

I: Introduction

Despite recent art historical investigations of the spiritual grounding of modernist abstraction, discussions of the same spirit in contemporary art are scarce and tentative, '70s feminist art criticism notwithstanding. Almost two decades ago we moved out from under the once-therapeutic spell of strictly formal (i.e., visual and logical) ways of looking at, interpreting and perhaps even making art, but the spiritual aspect of art - which some of us believe is at the core of art-making and art-experiencing - has not yet regained its rightful centrality within the critical discourse. Neo-Marxist and deconstruction-influenced trends in art writing, while once offering some insights, now seem only to fuel the proliferation of irrelevant art. Commodity critique has become yet another commodity; the disappearance of the author (artist) has meant the disappearance of responsibility.

Yet if we look at art globally – which means including pre-Renaissance art, non-Western art, and even unschooled art - it is certainly clear that a great many of the subjects we admire, even covet, were created for spiritual purposes. We may not subscribe to the particulars of the belief systems that generated these artworks, but the power is there; what we experience is an energy that cannot be explained away by formal, anthropological or political analysis. Some of our best Western artists have been attracted to African, Pacific and Native American visual expression and have, in fact, appropriated at least the outer forms. Yet time after time we treat these non-Western objects as if they were items of contemplation or accents for some private or public decor instead of understanding that they are spiritual tools.

In America, a number of artists are currently working in a spiritual mode; they hold on to and bear with the art system only to utilize its distribution and communication potential and its occasional economic largesse. They see art as more than paint on canvas, more than commodity, status object or investment ploy. Art is a quest, healing and devotional activity that can change the artist, the viewer and life as we know it. Beth Ames Swartz, the subject of this essay, is one of these artists, and yet her work like the work of other artists working for a new spiritual art has not yet received its due.

In what follows I will try to examine Beth Ames Swartz's major work *A Moving Point of Balance* from several points of view, utilizing various contexts: Swartz's previous works and her development as an artist; the installation genre; and of course the tradition of spiritual art, noting some of the difficulties it may present to the viewer. My intention is to provide a setting for the proper perception of the work, a verbal pre-experience and/or post-experience through description and personal interpretation that I hope will point to its significance as an artistic and spiritual action or intervention. We do not have a critical vocabulary to discuss the spiritual in art. Since spiritual experience itself must be nonverbal, we will only be able to strain and improvise, using fissures in language and logic to point to what we are after.

The evaluative aspect of this analysis therefore may not be immediately apparent, so let me announce here at the beginning that I feel very strongly that *A Moving Point of Balance* is an important artwork and that my experience of it was profoundly moving, and not a bit unsettling. It holds its own as "normal" art, for Swartz has a gift for color, texture, form and theater, but it is not an ordinary artwork. To reduce it to such is to miss the point. The parts do not separate out; photographs offer only hints. Much contemporary art uses religious imagery, but most often with ironic intent. Swartz is not ironic. Some contemporary artworks are *about* the spiritual; Swartz's installation *is* spiritual, offering a direct challenge to officially sanctioned assumptions about art. It places the critic as well as the artist at risk. My hope is that in what follows I will not be entirely foolish, but I know I must be as brave and as personal as a critic as Beth Ames Swartz has been as an artist.

II. Arizona Revisited

When did I first meet Beth Ames Swartz? I mentioned her work in a review in New York's now defunct *Soho News* upon the occasion of the Western States Biennial when it was in Washington, D.C. I must have heard of her and her work when I was Distinguished Visiting Professor of Contemporary Art and Criticism at the University of Arizona in Tucson, but I know I did not visit her studio until early in 1981 when I returned to Arizona to do research for an article I was writing on contemporary art in that state for *Art in America*. One leg of the trip took me to the Phoenix area and I visited with Swartz in Paradise Valley.

I remember Swartz showed me early Lyrical Abstraction paintings and then pieces that were part of *Israel Revisited*, a traveling exhibition she was preparing. Something had happened between the paintings and the pigmented, burned, buried paper pieces she was now making. Lyrical Abstraction, of course, was a late and mostly enervated outgrowth of Abstract Expressionism.

Retaining only the ghost of the once heroic emphasis upon process and artist interaction with materials, Lyrical Abstraction eschewed the metaphysical intentions of Pollock, Rothko and Still. Swartz, it now seems to me, was reconnecting to the spiritual center of Action Painting, but now pushing it forward by using performance and conceptual frameworks. I did not quite grasp it at the time, but she had already embarked upon her spiritual journey.

The modestly titled *Israel Revisited* actually involved kabbalistic research and visits to ten sites in Israel linked to women mentioned in the Bible; at each site Swartz performed a fire ritual. Even for someone schooled in the avant-garde this was difficult to deal with, for she was deadly serious. When, however, the exhibition arrived at the Jewish Museum in September 1981, I was completely won over; the work was beautiful on many levels: surface richness, formal invention, poetic import.

Since then I have followed Swartz's work with considerable interest. Although I have often been uncertain about her direction and, I confess, skeptical about some of her New Age pursuits, we clearly share beliefs concerning crucial issues; art is more than pleasing or shocking forms, art can heal, art has a spiritual mission.

After *Israel Revisited* Swartz returned to paint on canvas. She began including metal leaf, microglitter, and even crushed crystals. The paintings moved beyond formal and pictorial considerations and, starting from her own shamanistic experience, attempted to be instruments of spiritual transformation for the viewer as well as the artist. Can there be such a transfer of power? If the viewer is willing to put aside preconceptions about art, if the viewer is ready, if the viewer will allow himself or herself to participate, certain works of art may trigger unusual states of consciousness. The artwork is no longer a painting, but a technical apparatus that can create previews of higher states of consciousness. Swartz began creating a suite of paintings and, equally important, the proper setting for their viewing. When *A Moving Point of Balance* came into existence, one could not separate the painting and the setting. A Native American medicine wheel, color "baths" in front of each station (painting) and music throughout are integral to the experience. The paintings were made for the spotlights that illuminate them; they come alive.

