

Art and sacral space

Peter Stupples

Dunedin School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand

Email: pams@actrix.co.nz

‘Art’ was originally associated with sacral spaces for the enactment of rites that bound a community into a culture. The objects created as ‘art’ were also imitated by secular authorities, enacting their ceremonial rituals to symbolise the exercise of authority and domination. In the Enlightenment both art and its sacral spaces were reentered into museums, that not only preserved objects of a cultural past but also of a widening geography, including colonial worlds. In the late 20th century both ‘art’ and the spaces of its display were subject to recasting pressures from popular culture, post-colonialism, feminism and globalisation. Under these pressures cultures have become internationalised, disembedded from local roots. The sacral precincts of the past have been ghettoised and replaced by the dispersed culture and space of the biennale, as formerly static or performative art has been displaced by computer-generated morphing images with no obvious cultural function and for which museums become mere content providers

Keywords: art, sacral spaces, culture, museums

El arte y sacros espacios

El “arte” estaba originalmente asociado a los espacios sacros donde tenían lugar los ritos que unían a una comunidad dentro de una cultura. Los objetos creados como “arte” también eran imitados por las autoridades seculares, las que se valían del aspecto ritual y ceremonial de lo mismos para simbolizar el ejercicio del poder y la dominación. En la Ilustración, el arte y sus espacios sacros fueron enterrados en museos, donde no sólo se conservan objetos de un pasado cultural, sino también de una geografía cada vez mayor que incluye los mundos coloniales. A finales del siglo XX, tanto el “arte” como los espacios en que se exhibía estuvieron sujetos a presiones de redefinición por parte de la cultura popular, el post-colonialismo, el feminismo y la globalización. Como resultado, las culturas se han internacionalizado y desvinculado de sus raíces locales. Los espacios sacros del pasado han sido compartamentalizados y sustituidos por la cultura y el espacio dispersos de la Bienal, de la misma manera que el arte mismo ha sido reemplazado por imágenes proteicas que, al ser generadas por computadora, no cumplen ninguna función cultural evidente y convierten los museos en meros proveedores de contenido.

Palabras clave: arte, sacros espacios, cultura, museos

The word ‘art’ carries with it a history and geography of connotations. It is usually associated, in the Western world, with visual creativity in a range of media – painting, sculpture, printmaking, all with their own Western histories. In addition there are the crafts – ceramics, textiles, jewellery, which have their utilitarian manifestations, made for use, and their artistic expression – made for decoration and aesthetic delectation. In addition, as the twenty-first century gathers pace, there are the new media, the oldest, photography – from family snaps to studio studies, and the more recent electronic arts – animation, video, computer-generated, in all their variety. Of course film, television, multi-media installations must be added to the spectrum of connotations, but the uncertain and always changing difference between art and non-art, in the West, lies on the fuzzy boundaries between the banal use of a utilitarian image, the casual appreciation of a visual artefact and the deep contemplation of a culturally acknowledged treasure.

This range of associations of ‘art’, generally elevating it above the commonplace, the sublunar, to the throne of aesthetic delectation and reflection, sometimes visually challenging, even confronting, in ideological Otherness to the mundane, has about it the tattered shroud of its sacral genesis, the tarnished glory of its transcendent passage from the mere real to some non-material plane, some retinal paradise in which the shadowy progeny of the Neo-Platonic Idea may stroll in aesthetic fellowship. Despite the fact that much contemporary art rejoices in the abject, it displays its underlying sacral mission, to cleanse through purgation, which it performs in a special place, alongside more positive images, within the white cube of a gallery, a deconsecrated embodiment of the charged and magic space ‘art’ inhabited in the remote past. That now secular gallery space is characterised not only by its architecture, but also by the behaviour of visitors, spectators, replicating a silent reverence for the mystical properties ascribed to art, a respect for its social and cultural functions, removed from diurnal routines, and

with its own priesthood of directors and curators, of custodians and conservators, of critics and historians, of scholars and commentators.

It is this space, earlier sacral, now secular, sequestered from the everyday, and so often taken for granted, that is the focus of this paper, which will emphasise the ubiquity of this spatial deployment, not only in Western art, but also in the non-West.

However globalisation is rapidly changing traditional conditions of art's practice and the social spaces of display, collapsing differences between the sacral and profane, as we accelerate into the unknown sublunaries of the twenty-first century.

