

The role of Visual Art in the Twenty-first Century

What do we need and what are we looking for when we look at pictures and what are some of the real aims and responsibilities of the contemporary artist?

“Live with your century but do not be its creature. Work for your contemporaries, but create what they need, not what they praise.”

F. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.

There are some words by Rudolf Steiner in *The Fifth Gospel* where he describes what happened to the disciples after the Whitsun event. He says, “It seemed to the people as if these men had been transformed...they seemed to have lost all narrowness, all selfishness in life, to have acquired largeness of heart, an all-embracing tolerance and a deep understanding for everything that is human on earth. Moreover they were able to express themselves in a way that everyone present could understand them. It was felt they could look into every heart, could read the deepest innermost secrets of every soul and so were able to bring consolation to every single individual, to say to him exactly what he needed.”

These words describe what became possible for the disciples as a result of their relationship with Jesus Christ. If we understand Christianity as a fact beyond the confines of institutions and perhaps even names then these words contain a promise of what is possible for every human being. In paintings of the Whitsun event we see a flame above the head of every disciple as the outward and visible sign of the Comforter who came to the bereaved disciples as a fulfilment of Christ’s promise. They sat together in a circle and looked into each other’s faces. Each one knew that he had failed to behave as he would have wished during the unfolding drama of the holy week and beyond. They could not escape from this humiliating fact. However, the atmosphere of bereavement and shame is unexpectedly filled with a transforming presence. Self-knowledge and self-revelation prepare the disciples for an entirely new experience. In what follows we see them grow into their true humanity, and become able to have a new kind of relationship with their fellow human beings, a relationship of abundance in understanding and enabling.

The drama of the Holy Week and beyond left the disciples exposed. Their illusions were stripped away. In this moment of crisis they turned to each other. They were invested through the power of the Holy Spirit with the new ability to share in the work of love that underlies all existence. Genesis tells us of the first creation; Christ prepares us for the second, a task that he gives to us. Whitsun is a key to understanding what that means. I believe as well that this event, particularly in the way it is described in *The Fifth Gospel*, can help us understand the needs and challenges of our time. Visual art has a role in articulating those needs and challenges. It can also help us to address those needs and to find the resources to rise to those challenges.

At the beginning of the 19th century a group of painters began to work in a way that demonstrated that the world was changing. Their work was a confession of poverty. These artists, the Impressionists, experienced that the old sources of inspiration - religion and classical antiquity - had dried up. Faced with this poverty of resources and a complacent and self-satisfied middle-class these artists turned away from respectable society and cast their gaze in a new direction. They turned to the hitherto unrecognised world of ordinary people and their surroundings. As they did this something extraordinary happened. This

hitherto neglected world was flooded with light, was transfigured and invested with a new significance. In their abandonment of the past and their search for a new and more potent truth the Impressionists revealed a new and incredible fact. They showed that the laboratory where we would search for the new truth about humanity was in fact our everyday world and ourselves.

The work of the Impressionists heralded a process in which Cézanne was to play a significant and essential part. They had placed the ordinary human being and his world at the centre of consciousness, but their work needed to be deepened; it needed roots and durability. Cézanne took up this challenge. He changed our experience of the picture plane. The image was no longer a skilled copy of the world, following rules of form, structure and space; rather, the picture plane became a universe entire in itself, and the artist became its creator. The artist now tried, when looking at nature, to penetrate its hidden laws, to get below the surface. If Art was no longer about representation, what was it, and how can we understand it? The English poet and artist, David Jones, says that the landscapes of the post-impressionists contain the same transforming power as the sacrament. For him, the artist, like Christ, dies and becomes one with the world, penetrating its deepest mysteries. In this willing sacrifice, something new is created: a new creation, a *signum* or pointer. But it is no empty symbol; it bears within itself the traces of the process of sacrifice and communion. The work of art is a sign of resurrection.

These two modern movements opened the door to countless new artistic forms and theories. I would like to concentrate on one aspect of that multiplicity. Our experience shows us what many novelists and thinkers have explored, namely that human beings are becoming ever more individual. The English novelist D.H. Lawrence describes this process. He says: "We cannot bear connection. That is our malady. We must break away and be isolate. We call that being freed and individual." He goes on to point out one possible consequence of this kind of individualism; he says: "Beyond a certain point, which we have reached, it is suicide."

There is however another possibility in this process. Could it be that when we reach the deepest point of isolation, when everything is called into question, even existence itself, a crisis might occur that does not harden into neurosis but breaks through to a new reality where hitherto unimagined resources are found - spiritual resources that might enable the newly individualised human being to be sovereign and to find that which gives meaning to life on earth? This second possibility is not spoken of much in mainstream thought, and yet it is very real.

