the evolutionary advance in which we stand."

The importance of this dictum cannot be overestimated, though of course it can be overlooked. To take it seriously means also that we radically revise the criteria with which we view and judge visual objects and the processes connected with them. Taking the example of the installations by Ilya Kabakov we can elucidate in a direct and striking way the extent to which Steiner's indications at the beginning of the 20th century can offer a foundation for apt understanding of these works. Whereas the traditionally oriented viewer assumes that Kabakov's installations are works in the traditional sense, in which the form of distinct objects is altered to provoke aesthetic experiences, in fact Kabakov uses daily objects that have previously been used and utilised. He leaves them in the form in which he found them but groups them into new configurations. The ordinary beholder, with his outlook and expectations, may see nothing more in the installations than a collection of rubbish, whereas Kabakov is in fact concerned with the relationships between the objects: with the shaping of the viewer's inner processes between expectation and memory, sharp focus and overview, between the ordinary and the extraordinary, and between waking and dream.

Thus his realm of art is not the sensory object in a more limited sense but the viewer's consciousness with its intentions, content, processes and qualities. Here traditional aesthetic criteria such as unity, proportion and balance do certainly figure, though not in the naïve realism of sensory attention to perceived objects but in the enlarged awareness of the beholder - who must, however be open in turn to his own inner experiencing of these qualities. However variously perceived the details of Kabakov's works may be, he can only create this form of art through a deeply and inwardly experienced sense that modern art is no longer predicated on external objects in space; and at the same time he must assume that there is an audience for this art - or that there will eventually be. Only if we do not go along with this

development will we regard Kabakov's works as an expression of art's general decline; for we have failed to meet the conditions in our own awareness for discovering this kind of art where it is experienced: in the – supersensible – inner life of the beholder.

Thus we are concerned here with two kinds of development that are closely connected in the 20th century with the theme of sense experience as the source of art:

- A. Enlarging the scope of the senses in the visual arts to encompass the lower and upper senses.
- B. Gradually developing awareness of the productive powers in human consciousness, i.e. overcoming of naïve realism by acknowledging that the true locus of art is not the outward object but a process of consciousness that encompasses it and actively unfolds the potential the artist has embedded in it.

Today, in the context of these developments, in a much more precise way than previously, we can address the "sensory-supersensible" process involved in both the creation and experience of art. Artists such as Ilya Kabakov (in the installation field) or Bill Viola (in the video installation field) create works in which the artist is clearly shaping not just outward objects but also the beholder's space of consciousness, his expectations and fears, his intentions and experiences, his perception and thinking. This connection between sense perception, thinking, receptivity and productivity is something I now wish to consider a little further.

During the course of the 20th century, a subtle feeling has arisen (among other things) that our perception of the world through conceptual thinking has a "deadening" character. A reflex identification of perceptual phenomena, increasingly intensified in our "rapid-fire" culture, reinforces this tendency; and those of subtler sensibility gradually become more aware of it. Steiner did not try to circumvent this process. Instead he took it seriously as an intrinsic part of artistic endeavour as long as it is encompassed by an aesthetic capacity which he calls "humour". This does not so much refer to our usual understanding of the term but to an ability to see, as they are, opposites, contradictions, things that mutually exclude each other – a death-like disintegration – but at the same time to integrate them in a superordinate realm, to "raise" them and know they have been reconciled. Thus in the lecture already mentioned on 15 February 1918 in Munich ¹², Steiner says:

V "[...] In the soul both of the creative artist and the beholder a process of deadening and then re-enlivening through humour must always be accomplished."

With this passage Steiner suggests that the deadening quality that enters perception through thinking consciousness cannot be circumvented or avoided but instead can itself be integrated into the process of aesthetic experience without it losing its quality. Humour here is an aesthetically significant capacity to perceive what is contradictory, oppositional and fragmented in the world but at the same time to see beyond it to a totality in which opposites have not vanished but have been encompassed. If we can only see the contradictory nature of the world without an intimation of the superordinate unity, we become cynics or tragic figures; and if we do not take the contradictions seriously, we succumb to quixotic illusions.