Open space

In prehistoric times images represented ideas – of the hunt, of the fauna, of the fetish demanding sacrifice, of authority, of magic or other realms of psychic experience. A space within a community, constituting part of its fundamental (primal) anthropological situation,¹ was devoted to the enactment of rituals centred on such visual fetishes or stimuli – from the exposed granite of Pilbara in north-west Australia, to the rocky shore line of Besov Nos on Lake Onego in Karelia, to the bushmen complex on The Brandberg overhang in Namibia. The locations of all rock art images, spread around the world, are associated with local beliefs and customs. They are not 'art', in the way a post-Renaissance European would understand the concept, but potent, functional images, operative and efficacious within belief and social systems specific to time and place. They both locate the space for the enactment of sacral rites and bind adherents to a specific view of the world, in terms of social hierarchies and spiritual sentiment: the space is not only given over to an enriching attention, a synaptic enhancement of the visual (a heightened concentration of perception made automatic by social custom), but also for the habituating restatement of cultural cohesion. The cultural frame has spatial characteristics. As Durkheim has emphasised, the space, and the images contained within and about it, are essentially a part of a society's inner life,² give a sense of coherence to the cultural self, set visual parameters to its affective field.

As Aron Gurevich has pointed out, with reference to early medieval Europe, where sacral space was not dissimilar in concept and function to that of prehistoric worlds, that space was not a neutral category, adopted freely, at aesthetic, social or commercial will, but locally integrated into custom and belief systems.³ It was emotionally charged, drenched in ancient mysteries, evoking feelings of good and evil, where certain activities could be properly enacted, cloaked with the miraculous, but also barbed with danger and dread for Others. Being in the space, having dealings with the images and the spiritual powers they represented, carried implications for the self, the group, the clan, implications for the well-being of their bodies, for adornment and deportment in its precincts. The space itself, as well as the objects within it or decorating its surfaces, became a cultural non-verbal signifier, an important component of what, to rephrase Laplanche, we may call a site of 'primal seduction,'⁴ weaving a web of signification, of behavioural practices and ways of relating, constantly recentralising the participant in the sacral signifying practices of the elders. The visual codes, and their particular forms of expression, interpenetrated the group's cultural relations, not only among themselves, but also in their dealings with Others, predisposing any translation of their codes of behaviour, their use of signification, including imagery, and the space of their enactment. In other words the sacral space was a cultural construction, its signifiatory systems essential to the group, but relative to those of Others.

Such images were not always parietal, fixed in static space. Decorations, and objects with sacral connotations, were also itinerant, in the forms of body art (the sacred skin)⁵ or of mobiliary objects that could charge specific places when enhanced by ceremony, often activated by magician or holy man/woman.⁶ For example the decorated drums of the Lapp shaman, the body painting of Australian aborigines and the objects that, when worn, carried or performed, transform a cohesive group associated with specific rituals into masqueraders, change the nature of the space they temporarily inhabit, giving it authority, the vibrancy of magic, fixing it with tangible but invisible powers, fusing actuality and the engaged forces of a spiritual realm. The object or body, presented in space as charged, becomes the essential adjunct to ceremonial, to public display, electrifies the space, changes its character, releases often unruly magical forces, becomes, in itself, sacral.

These marks and forms, configured out of inert matter through human social agency, become transcendently efficacious at moments of specific enactment, during the evocation of uncanny force-filled states.

Closed space

The position and deployment of sacral images depends upon climatic conditions, both for their inert preservation and their sacral enactment. Many rock paintings are set deep within cave systems that have no access to direct light, the space made unstable, and hence spiritually liminal, by the flickering of tallow candlelight. In more sedentary later civilisations, these cavernous spaces would be reconstructed as temples, funerary complexes, religious compounds, decorated on the walls with mosaics, frescoes, the space given a special character by statuary, such as the Erechtheion in the Acropolis in Athens, Igbo community and mbari shrines, or modern voodoo temples. Again the inert images and objects, together with the space itself, would be charged, focussing synaptic enhancement through ceremony and ritual, the visual marks and shapes being as essential to that charge as the movement of figures, the chanting of voices and the protocols of behaviour. The space acted as a focussed cultural frame for whole-body practices.

The images and objects entombed in funerary sites, such as barrows or pyramids, were sequestered from human sight and social activation, their purpose was to add status to the buried dead or to assist their passage through the afterlife. In this enclaved space purposive decoration might be designated latent art, awaiting, as it were, discovery by tomb robbers or archaeologists to attain value in a world of light different to that of its internment, and simultaneously achieving the accolade of arthood. The spaces where it had originally been entombed were permanently charged with the sacral qualities of death until exposed to the light of new social dynamics that stripped them of the function for which they were made and profaned their original space.