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Vassily Kandinsky and his fellow artists in the Blue Rider were deeply affected by the new art. As Cézanne deepened the work of the Impressionists, so they sought to push the boundaries of his work further. There is a description of how Marc and Kandinsky sat together in a garden, trying to find a name for their new group. Marc loved horses, Kandinsky riders, and they both loved blue. In the horse and the rider, there is nostalgia for the past that had been lost, but there is also a yearning for a new adventure. Kandinsky said that for him, blue was the typical colour of heaven. Their new adventure encompassed mankind's spiritual search. Marc said of work they showed in the Almanacs:

"To create forms means to live. Are not children who construct directly from the secrets of their own emotions more creative than the imitators of Greek form? Are not the savage artists who have their own

form stronger than the forms of thunder? We went with a divining rod through the art of the past and the art of the present. We showed only art which lives untouched by the constraints of convention. Our devoted care was extended to all artistic expression which was born of itself, lives on its own merit and does not walk with the crutches of custom. Whenever we have seen a crevice in the crust of convention we have called attention to it because we have hoped for a force underneath which will some day come to light”

For the Blue Rider, the old sources of inspiration had dried up, but by pushing through that isolation they believed that they would find new resources in the human being and in the world. These words also challenge the artist in a new way. They ask him not only for his skill, they ask him to be authentic. For the Blue Rider, this authenticity is not only important for the artist himself. Kandinsky says: “But without fail, a man will come who differ in no respect from the rest, but who harbours within himself a gift of mysterious origin – the power to see. He sees and shows. Sometimes he would like to rid himself of this exalted gift, for it is often a heavy cross for him to bear. Heaped with derision and hate, he slowly pulls the reluctant wagon of humanity behind him ... ever onwards and upwards.” At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, in the midst of the cultural “suicide” of which Lawrence spoke, Kandinsky and the Blue Rider tried to show us a way forward. Kandinsky said: “When the foundations of religion, morals and science ... are shaken, and when the external supports threaten to collapse, men turn away from external things and look inward. Literature, music and art are the first sensitive areas to feel this spiritual turning and to react in a concrete way to it. They immediately reflect the dark image of the present, they reveal the profundity of tiny beginnings ... They reflect the great darkness that is barely discernible when it first emerges. They themselves grow dark and despairing. Yet they also turn away from the soullessness of contemporary life and turn to surroundings which give free rein to the non-materialistic striving and searching of the thirsty soul.”

These artists were aware of the challenges of their time. The poverty first recognised by the Impressionists, which had led the latter to seek for a new truth, was very apparent. Their response to materialism was to state unequivocally that there was no conflict between spirit and matter, rather that there was synthesis. Behind matter was spirit; matter was in fact an expression of spirit. The artist used the invisible and mysterious force of creativity to reveal the invisible, spiritual reality behind life. Man thrown back on himself was not isolated but broke through to the new man. The natural world was not dead and devoid of meaning, but was the result of spiritual processes.

In order to try to express this, Kandinsky made a new and amazing step. He freed his pictures from sense impressions, and tried instead to paint the archetypes that lie behind creation. This was the original intention of those first abstract pictures. Kandinsky was trying to make visible the process of life itself. Klee describes this quite concretely: “Art must penetrate to the source of the life-force (the powerhouse of all time and space).”

The original impulse of the Blue Rider had to endure hard trials. Marc and Macke died in the First World War, and the others never worked together again as a coherent group. But in spite of its brief existence, the Blue Rider expressed in a new way the timeless truth about the world that underlies, nourishes and sustains our world. Juan Mascaró says of the struggle between materialism and the spiritual worldview

“We thus have a prosaic view of the universe and a poetical view. According to the prosaic view all is matter and its energy, and from this somehow comes life and consciousness. The progress of man is through analytical knowledge. The conception of a spiritual world is an illusion. But according to the poetical conception, matter is the lowest manifestation of Spirit and the progress of man is through an

awakening and a returning ... Of the two conceptions, which is more beautiful; the truth of either may not be proved by mere logic, but the proof of life is life. The poetical conception includes all the great values of man, it includes the good and the beautiful, and we feel the good and the beautiful, although often beyond definition, are true.”

The Blue Rider witnessed to this “proof of life” which is life. Where can we look now to find their successors?

Since the time of the artists mentioned above, much that is wonderful and much that is at best inconsequential and at worst pernicious has been made in the name of Art. There is, however, a persistent question. What happened to that new human being and his sacred world made visible in the work of the Blue Rider? Mainstream culture seems to prevail. In a gallery we are often faced with cold, detached conceptual art, which leaves us with a sense of no connection. In a world that believes that we cannot communicate, conceptual art, top heavy with wordy self-justification leaves us lonely. In our heart of hearts we believe that if we cannot share in these sophisticated intellectual trapeze acts then, despite the fact that we must stand up to the bogus authority they gain by being placed in the gallery, we must admit that we believe that they are in fact “inconsequential exercises.”