In this characterisation Steiner is pointing to subtleties at work in the process that unfolds in the soul of the creative artist and the aesthetic beholder. This is the true locus of aesthetic experience. This quality too is one that people have increasingly become aware of in developments in the visual arts in the 20th century – by no means only explicitly in humorous, comic or bizarre elements but in an increasing sense of the inner necessity of conveying contradictory experience as such in art rather than smoothing it over or ignoring it. To view and enjoy art we need this reflex conceptualising, identifying and distancing thinking which is only raised into “humour” if the disintegrating power that is immediately triggered can be integrated into a totality with our perceptions. This is not simply a given but must be drawn forth as actively invoked humour.

These powers active in perception of the sense world need to be raised increasingly into our awareness so as to unfold the artistic potential inherent in sense perceptions. Here it is not sense perceptions themselves that must be raised into the light of consciousness as in the case of the bodily senses; in the ordinary five senses and the upper senses, instead, our thinking and judging activity prevents the unfolding of their potential, and this begins already with our judgements about what is good or bad art, what is legitimate or not. Steiner was acutely aware of this, as shown by the following quotation, on 3 July 1917 ¹³:

VI [...] The most curious thing occurs in human life in fact in these disputes about what is beautiful or ugly, about what is artistically legitimate or not. You see, ultimately this whole judgement about beauty and ugliness, about legitimate or unacceptable art, is rooted in human singularity itself. We will never find a generally valid definition of beauty since nothing more nonsensical could exist than a universally decreed standard of beauty or ugliness. Nothing more nonsensical could exist. One may not like an artwork, and yet one can still engage with the artist’s intentions, enter in to the work that one previously failed to comprehend, and may then find it very beautiful in fact; can realise that one did not like it before only because one failed to understand it.”

This is such a fundamental statement because, in his comments on the sources of artistic creativity, in his account of the laws underlying or immanent in artistic work, in his emphasis on the need to detach ourselves from purely subjective expression in art, Steiner can easily give us the impression that there are eternal laws of beauty that the artist must follow like state-prescribed legislation if he is to produce aesthetically valuable art. But his suggestion that our understanding may be deficient and that remedying this can open doors to aesthetic enjoyment, should by no means be taken as a guarantee of aesthetic experience. He does not, after all, say that we will find something beautiful when we understand it, but that this may be the case. A small but vital distinction!

The erroneous view that there are universally valid laws of beauty leads easily to the idea that a particular style in art is the only one that should be pursued and repeated in future. If such an idea were pursued and realised in the long term, art would separate itself off from the advancing human soul, becoming isolated in itself and thus lapsing from humanity’s ongoing evolution. Humanity’s general process of evolution is not there to serve art but the latter, instead, must serve human life and in the broadest sense seek to improve its condition. The view of many artists that they are producing the only possible true art also becomes the underlying reason for their negative judgement of other artists (or of contemporary

art altogether) which ultimately tells us less about art itself than about the person judging it. Steiner, however, did not succumb to the temptation to impose his own negative judgement on such a stance in turn, but instead illuminated the psychological roots of this outlook. On 15 February 1918 he said in Munich ¹⁴:

VII “[...] Artists generally speaking have nothing good to say about what other artists produce [...] and this is because they sometimes harbour illusions about their own work. Yet the artist has to create out of illusions, and this could be precisely the right thing and give the right impulse for his artistic work.”

Steiner therefore did not moralise superficially about this proclivity for dismissing other artists and art, since he recognised the causes of such dismissal and was able to properly appraise them psychologically. As we saw already in the case of Kandinsky, even outstanding artists do not necessarily have the ability to objectively evaluate other artists and their works. There is a well-known anecdote about Matisse which relates how the painter attended an exhibition and spoke disparagingly of a work by Brancusi. A recently published anthology has recorded sometimes devastating comments of this kind in the literary realm ¹⁵.