Elsewhere the enclosed spaces of temples, basilica and mosques were encrusted with imagery – frescoes, mosaics, tiles, woodcarving, festooned with objects – banners, statuary, devotional books, calligraphy, all of which enhanced the sacral space, the religious enactment of devotion, mystical sacrifice, union with the divine. ‘Art’ - the architecture, the encasing environment, together with its denotative objects, such as the shrine sculpture dedicated to Osanobua or to Olokun in Benin, or the iconostasis in the cathedral of the Dormition of the Virgin in the Moscow Kremlin, was spiritually and culturally functional. In these most sacred and noble buildings there was a sense that the air was almost permanently charged with magic or the dynamics of faith, only brought to a pitch of intensity during the rituals enacted according to cultural custom.

Secular space

The spiritual has always gone hand in glove with the secular. The sacral object, endowing its possessor or user with spiritual authority, also often bestowed secular privileges, political significance. The chief/shaman combined earthly and otherworldly functions in Mesoamerican cultures, as, in the West, did the pope/king, bishop/prince. Some secular rituals had their origins in the sacral and were elevated by the presence of objects not dissimilar to those of religious usage – the orb and sceptre, the throne, the crown and staff, props in the theatre of the court, the palace, the diwan-i amm. None of these were understood as autonomous art objects. They were artefacts that emblazoned power, were the visual appurtenances of office, replete with (hi)stories. They were adjuncts of a social behaviour that, over time, had crystallised into forms and functions within hierarchies of political authority.

Indeed within secular rituals processes of seduction and implantation of cultural behaviours, as theorised by Laplanche, and their elevation and enactment in varieties of sacral and secular space, were complicit, engorged with ideological assumptions, and carried within their restatement of custom political implications of power, hierarchy, domination and servility, indeed inferences of what was considered nothing less than normality.

Cultural treasure

At any stage of cultural development ritualised sacral and secular objects could take on a special significance, become in themselves generators of ritual, often still closely associated with a greater spiritual schema. Their charge delineated the cultural frame and synaptically enhanced the space of their efficaciousness.

For example, the Virgin of Vladimir, as it is now known, was a Byzantine icon sent as a gift in 1131 by the Greek patriarch in Constantinople to the grand duke of Kiev. In 1155 the image was removed to a politically safer location in Vladimir, where a cathedral had been built especially to house this treasure. When Vladimir itself became subject to Mongol invasion the icon was removed once again, this time to Moscow, where it had the reputation of repeatedly saving the city from Mongol plunder and destruction. After the Russian Revolution of 1917 it was again removed, this time to the Tretyakov Art Gallery, where it remains. However, such was its sacral significance, the Tretyakov has, since the fall of the Soviet Union, housed this, and other ‘wonder-working’ icons, in the Museum Church of St Nicholas in Tolmachy, that is incorporated within the gallery complex. Thus this icon is both an object of sacral significance within a functioning church, and an artwork of nation cultural value, which still imbues the space it inhabits with a sense of the sacral, as well as emanating an art historical/cultural aesthetic.

Spiritual and secular ritual objects often formed part of what was called ‘treasure’ – giving benefits, political, religious and economic, to their temporary possessors. ‘Treasure’ was kept in privileged repositories. ‘Treasure’ was fought over. It often travelled with religious or secular dignitaries, thus adding to the lustre of their presence, aggrandizing the space in which they enacted rituals or ceremonies.

The museum

In 1789 the French church was nationalized. The religious houses were closed. The state appropriated the sacral ritual objects. Many were destroyed. Alexandre Lenoir was appointed keeper of the treasures in 1791 and soon after ‘conservateur’, two words that have been used frequently in European and American nomenclature of museum office holders ever since. These

French treasures were eventually housed in the Museum of French Antiquities and Monuments.⁷ Following Johann Winckelmann's division of antiquities by period style in *A History of Ancient Art* (1764), Lenoir organized his museum according to period rooms: a classificatory system replaced functional significance. Instead of their formerly sacral usage museum objects now served both cultural and aesthetic functions, formed into a hierarchy that privileged those which sustained some particular heritage value – had provenance and histories, associations with the high and mighty, or were regarded as models of their kind, against which lesser objects might be measured. Despite this rupture in function the museum space in which these objects (now 'artworks') were deposited (a museum acted as a 'depository' for 'collections'), often in buildings themselves of historical significance in the centre of cities, or specially built by governments or municipalities to house visual treasures, became hallowed ground, a new form of secular sacral space, as it were, housing the preserved and resplendent heritage of a culture or nation, a city or province. Antiquarianism, the collecting of heritage items of the past, became a scholarly discipline. Visitors made pilgrimages to museums. Books, catalogues were written about the treasures. Despite the fact that the Museum of French Antiquities was closed in 1816, and the works taken from churches largely restored to them, the idea of a museum of art had been born and was expanded upon in the nations of Europe in the nineteenth century.