On the other hand, we may be shown another kind of art. It is very physical. Sometimes it is even made from real flesh and blood and it explores all that is dark and terrible. Why do we feel repelled when we look at this art? Should we not have the courage to face the truth about our world – its violence and horror? Yet we feel, despite these artists’ claims to be serious, to want to awaken us from our complacency, this art contains instead the sick fantasies of ill-informed and arrogant boys.

There is a third kind of art. It comes from a genuine desire to affirm the positive in life. Often however we experience it as thin, even pretty. The process through which the images and indeed the artists have gone is not deep enough that the images might speak with authority to our fundamental human experience. They do not bear the mark of authenticity described in the almanacs of the Blue Rider. There are of course many artists working today in an authentic way, in spite of the dominance of conceptual and sensational art. However, there is no doubt that we need many more. Is there something that we could understand that would unleash our creative potential both in the way that we look at art and the way that we make it?

Earlier I described the second possibility that arose out of our ever-growing individualisation. Rather than isolation and suicide, I described how at the deepest point of isolation, when everything is called into question, even existence itself, a crisis may occur that does not harden into neurosis, but breaks through to a new reality where hitherto unimagined resources are found.

For a long time, one of the assumptions of mainstream culture was that a serious person could not be optimistic. A student of the artist Suzi Gablick expresses it thus: “We have been taught that we must learn to face reality ... When we see cynicism even in our art, it reinforces our belief in a negative, cynical reality ... Recently people who create art movements, artists as well as art critics have come from this mindset too; they teach us that cynicism is interesting because it relates to life. Hope and optimism are generally hated and made fun of ... simply because they are not concepts that people of any intellectual stature believe in.” This student goes on to affirm that we long for a different worldview. Optimism becomes more and more relevant. It becomes clear however that it must be an optimism that has the inner content to meet human experience. Does this have something to do with our understanding of Christianity? In order to move on in a creative way, it is important that we begin to embrace the connection between crisis and Christianity on a much more personal level.

Friedrich Rittelmeyer, cofounder of The Christian Community describes his meeting with Rudolf Steiner in a way that casts light on these questions. He says that when he met Rudolf Steiner he was thought of as someone. His meeting with Steiner challenged him to give up the experience of being someone and to realise that he was in fact, in his words, a pigmy. I love this story not only because I recognise its creative force in another person's life, but also because it has mythic force; it can be applied to any life, to my life. It tells us an important truth. We are tempted as human beings by what the poet Adrienne Rich describes as "a longing for certainty, even at the cost of honesty, for an analysis, which once given, need not be examined." Is this the hardest thing that the newly individualised human being has to learn, that the process of becoming free demands constant crisis, the continual death of what we were in order that we might become what we long to be? How can we find the resources to embrace this experience?

Franz Marc once described aim of modern art as "the creation of symbols for our time, which belong on the altar of a spiritual religion of the future whose technological creators vanish into anonymity." I wonder whether these words have something to do with the process of dying of becoming that we need to embrace together.

Rilke says that art may be helpful inasmuch as we (the artists) "bear our own distresses more passionately, [to] give perhaps now and then a clearer meaning to endurance and [to] develop for ourselves a means of expressing the suffering within ourselves and its conquest more precisely and clearly." This is a starting point for art; we have a beginning. Between the artist, the image and the viewer we begin to make a circle. The artist sees and shows. We look and we recognise our own struggle in the struggle of the artist. Not only do we recognise, we too take courage. The circle is then formed; like the disciples in the Upper Room, in the moment of self-knowledge and self-revelation, the way is prepared for a new experience. In this moment of shared crisis something is made possible that we cannot experience if we hold on to the security of our ideas and our image of ourselves. Images made in this spirit could create places where people would go to find the courage to take part in this process themselves; could these places become the altars of the new, spiritual religion about which Franz Marc speaks?

The philosopher John Macmurray says: "Real Christianity stands today, as it has always stood, for life against death, for spontaneity against formalism, for the spirit of adventure against the spirit of security, for faith against fear, for the living multiplicity of difference against the monotony of the mechanical, whether it be the mechanisation of the mind, which is dogmatism or the mechanisation of the emotions, which is conformity." If Christianity is to be a living force in our lives, then we need somehow to make the step not only to let go, but to let go over and over again. The artists of the Blue Rider broke through to a new human being in a sacred world. Where are these new human beings now, and what is their task? I am sure of one thing: if as artists and as individuals we could embrace the process of dying and becoming, like the disciples in the Upper Room, we would also experience the Comforter who would enable us to grow into our true stature and to turn to the world abundant in our giving as in our receiving.