Natalie Fritz and Paola von Wyss-Giacosa

Book Review
Joseph Masheck, Faith in Art
Religion, Aesthetics, and Early Abstraction
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Can abstract art be conceived and realized only by a non-religious artist? Does modern art have any roots in the rich iconographic tradition and in the religious conceptualities of specific belief systems? In the volume under review, art historian and critic Joseph Masheck tracks the impact of religious socialization on four of the most popular representatives of abstract art: Vasily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, and El Lissitzky. Masheck not only reconstructs the biographies of each of the four artists with a particular focus on their religious upbringings and social contexts, but also engages in an in-depth discussion of their writings as sources for and links to religious layers in their artworks. In the introduction Masheck states that the four artists "were, from youth and early adulthood, adherents of institutional as well as 'revealed' (meaning biblical) religion". He then explains that these "ideological origins and enduring worldviews on faith" resonated in their later works (p. 1).

The basic structure of Masheck's approach is attractive. His characterization of the four artists – Kandinsky as Orthodox, Mondrian as Protestant, Malevich as Catholic, and Lissitzky as Jewish – will likely provoke discussion of the epistemic value of such categories as a means to better understand each artist's artwork. At the same time, a critical reader may be inclined to ask throughout the book, What exactly is a "religious artist"? How does Masheck understand the concept? What role do cultural context, time, and perspective play in relation to such categorizations?

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But what strikes us, an anthropologist/art historian and a religious studies scholar, is that in weaving a thick theoretical framework to highlight the religious references in the œuvre of each artist, Masheck loses sight of the actual artworks. In our view, artworks should be the main protagonists when we analyze the impact of religion and faith on artists. As discursive actors with a diachronically changing attribution of meaning, the artworks are, in our opinion, equally, if not more, relevant than theological treatises for exploring religious impact on art, ritual knowledge, or essays on art. Furthermore, we question the premise that an artist brought up in a religious setting must necessarily create religious art, and institutional religious art in particular.

This critique does not mean that Masheck's approach isn't valuable, for he contextualizes each of the artists in a specific social, political, intellectual, and religious setting and highlights the impact of their respective backgrounds on their œuvre. The individual chapters dedicated to each artist make clear that the artistic expressions of Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, and Lissitzky are the result of intensive consideration of what was going on in their respective political arenas and how this deliberation affected their individual ways of living and thinking. Importantly, *Faith in Art* also reevaluates and relativizes the significance of theosophy for the artists in question: it was just one among other trends in occultism and esotericism. Masheck underlines that abstract art is not a nihilist approach to the world, but rather a continuation of what is accepted as the core of being at a certain point in time and in a certain social environment. All four artists were aware, Masheck states, that art might change society. The provocative undertone of the book forces readers to rethink abstract art and the assumptions associated with it.

Before Masheck starts to contextualize the four artists and then look at their ideas and concepts of art and the world (the religious dimension included), he defines some of the most prominent terms of his approach. For the concept of religion, he follows Émile Durkheim's definition of religion as a system of beliefs and practices which unites everyone who adheres to them in one community of shared values and norms, and is wary of the concepts of *laicité*, described as an "aggressive state of 'neutrality' towards religion", and *duoverie*, a term for practicing two religions at the same time (pp. 8–9).

The discussion of the term "spirituality" remains superficial, and the tone becomes slightly disrespectful whenever Masheck returns to comparing spirituality with religion. The former is judged to be purely individual,

a vague, obfuscating concept, while the latter is highly valued, for it is, he suggests, connected to faith, belief, and conceptualities deeply rooted in society. Thus, Masheck's terminology is not always adequate or consistent. It seems odd to define spirituality and religion as antitheses only to then use "spiritual" to describe some of the artists' works or the effects they may provoke.

Masheck goes on to dedicate about forty pages to each of the four abstract artists. In each chapter he explains the circumstances of their upbringing, with references to the specific sociopolitical setting and the dominant religious movements and ideologies of their time. The first case is Kandinsky, and here Masheck highlights the idea that creating art is an almost sacramental act (p. 31) and notes the crucial role of Orthodox Christianity. He explores some of the artist's most important writings. His description of Kandinsky's career and biblical literacy is certainly enlightening, with his analysis helping the reader understand the artist's own concept of "abstract art" as a way of revealing the core – or "inner sound", according to Kandinsky (p. 37) – of an image.

