

The Third New Metaphysical Art National Conference: The Arts and the Renewal of the Spirit

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A protest movement is gathering momentum in the peaceful folds of the South Downs. New Metaphysical Art, organised through the University of Sussex Institute of Education, has sprung to life in response to what it sees as 'the low pragmatism of the age' and the 'unprecedented numbing of sensibility in our time'. Founded by writer PETER ABBS, composer JONATHAN HARVEY and dancer ANNA CARLISLE, the movement is committed to radical new developments in the making and understanding of art. It aims to encourage original work across all the arts to stimulate the imagination, to 'shred our liberal and materialist complacency', and hopes to awaken the public to the mediocrity of much of our contemporary art. Although this was only the third annual conference of New Metaphysical Art, it already has a membership of between eight and nine hundred and the predominant atmosphere amongst the two hundred or so participants at this one day conference was of lively dissatisfaction with the 'growing vacuity of our collective culture' and of an almost tangible enthusiasm for change.

The Society's Manifesto is very clear about what it is against. The artistic and spiritual qualities it is seeking to promote, however, are left unspecified, at least for the present. In his opening talk, Peter Abbs pointed to the deliberate breadth of the umbrella term 'metaphysical art', borrowing words of Iris Murdoch (a patron of the movement until her recent death) to describe metaphysical art as art which 'sets up a picture of what we may find in our deepest experience' - art that can depict 'supreme otherness'. He stressed that, although we are born into the predicament of needing to find meaning in our lives, which we may do perhaps through religion, philosophy and art, New Metaphysical Art has not been set up to advocate a return to any kind of closed system of thought. It seeks to remain exploratory, vulnerable and without authority in 'beginning again the broken conversation with Eternity'. This exploration will enable art-makers to be 'cartographers of spiritual insight and desolation' and their task, as set out in the Manifesto, is to create the mythology of the learning mind.

The programmes of these conferences help that epic task, for not only does each presentation reveal its own spiritual direction and artistic techniques for mapping humanity's deepest experiences, but it also acts in relationship with its fellow presentations to hold up a mirror to current spiritual trends in society.

The morning was devoted to the spiritual in music, with talks and recorded musical extracts by JOHN TAVERNER and JONATHAN HARVEY, which at once opened up the vast mental spaces to be charted. (John Taverner's talk had been videod as he was unable to be there in person). John Taverner spoke from deep commitment to Greek Orthodox beliefs, about his perception of a reality that lies beyond our physical world, yet impinges upon it. This other reality is apprehended when the mind, devoid of intellect, is brought into the heart, and it is manifested through artistic forms of an uncompromising purity, which is preserved as it is passed on through the generations. This tradition stands implacably opposed to the expression of the ego, the 'self', in art, where as in life, it is seen as polluting and ultimately destroying the relationship which must exist between the physical and spiritual worlds if we

are not to perish. John Tavener contrasted extracts of his own music, Greek chant and even a song of Randy Newman with Renaissance counterpoint, for example, in which he already hears the seeds of destruction. He considers that music since Beethoven, with the exception of Stockhausen and late Stravinsky, has deteriorated further and further into 'rotting humanism'. There was some indignation and astonishment among conference members as well-loved composers came in for stringent criticism! Jonathan Harvey, more comfortable with the Buddhist tradition, but not believing religious experience to be necessary to the expression of the spiritual in art, spoke of music in terms of reconnecting with nature and making the journey within ourselves. Here, darkness and suffering have to be confronted for healing to begin. Opposites such as light and death can be reconciled in music which is rich in ambiguity, and through its constantly changing, dissolving identities we can be liberated and healed. He played us extracts from his own composition 'One Evening' (1994), for voices and small instrumental ensemble, written as a meditation on emptiness, which he sees as leading to the perception of a mysterious higher harmony and ultimate unity. It is a great pity that John Tavener's absence meant that the advertised open discussion with these two composers could not take place, for some exploration and comparison of their spiritual beliefs and the technical means by which their spiritual beliefs are expressed in music would have contributed significantly to our understanding of these fundamentally important areas of the metaphysical map.

After lunch, there was a change of gear and pace as we returned to the theatre for the four very diverse events of the afternoon. First a live dance performance by AMANDA BANKS, entitled 'Ghost in the Machine', which was commissioned by the Choreographic Laboratory at Sussex University. Here we were invited to absorb sound and movement with equal emphasis and to fuse our visual and aural senses. The work was inspired by an interview given by Marvin Minsky on Artificial Intelligence, and fragmented scraps of his text, proclaiming that man has no 'self' or soul and is nothing but an intelligent machine, figured prominently on the tape which counterpointed the life of the dance movements. Next, the distinguished poet and translator MICHAEL HAMBURGER, who won the First European Translation Prize in 1990 for his translation of poems by the metaphysical poet Paul Celan, introduced and read a personal selection of Celan's work. Here, a metaphysical reality is built through the contrast between the personal, Celan's anguish at the death of his mother in the holocaust, and the universal, diverse archetypal images, which are tightly packed together in repetitive spiral verse forms. For me, both the dance display and the poetry reading raised questions relating to the qualities of time that we live through in a metaphysical art form and it would have been good to discuss this and other matters at this point while the experience was fresh in our minds. After the break, PETER ABBS spoke of the work of ANDRZEJ JACKOWSKI, who sat beside him to add comments and take questions! We were shown paintings from 1983 onwards, including two particularly arresting subjects: 'Toxic Tank' and 'The Boy Who Broke the Spell'. Jackowski's works portray an inner world in clusters of images that are dense and sombre: the dignity of man's labour is a strong theme but it is labour that is threatened by cosmic disaster. Nevertheless, his paintings convey an openness to meaning and struggle towards understanding life expectantly, portraying small affirmations of hope. The conference ended with the film 'Blade Runner', presented by STUART HOOD, former head of the BBC World Service and currently Professor Emeritus of Film. Adapted from the novel by Philip K. Dick 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep', and directed by Ridley Scott, 'Blade Runner' transports us to the year 2019 when the earth's atmosphere is permanently polluted, there are extremes of wealth and poverty, and

'replicants' - adult clones endowed with high intelligence but only a short life span - are used to explore space. The film explores - amongst many other things, the importance of memory and also the delicate balance between logical thought and empathy, without which we may be very "intelligent" but not fully human. The show of paintings and film at the end of the afternoon raised questions about the association of images and the tuning of their intellectual and emotional content in appealing to the human spirit which it would then have been interesting to have discussed in relation to the whole day's presentations.

The New Metaphysical Art movement aims at 'revelation' rather than concept. I certainly came away from this very 'rich' day feeling that I had experienced a wide range of ideas but I was left with the impression of a rather loose collage of events whose connection I needed to articulate more precisely. I would have liked to return the next day - this time with microphones in every aisle of the conference theatre so that everyone's contribution could be clearly heard! - to engage in dialogue with the many knowledgeable people assembled there. The value of these conferences lies just as much in the informal chats over lunch and tea about the questions that are raised, as in the formal presentations which inspire them. The next conference could usefully last two days instead of one - which brings us, as ever, to the subject of funding. So many matters are raised by the parts of the spirit that are currently parts of the spirit which are not currently being expressed, that there must be more time for discussion at these conferences if a metaphysical map is every to be drawn. If there are any metaphysically-minded millionaires about, they would do well to help sustain the protest movement begun by New Metaphysical Art.

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