One controversial theme in anthroposophically oriented art which repeatedly surfaces especially in judgements and discussions, is whether works by anthroposophically-oriented artists are, or should be, immediately discernible as “anthroposophic art” without further knowledge of the context or artist – in this respect comparable to, say, works from the Impressionist or Cubist school. The exhibition “Aenigma – 100 Years of Anthroposophic Art” has provided a wealth of material on this theme and adequately demonstrates the extent to which the question can only be answered in the negative. Certainly there are plenty of works whose themes suggest they originate in an anthroposphic orientation, and at least as many again whose technique may leads us to suspect something similar.

But in the history of art inspired by Steiner there are also sufficient examples that cannot be identified in this way – often in fact works by artists who personally met Steiner and received important stimulus from him. It should therefore be clear that the criteria of motif and technique ought not to be sufficient to identify “anthroposophic art”. The really interesting thing here, though, are the consequences that follow from this. If not particular motifs and techniques, what constitutes the core and the distinctive nature of anthroposophically inspired art? Fortunately a question-and-answer session in relation to this theme survived, in which Steiner himself clearly suggested that it is not the task of anthroposophically oriented art to reflect spiritual ideas and motifs in the sensory realm according to particular fixed criteria, but that instead artists should primarily seek to approach the “flux of spirit” in their respective material. On 26 August 1921 in Dornach ¹⁶ he leaves the results and outcome of such experience as open as possible.

VIII “[...] Question: Wouldn’t art influenced by anthroposophic teachings have the tendency to become uniform [...] as if produced by a particular school of painting?”

Dr. Steiner: If we comprehend, truly comprehend what can really emerge as art from the spiritual orientation of anthroposophy, it seems to me that this question will not arise at all; we will not be lured into thinking that anthroposophy could ever seek to subject art to

the influence of anthroposophic teachings. An anthroposophic outlook cannot regard art in any other way than as emerging from an experience of the flux of spirit within matter, from living engagement with the material.

[...] I can tell you that my continual wish is that people will use the capacities they have to meet what approaches the soul, and to show and depict what they wish to not in any monotonous way but in great variety and diversity."

There is no scope here for me to trace the development of "anthroposophic art" in the 20th century, with all its branches, sociological processes and interpretational contexts, and unfortunately no history of this field exists as yet. It is not possible, therefore to refer you to an exhaustive bibliography on the subject. The exhibitions and publications by Reinhold Fäth are, though, important milestones on the path of historical elucidation, even if Fäth's views and theoretical appraisal of the phenomenon are certainly debatable.

Evaluation of the art that has arisen since Steiner's time is a subject I would like to conclude today with a last but in my view especially important reference to esoteric deepening of aesthetic perception. Drawing on guidance for esoteric schooling I would like to show how the spiritually evolving human being can, through corresponding exercises and by his own powers, grow able to change, enlarge, refine and deepen the experience of his body and senses. The text can be found in Rudolf Steiner's instructions for esoteric schooling.¹⁷

The quality of positivity that Steiner addresses there is known, of course, but in my experience has scarcely ever been applied to an encounter with modern art. This may be because, in all other accounts of Rudolf Steiner's schooling of cognition, this quality is scarcely ever related so directly as here to resulting capacities of refined perception of one's own being and of one's spatial surroundings.

IX In the fourth month the new exercise we should adopt is that of positivity. This means seeking what is good, fine, beautiful etc. in all experiences, beings, people and things. This quality of the soul is best characterised in a Persian legend about Christ Jesus. One day when he was walking along with his disciples, they saw a dead dog lying by the roadside, in an advanced state of decay and putrefaction. All the disciples turned aside from this unpleasant sight. Only Christ Jesus stopped, looked thoughtfully at the dog and said: What beautiful teeth the creature has! Where the others saw only something repulsive, he sought beauty. In the same way the esoteric pupil must try to find something positive in every phenomenon and every person or creature.

If he does so he will soon notice that a beauty lies hidden beneath the surface of something ugly; that even a criminal conceals good within him and that the divine soul lives too in the person of a lunatic. This is not to say that we should call black white, and white black. But there is a difference between judging another with our personal predilections of sympathy and antipathy, or instead lovingly entering into someone or something else, into the life that is different from ours and continually asking: How is it that this other is like this and acts in this way?

