

The Lives of Form: Abstract Art and Nature (Bremen, 14-16 Aug 08)

Isabel

CALL FOR PAPERS

International Symposium

The Lives of Form: Abstract Art and Nature

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Jacobs University, Bremen, Germany

August 14-16, 2008

In 1942, Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock met Hans Hofmann. Hofmann asked Pollock „do you work from nature“? Pollock’s famous reply was „I am nature.“ Hofmann’s response to this is less well known, but just as interesting. He said „Ah, but if you work by heart, you will repeat yourself.“ This exchange sets out, implicitly, the two extremes between which abstract art has developed, on the one hand, the desire to tap into the formative power of nature itself, and on the other hand, allowing this drive to be regulated by reference to natural form. Our symposium will explore these extremes and the complex space of creative possibilities which exists between them. We will address different ways in which art has been created by consciously abstracting from nature, and the varying ways in which nature’s formative non-objective core – and cognate notions such as the Unconscious - have been addressed through abstract idioms. As well as considering specific bodies of artistic practice, our symposium will also look at those accompanying theoretical and critical narratives which seek to justify abstract art on the basis of a special relation to nature, or in the deliberate attempt to transcend it entirely. We will also be interested in the possibility - or otherwise - of their relevance for a general theory of meaning for abstract art. The time span covered will be from Kandinsky’s, Malevich’s, and Mondrian’s innovations after 1910, down to Postmodernism. We welcome contributions from art historians, philosophers, scientists, and other interested parties.

Session 1: Abstracting from Nature

The origins of abstract art are found in artists who transform the appearance of nature and artifacts, either by emphasizing their more basic geometric structures, or by altering familiar relations between contour and colour (or both). This session will discuss the variety and

scope of these transformations, and the different meanings assigned to them in different historical contexts of creation and reception.

Session 2: The Other Side of Abstraction: Nature and Formative Processes

A recurrent vindication of abstract art has been the claim that it offers a more direct visual expression of those forces which shape the structure and evolution of nature. The forces in question have been understood in many different terms - metaphysical, religious, and scientific. This session will analyze the relation between abstraction and the forces which shape nature, describing the different historical contexts in which this relation has been posited, the critical questions it has raised, and its more general intellectual viability.

Session 3: Abstraction and the Unconscious

One of the most important justifications of abstraction has been its possible link with the ultimate "natural" element in human cognition - namely that „unconscious“ dimension which manages to shape conscious thought processes, but which is, fundamentally, not shaped by them. The session will investigate possible linkages between this and those processes of „automatic“ creation which have been so important for the making of some abstract works, most notably „action painting“.

Session 4: Beyond Nature? Abstraction in Late Modernism

From the late 1940's onwards, new forms of radical abstract painting and sculpture have emerged. These range from colour-field works, through (later on) post-painterly abstraction, minimalism, and land art. Does the large physical scale of some of these works, or the lack of autographic emphasis or suppressions of artifactual identity in others, mean that we are meant to regard them as if they were on a par with natural objects and formations? Or is a more radical antithesis between abstraction and nature also involved?

We welcome 200-word abstracts for 20-minute papers to address these and related questions. Please submit your proposal as well as a short CV (1 page) by email to abstraction@jacobs-university.de by October 31, 2007. Please indicate also in which of the four sessions you would like to be placed.

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