

*The artificer still struggles with the materials, unable to achieve the direct expression of the Spirit in it. We do not have a meaning proper, expressed in articulate speech, but an infinite longing for meaning which remains a mystery, a riddle not only to us, but to the Ancient Egyptians themselves.*

—Slavoj Zizek, *On Belief*, 2001

**A**sk most contemporary artists (especially in the U.S.) about spirituality in their work and you will likely be met by a long silence, a stuttered defense, a dismissive laugh, or an awkward combination of the three. Spirit (with or without a capital S), as co-opted by right-wing fundamentalists and new age profiteers, has become a pariah. But in 1912, Wassily Kandinsky, in his paean to abstraction since titled “Concerning the Spiritual in Art,” declared the now commonplace integration of the arts the most spiritual advancement in the field. At the time, he focused on disparate elements featuring color as the language of the soul. This psycho-spiritual sensibility largely became his legacy, but in rethinking his thesis in relation to the current and fluid fusion of sound, form, film, paint and image, we find ourselves in the midst of an overwhelmingly spiritual time in art. Semantics being what they are, spirituality instead is nestled alongside personal and political, in the fuzzy ephemera of Big Ideas too weighty to be handled nimbly.

A recent traveling exhibition, *The Missing Peace: Artists Consider the Dalai Lama*, curated by Randy Rosenberg and organized by the Committee of 100 for Tibet and the Dalai Lama Foundation, can be viewed in the context of a redefinition of spirituality. Eighty-eight contemporary artists from twenty-five countries address the ideals of the Dalai Lama, a man whose life and work conflate politics and spirituality, universality and individuality. The exhibition successfully lays claim to an expansive and contemporary version of spirituality, but even Rosenberg is hesitant to talk about it that way, quickly distancing the show from the plagued descriptor. “It encompasses a large umbrella,” she says when I mention the S-word. “This show is much more about collective ideals and lifting the spirit, coming from a bigger place within all of us and looking at different ideals and value systems,” all keys to the *new* spiritual, but who can blame her for responding to the popular, if superficial, interpretation; that’s all we have for now. And until we do something to change it, spiritual will continue its dizzy paths to consumer heaven and political hell.

Precisely because *The Missing Peace* addresses global consciousness and human dignity, meditation and transcendence, through critical and sophisticated works (big-name artists don’t hurt), the exhibition is the grandest of a few recent indicators of redefinition. *ARTnews* claimed spirituality as one of the trends in contemporary art (“Top Ten Trends in Contemporary Art,” *ARTnews*, February 2006) and *Artforum* included a feature on Allan Kaprow (“Allan Kaprow: Life Like Art,” *Artforum*, summer 2006). The resurgence of interest in Kaprow may seem like a questionable connection, but his lifelong investment in the astonishing present was profoundly spiritual and de-materialist. While these same concerns brought him to

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Buddhism eventually, the drive to religion is a result, rather than a source, that can just as easily lead to art. Katarina Wong, an artist in *The Missing Peace* and a theology scholar, shies away from spirituality too, saying via e-mail, “If there is a *spiritual* it isn’t something that is separate from any other way of being.” Kaprow, Kandinsky and even the Dalai Lama would likely agree, but what are we to do with such a vast interpretation?

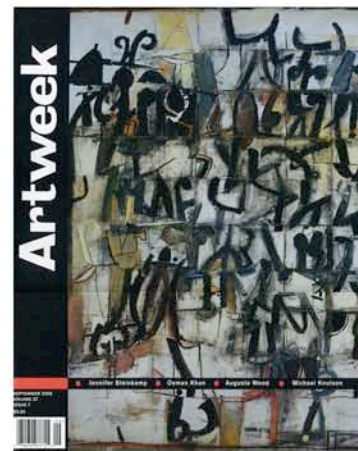
Some of the artists in *The Missing Peace* take the concept of portraiture literally. Others integrate symbology and imagery from Buddhism, robed monks and nuns, Buddhas and lotuses. Marina Abramovic offers a video wall of praying monks and Bill Viola films the Dalai Lama giving a blessing. And in inventive versions, Salustiano Garcia’s striking painting features the Dalai Lama reincarnated as a young girl and Dario Campanile’s intricate portrait of the leader’s hands includes a dove busting through the newspaper he is holding. Symbols have a long history in spirituality, pointing to and activating the unknown much as Internet wiring and global teleconferencing galvanize interconnectivity. Another group of artists address interconnections abstractly and the exhibition as a whole posits the *new* spirituality in reference to relationships between consumerism and poverty, refugees and capitalists, the powerful and the powerless. Wong’s wax fingertips trace the migratory patterns of birds and insects, or

refugees and immigrants. Yoko Inoue’s ceramic Buddhas top water bottles that serve as coin banks, referencing the sale of water as a social and economic quandary as much as a spiritual one. Jane Alexander’s photomontage portrays a ghostlike figure embodying aggressor and victim. The invisible is subject, and the “other”—be it conservative pundit, immigrant worker, or spiritual madman, is neither excluded nor embraced. The shifting currents define an aggregate whole.

Kisho Mukaiyama’s layers of luminous wax are as easily discussed in minimalist terms as they are in relation to meditation. The artist was raised surrounded by Buddhism in Koyasan, Japan, and says via e-mail, “If there is no spirit, there is no body. If there is no body, there are no artworks. The artist needs to improve their technique, but the important thing is improve their lofty spirit.” The antithesis to our avoidance of spirit, Mukaiyama speaks to Zizek’s above referenced longing, as well to the artists of *The Missing Peace*.

Inoue echoes and expands the perspective, “I believe, to many artists, the project also promoted the ethical thinking, reminding us how we exist as an artist day-to-day, considering our political stance, forming and sharing our opinions, being a responsible citizen—and ultimately how we can use art as powerful tool to visualize our shared hopes and concerns.”

Wong says further, “Perhaps by ‘spiritual’ we can also mean asking the big questions—for me one of the biggest is, how do you live your life knowing you’ll die? That seems to be the question many turn to religion to answer. I think it’s also a question the arts and sciences can answer; perhaps they offer different answers but all equally meaningful.” Lewis deSoto’s response is a huge, blow-



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up Buddha. Faced with the death of his father, the artist wondered about the moment of his own death and superimposed his face on his sculpture. His personal response becomes public reverie; the giant cloth figure reclines across the gallery like a grounded parade float in commemoration of father, son, enlightened being, memory and question.

Mystics are the counter-culture of Western religion. Twirling madmen and drunken poets offered their own answers to Big Questions, but in Buddhism and other Eastern religions, mysticism is a mainstay rather than an outlier; identification with something that cannot be empirically known is part of life. So it’s no surprise that artists and others seeking understanding beyond the rational turn to the East (thus, to satisfy an equally hungry god, Eastern spirituality is marketed in increasingly hyperbolic ways across the globe). But what underlies this interest in contemplative and esoteric practices is the root: spirit—my online dictionary adds will, courage, strength, character, guts—to look beyond what we know. Traditionally, the role of monks and preachers (and later philosophers and scientists), like reason, has always taken a backseat to power and consumption. So, are artists the new mystics? *The Missing Peace* makes a case for it, not in the whirling dervish or mad scientist sense, but in that it asks us to see the world, and our experience of it, as the complete, complex, startling and mysterious thing that it is.

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