Technically *A Moving Point of Balance* is an installation, but, unlike most works in this contemporary genre, the viewer is meant to follow a path from one painting to the next, standing in front of each, bathed in colored light. The sequence takes one through the seven chakras or body. connected energy centers delineated by tantric yoga and ends in a balancing room of projected abstract shapes.

The contemporary installation is derived from the sets and environments created by the Happenings artists of the late '50s whose own work was influenced by much earlier Dada and Surrealist displays. It is an established art genre that takes many forms - temporary or not-so-temporary, nearly invisible or over-whelming - but the working definition is that it is an indoor artwork, halfway between stage-set and sculptural environment. The viewer is inside the art. The installation may be purely formal or it may have a narrative component. As a critic, I have supported the genre as part of the general movement to subvert the objectness and commodity aspect of most art. Swartz pushes installation format into another realm: the zone of the cosmic. We are in a cave; we are in sacred mind-space. There is no larking about and sensational effect. Just as in the past she used action-painting techniques, earth art and conceptual art strategies to point to the spirit, she so uses the installation form for higher ends.

I cannot vouch for the accuracy of her portrayals or visual interpretations of the various chakras, but as I moved from station to station different energies were apparent, different moods, definitely creating a psychological if not a psychic progression. She does not duplicate nor as far as I can see even refer to the traditional tantric images for the chakras; her versions seem to come from her inner being. While advised by a printed text to focus in succession upon connection to nature, relationship to others, self-empowerment, loving kindness, communicativeness, and knowledge, one is lead through the energy nodes of what I take to be the invisible body. By the time I walked into the violet color bath and stood before the seventh chakra – the crown - there were definitely emanations of transcendence. If what I experienced is art it is a new kind of art or a very old kind of art reborn - an art that can make a difference in perception, conception and even the direction of one's life.

III: Conclusion

We are not supposed to speak of the spiritual, particularly in an art context. Art, we thought we once learned for good, must not only be above politics, but also above religion; this is the only way to save it from being tampered with by princes and soldiers, priests, rabbis and mullahs. But is art so delicate and peripheral that it has no strength of its own and therefore must be cut off from life? For some of us it is close to the center of life. We must try to understand why there is, so to speak, a spiritual blackout in most discussions of art. There is, after all, considerable evidence that the most powerful non-Western art, the greatest modernist art and the most challenging new art have as their basis a spiritual intention. Nevertheless the spiritual is taboo.

Organized religion has given not only religion a bad name, but the spiritual as well. One need only consider the havoc wrought by established religions: religious wars throughout the centuries and up to the present; denial of basic human desires and needs; collusion with evil governments. Furthermore, false notions of spirituality have been used to control people rather than liberate them. Spirituality equals repression. On the other hand, there are truths purveyed by established religions, spiritual techniques preserved and used, needs met that are not purely sociological. There is beauty in the meanings, if not always in the practices.

Cult religions are often no better than organized religions, since so many of them are cash-cows for charismatic charlatans. Spirituality equals gullibility. One must remember, however, that Christianity was once no more than a cult. Not all new religions are fraudulent; some may indeed be offering new truths or the surfacing of old, forgotten truths that established religions have lost or will not acknowledge.

We live in a culture of naive materialism, machismo and scientism. Naive

materialism does not even respect the material world. The natural and the made environments are stage-sets for self-destructive posturings. Spirituality is wishy-washy. We are "men" (even some of us who are women) and we are strong and invincible, always in control. Spirituality is soft. We are always clear-headed and rational, not believing in anything unless it can be calibrated, predicted, manipulated and above all agreed upon by like-minded individuals. Spirituality is unscientific. But if we understood our place in the spiritual hierarchy as shepherds rather than generals, as brothers and sisters rather than as tyrannical fathers and mothers, as leaders capable of persuading rather than as masters who command, we might not destroy the world. Likewise, properly understood, reason can free us from superstition, while adding to knowledge - including the knowledge that reason has limits.

Finally, if we began talking about the spiritual intent, content and potential of art and begin using this constellation of values as factors in our evaluation of art, we risk offending those who do not share these values; we risk creating a threat to established ways of thinking about art. We also risk appearing sentimental, mystical, irrational, emotional, idealistic and totally looney, for there is no cash value for the spiritual, whatever it may be or however it may be defined.

On the other hand, at this point we must be brave. The sins of the past are no excuse for the sin of the present, which in the realm of art is that we have not demanded the art we require: an art that is more than ironic entertainment and a comment on the emptiness of art and therefore of life. Idealism has returned, but stripped of its fallacies and madness. We decide what would be ideal – not what is real but what should be real - and we take the steps necessary to create these transformations. We do not want, I hasten to add, yet another art movement; we already have enough of them appropriated, hyphenated, and as ephemeral as last month's art magazine.

We want and in some respects already have a major reordering of priorities. Dissatisfaction with the mechanics and the morality of the commercial art world has guaranteed that a new art world must come into existence, perhaps parallel to but above the commercial art world. I have no doubt that the normal, business-as-usual art world will continue, without noting this development, just as governments and philosophers have not yet noticed the larger change - a general reorientation towards the spiritual that is not doctrinaire, but open and forward-looking and respectful of others in the common effort. The commercial art world may be replaced by this new art world. Because it is not primarily commercial, it does not have a center; it does not have a critical establishment; instead it is a network of like-minded individuals. Eventually Beth Ames Swartz will be identified as one of the artists who initiated this transformation.

Some Moving Points; Thoughts on the Art of Beth Ames Swartz by John Perreault