But at the same time, the artworks themselves, the very materialized images that reflect the artist's thoughts, are oddly missing. It takes almost thirty pages before the reader sees the reproduction of an actual Kandinsky, *Accent in Pink* (1926), and learns how it can be interpreted as an abstract reference to Russian iconographic tradition. Masheck asks if a "culturally sophisticated church" would use *Accent in Pink* as a substitute for a Christ-in-Glory icon, but disappointingly, he avoids a direct answer, preferring vague references to different viewpoints and possibilities (p. 44).

The book continues with a chapter on Mondrian. Here, after just four pages the reader is presented with drawings. The effect is encouraging because not only does the artist's development become visible, but the drawings also help make comprehensible Mondrian's concept of art within the matrix of a Protestant belief system, which is explored in great detail by Masheck. The significance of crucial neo-Calvinist concepts for Mondrian's point of view, – *justification* and *equilibration*, for example – becomes clear from the interplay of theological tractates and essays with the illustrated artworks (pp. 63–67). The reader understands that "pure abstract art" in Mondrian's view is "no longer natural harmony but creates equivalent relationships". Such relationships have the power to change society and bring peace and freedom (in a Thy-Kingdom-Come way), whereas inequivalent relationships sow seeds of injustice (pp. 70–71).

The shift from Mondrian to Malevich with the third chapter again highlights the importance of a religious upbringing for the work of the featured artists. As Masheck underlines, the Roman Catholic Malevich's experiences within a Russian Orthodox setting provided him with a sense of both theologies, their rituals, their iconographies, and in the end, their core principles, which then inspired his œuvre. Malevich's concept of "suprematism" defines the common denominator of art, religion, and science as a non-figurative ideal, which he implements in his work by liberating geometrical forms from associations to objects to show or evoke a higher level of insight: "Suprematism is the rediscovery of pure art which, in the course of time, had become obscured by the accumulation of 'things'" (p. 134). Masheck wonders if Malevich might have seen suprematism as a "vehicle of grace" (p. 136). But again, as with Mondrian, a question he poses does not receive a clear answer. Although, as in the previous chapters, he offers an interpretive reading of the artist's writings, his argument remains somewhat speculative and the line of reasoning is not necessarily clear.

The chapter on El Lissitzky is the logical conclusion to the analysis of the four artists, for Lissitzky was deeply impressed by Malevich's suprematist works, in which he recognized a visual equivalence to social changes: in his view, the suprematist's radicality mirrored on a visual level the creation of a new society. On the basis of his revolutionary thoughts combined with messianic elements of his Jewish upbringing, the trained architect Lissitzky conceptualized his own constructivist approach to art and the world, the "Proun" (Project for the affirmation of the new). Lissitzky explained that "Proun" does not describe anything, but instead creates in a new, voluminous way the "composition of the real world" (p. 165). In this fourth chapter Masheck's analysis of the religious, here Jewish, background and its impact on an artist's œuvre somehow remains less consistent than in the other three, even though it is omnipresent in Lissitzky's early works. This may be due to Lissitzky's sophisticated and deeply political way of creating art, which in his revolutionary, utopian sense must be liberated from all influences and dependencies if the new (whatever that may entail) is to become real. In an institutional sense, religious art is then no longer tangible.

In his conclusion Masheck returns to the point that the religious blindness of modernist art historians obscures the religious aspect of abstract art and thus diminishes its significance, just as, vice versa, the dismissive attitude of many religious recipients may diminish the significance of abstract art with which they are confronted. He then highlights aspects the four cases share:

(a) the biblical and liturgical knowledge of the artist, and (b) art as a means of creating and experiencing the promised future kingdom of God. With this he comes back to his categorical contrast between spirituality and faith and emphasizes that what the four artists created is by no means to be labeled as spiritual art, a terminology designating an empty shell. On the contrary, through their dialectical reasoning all four artists incorporated religion and created an œuvre deeply rooted in a thick socio-religious context.

We read this book with mixed feelings. We appreciated the contextualized analyses of the artist's œuvres and the call for a (re)examination of the bearing of religion and faith on them. But we had our difficulties not only with most of the very categorical premises but also with the neglect of the agency of the artworks themselves. For us, the most irritating aspect of *Faith in Art* was that the book's tone seems unpleasant, if not disrespectful, every time its author writes about worldviews which do not align with his own views.