At first these European museums contained local religious and secular objects that were regarded as exemplary of their kind, and worthy of study, collection, display and public attention. There was about them, particularly in their mass, an aura of their past cultural significance. They were sacral by association with history. Visitors regarded the objects with awe and reverence. The dark corridors of grand museums, the subdued lighting, the 'keepers', 'conservateurs' and liveried 'custodians', the glass vitrines, gave a sepulchral feel to the space, now cathedrals of art, temples to taste, halls of heritage, as if the ancestors themselves were present in the cold marble of the walls, the dust of the atmosphere, the spectral light of the domes, the self-conscious clunk of a footfall. The space was filled with the threnody of silence.

In the mid-nineteenth century Europe added to the museum of antiquity the exhibition of treasures of the present - the best of local manufacture, design, art. This new space was reverential not of the spirits of history or transcendent experience, but of commerce and capital, of aggressive mercantilism, displayed in glassed pavilions, not meant to last for ever, but as ephemeral as the profits from which they were built. Nevertheless they were called 'palaces': the very name 'Crystal Palace' evoking a fairy tale treasure house of romantic fiction. The space was now invaded by conversation, the music of machines, the light from gas, a lesser level of reverence.

In the second half of the nineteenth century these 'expositions', 'international fairs' – that might include a corner for 'the arts', began to incorporate new treasures from the expanding geography of colonies or dependent territories, even independent states that Europeans regarded as 'markets' rather than equals, such as China and Japan. These non-European territories were systematically looted of their own national treasures, which, from the late eighteenth century, were shipped to Paris, London, Berlin, later to New York, Boston, Chicago. The space of display was now given over to an expanded curiosity, to pride in power, to the preservation of the artifacts those societies doomed to perdition by the predatory missions of dominant Europe. There grew an appetite for the exotic, the alien sublime – the European public could experience the savagery of the Red Indian, the monstrosity of the Hottentot, the quaintness of Japan, the inscrutability of China, without leaving the comfort of their own country.

The sacral space, that once formed part of the inner life of its celebrants, had been transposed into a variety of secular spaces. The museum had also diffused its holdings from a local sacral/spiritual/ cultural world into the multicultural worlds of commerce, scholarship and casual browsing. At best curiosity gave rise to a desire to learn more about the 'Other.' The

museum became a repository of artifacts from now defunct sacral ways of life, or from alien cultures destined to succumb to Western economic and political domination and exploitation, to the cultures of the dead.

More radically the international fair turned the museum experience into that of a department store, where commerce displayed its latest wares in the capitalist market place and where the exotic simply added a passing frisson, became a marketing virtue, whilst the originating cultures awaited transformation to modernity through the withering kiss of colonialism. Meanwhile their curious treasures could be taken or purchased for a song.

Art

Within the space of museums in the nineteenth century the display of visual treasures of heritage, the artifacts of now-benighted civilisations, the parade of exemplars of good-taste and design, of a commonly-recognised canon, was arranged according to hierarchies of inherited value from the sacral and secular past – from religious institutions and courts, from the cultural biases of economic, political and cultural elites. One of the triumphs of the Enlightenment was the expansion of universal education and a greater democratization of taste, leading to a reassessment of these inherited values. ‘Art’ became increasingly detached from any original social context to function in the realm of aesthetic delectation, as an autonomous object with vague, but supposedly transcendent, formal properties self-evident to the cognoscenti. As Rosalind Krauss pointed out:

In the increasingly de-sacrilised space of the nineteenth century, art had become a refuge for religious emotion; it became, as it has remained, a secular form of belief. Although this condition could be openly discussed in the late nineteenth century, it is something that is inadmissible in the twentieth, so that by now [1979] we find it indescribably embarrassing to mention art and spirit in the same sentence.⁸

Whereas in the original sacral space the function and social evolution of the fashioned (fabricated) visual dictated the form, in the museum space of the post-Enlightenment West form began to assert an absolute primacy over any former function.⁹ Form became the repository of ‘religious emotion’. In terms of the grid, Krauss went on to argue this particular articulation of form was both stridently ‘modern’, effacing any sacral or even secular content, but also a new repository for myth: the grid –of Mondrian, for example, - both erased the sacral and pulsed with its presence.