By its very nature, such a point of view seeks to help what is imperfect to improve rather than merely criticising and finding fault. To object that many people's circumstances



necessitate them judging or criticising others is irrelevant here, for if this is the case it means that the person in question cannot undergo a proper esoteric schooling. There are indeed many circumstances that do not allow people to pursue esoteric schooling sufficiently. Here there is no point in impatiently demanding that, despite this, we should make progress which is only possible under certain conditions.

Someone who consciously attends to the positive in all his experiences for a month will gradually notice that the following feeling slips inside him: it is as if his skin grew permeable in all directions and his soul opens to all kinds of hidden and subtle processes in his surroundings of which he was previously completely unaware. This is precisely what is involved here: combating the lack of attention that exists in every person towards subtle things of this kind.

Once you notice that the feeling described is present in the soul like a kind of bliss, you should try to direct it in thought towards the heart, and from there let it stream up to the eyes, and from there out into the space before and around you. You will notice that this gives you an intimate relationship to this space. You learn to regard a part of your surroundings as something that belongs to you. A great deal of concentration is needed for this exercise; and above all acknowledgement that everything tempestuous, violent, vehement and emotional will have a wholly destructive effect on the mood described here. The exercises of previous months should continue alongside this as before.

With these thoughts I would like to conclude, for now, my reflection on sense perception as the source of art.

I wanted to show not only the extent to which, at the beginning of the 20th century, Rudolf Steiner was able to prefigure developments that would enduringly inform modern art, but also and especially how he provided foundations for our understanding of many phenomena in 20th century art which are connected with a broadened sensory scope and an expansion of self-perception. In his view, this understanding should always be closely allied with the will to engage with contemporary art. It is quite clear that Steiner did not want artists to close themselves off from contemporary art because of perceptions and judgements arising from their anthroposophic orientation. On the contrary, he thought they should engage with it with deeper understanding, intensified capacities of perception and reflective tolerance. And thus he not only made important contributions to the understanding of art and the self-evaluation of the spiritually-oriented artist, but provided insights that today can still point us futurewards because they are far from being exhausted.

Many thanks!

- 1 GA 271, not available in English
- 2 C. R. Halfen, 'Entwicklungslinien in der Graphik Rudolf Steiners', in: *Stil* 4/2005-6, p.
- 3 Answer to a question from the audience after a lecture on Art in Dornach, 26th August 1921 (GA 77a)
- 4 Most evidently in the forms of the corridor entrance at the east end of the East Rotunda.
- 5 Some consider that the 1914 design for a large villa by Fritz Kaldenbach (1887- 1918) not only shows the resemblance of certain details to Steiner's second Goetheanum but might even have been an influence on him. However such people must either be ignorant of the whole developmental context of Steiner's buildings in Dornach or have intentionally overlooked them. Nor has it been explained how Steiner could have seen Kaldenbach's design for a building that was not built. The only design by Kaldenbach ever realized was the Seck mill and machine factory in Dresden.
- 6 GA 271. Not available in English
- 7 Rudolf Steiner, 'Der Budapester Internationale Kongress der Föderation Europäischer Sektionen der Theosophischen Gesellschaft.' In: *Mitteilungen für Mitglieder der Deutschen Sektion der Theosophischen Gesellschaft*, reprint Dornach 1999, p. 125.
- 8 Kandinsky, *Recollections*
- 9 GA 271. Not available in English.
- 10 In the lecture "Goethe as Father of a New Aesthetics" (1888) Steiner says: "Beauty is a sensory reality that appears like an idea." The lecture is available in English online at: <http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA271/English/RSPC1922/18881109p01.html>
- 11 GA 158. Not available in English.
- 12 GA 271. Not available in English.
- 13 GA 176, lecture 5. This does not appear to be available in English.
- 14 GA 271. Not available in English.
- 15 Jörg Drews (ed.), *Dichter beschimpfen Dichter*, 2nd edition, Frankfurt a.M., 2006.
- 16 GA 77b. Not available in English.
- 17 *Seelenübungen*, GA 267 p. 57. English: *Soul Exercises. Word and Symbol Meditations 1903-1924*. Anthroposophic Press 2015