[The grid] is a structure, and one, moreover, that allows a contradiction between the values of science and those of spiritualism to maintain themselves within the consciousness of modernism, or rather its unconscious, as something repressed.¹⁰

From the beginning of the twentieth century, and seemingly in contradiction to this earlier elevation, the notion of what might be considered ‘art’ began to be expand, leading, by the end of the century, to the wider concept of a visual culture. These shifting changes of aspect, both narrowing the concept to emphasise its supposedly autonomous aesthetic (transposed spiritual) values and expanding it to include even an inverted and signed urinal, lead to radical and recurrent realignments in museum practice.

The momentum driving both changes in the concept of ‘art’ and the space of its display, came from four principle directions. The first was the assault on the Western canon by European and, later, American Modernisms: the assured *Story of Art*, as so persuasively outlined by a reluctant Ernst Gombrich,¹¹ was breached by the ‘isms’ – Cubism, Neo-Primitivism, Abstraction in its many guises, Constructivism, and their progeny. Secondly, in the 1960s the canon of Modernism was itself struck abaft by Pop Art. Pop’s greatest significance lay

in ushering in a new inclusiveness. Popular culture was elevated for scholarly analysis, on a par for attention with both the sacral heritage and its Modernist profanation, and enjoyed a new status of widespread and democratised public attention. Thirdly, post-colonial theory and feminism called for a further recasting of the term 'art', its histories and canons. During this rewriting, which is ongoing, the sacral has been turned, like all religious practice, and even gender relations, into the anthropological. 'Art' has become such an inclusive category that its only certainties are the shifting ground of Arthur Danto's artworld theory.¹² Fourthly, and most profoundly, interculturalism, and its economic yeast – globalization, has compelled not only a further rewriting of art's history, but has raised questions about the purpose and relevance of 'art' to the world of the twenty-first century. The sacral space of ritual, belief, heritage and a wider secular visual culture has become dispersed across a fragmented human ecology, from the pavilions of international biennales to the labyrinths of cyberspace.

Art and cultural dislocation

In the late twentieth century the accelerating distance of museum visitors from any sense of a common inherited past, the abandonment of traditional forms of colonialism, and this gathering interculturalism, rendered the style and content of nineteenth-century museums remote to the experience of the present. Religious institutions, exclusive ethnic or single-heritage nation-states, the colonial adventure, all became clothed in the fustian of a history irrelevant to the needs of the contemporary world, except where it could, in a transformed state, be mined for commercial gain. A glamourised and vulgarised history became the stock room plundered for popular film or television series, the framework of blockbuster exhibitions in the major cities of the West or the burgeoning economies of the Far East. In these spaces, now managed by a culture industry, visitors could purchase ephemeral memorabilia, temporarily meaningful merchandise marketed to cover the increasing cost of site specific infortainment.. The museum, it was argued, could only survive if it renounced its sacral origins and turned itself into a fairground of the present, became a commercial theme park.

This position was summed up by the artist, musician and impresario Malcolm McLaren: 'Any art institution in the 21st century should recognize that it is nothing but could and should be everything. In three words, Shoppertainment in the "new cultural ideal". The church back in the Middle Ages sold salvation, made you feel you didn't have to acquire things. Later, the museum replaced the church and gave us the opportunity to acquire self-knowledge. Today, shops have replaced museums. Their manifesto is very simple: shopping is art.'¹³

The primal seductions were now certainly to shopping, information and entertainment, to patterns of acquisition and curiosity, like imbricated mirrors catching the fleeting reflections of a never fully-attending consciousness. Yet despite McClaren's assertion newly reconstituted museums reenergised many of the trappings of their genesis, their lineaments of the temple, the sacred ground. Works of art, as the objects of visual and historical treasures had become, were often re-housed in newly refurbished galleries or specially built palaces of culture, such as the Guggenheim in Bilbao, gleaming halls of a cultural paradise, constructed with the assistance of an international bevy of architects, designers and engineers.

The local culture provided a diminishing number of visitors, both to these secular temples and their ancient sacral forebears, now transformed into tourist sites. Hordes of such tourists, with no primary attachment to the art or the space in which it is displayed, now make their way to the best marketed of these sites, which resonate with multilingual conversations, irreverent jostling, and the flash of digital cameras. In a sense the commercial success of museums in the tourist world emphasizes a hunger of visitors for some dimly remembered certainties, to rub shoulders briefly with 'the past', almost any past, with 'a culture', almost any culture, with

the special qualities (it is claimed in some brochure or fashionable magazine) of the objects they see about them, in a frenzy to fill an increasing lack of these inchoate qualities, as if one consequence of the new primal seductions was the production of atrascendance, a lack of cultural implantation.

These epistemic changes have been accompanied by a general sense of cultural dislocation, shifting the sense of the cultural self from an implanted space, a specific social construction of what is, in the broadest sense, 'sacral', to the new forms of primal seduction. New technologies of communication enable an increasing number of citizens of the planet to log into an intercultural virtual space, to surf an ever growing network of websites, to look at almost any form of 'art' on their screen at any time of day or night, to read both published criticism, theoretical discourse and casual blogs related to their own culture or that of others.

The new, and increasingly electronic, artwork is often a virtual remix, a compilation of digitized images, snatched from every conceivable source, perpetually resequenced, mashed, existing as momentarily figured into form, only to be remashed, experienced as a process of constantly morphing 'sampling – bits of data set adrift from their original contexts and meanings and smoothly reconfigured through electronic scanning.'¹⁴

Of course not everywhere and everyone is yet caught up within this vortex of the virtual, but I believe it is important to understand that this is not an insignificant change for the future function of 'art' and the space of its display and existence.¹⁵ The vortex of the virtual is part of a process of the shift of cultural disembodiedness around the world, an accelerated episode in the perpetual recrafting of our cultural subjectivity. Rather than McCalren's 'shopping' the primal seduction is rather to instant communication. The cultural self is, as soon after birth as electronic media can be seen, heard and, later, utilized, becoming relocated, taken from the cultural mother's breast to become momentarily attached to fragments of attention no longer grounded in a local sacral or secular space, in a framing construction of belief, custom and heritage. The cultural self is increasingly grounded nowhere and everywhere, less often nurtured in a local and public arena, but within intercultural, and often privately experienced, virtual space.

Enactive civic space

Cultures and the cultural self are now in the process of reconstruction, enmeshed in constantly morphing spheres of relativism. The presuppositions of continuity are marginalized, enclaved in sites that no longer relate unselfconsciously to the daily lives and beliefs of a local culture. Within the post-modern art museum the local, the former culturally sacral, is displayed as exotic, without assumptions that can be taken for granted, open now only to relativised attention. From that sequestered cultural attic hero-stars may be plucked from time to time who retain some commercially exploitable vestige of implantation in heritage.

The rest of the museum, wherever it may be in the world, is given over to paratactic visual displays that span wide spectrums of contemporary cultural fashion, media innovation, spectacle, from Goya's etchings of *The Disasters of War*, to Japanese superflat, to 'morphed synchronization across complex multidimensional data'¹⁶ projected onto an array of computer-linked screens. Meanwhile the currently marketable content is on sale in a variety non-art forms, as gifts, souvenirs, fashion items, an increasingly large part of the floor space given over to McClaren's shoppertainment: the money-changers in the temple.

Yet there is also an important sense in which, almost against the grain of change, museums of art still retain a shadow of the primal seduction of the past despite the marketing glitter of the present. Art museums by their very history and nature are constructions of the Western Enlightenment. That origin is fundamental to their practice. If, from the late eighteenth century,

the museum increasingly appeared to distance itself from that sacral origin, nevertheless the penumbra of that genesis is often uncertainly cast upon the present as museums, the space of cultural self-realisation, struggle with seemingly conflicting roles. Are they simply content providers? Should they offer a range of interpretations and translations of contemporary relativisms, constantly redemarcating the range of visual experience available in a fast changing world? Or should they, the shades of their earlier ethical mission more manifest, offer opportunities to recall, even celebrate, the origins and histories of a local imaginary? Of course, they are encouraged, by equally unsure patrons and funders, to do all these things and more.

Old temples of art, part of the nineteenth century heritage of the colonial era in the West, and their progeny amidst the settler populations around the world, are trying to construct for themselves a new pattern of roles in spaces that often seem uncongenial to the present. New generations of curators, still implanted in the soil of Enlightenment thinking, the very thinking that has expanded, sometimes painfully, into post-colonial spaces, try to stitch and patch aspects of the past, both of the settler-colonists and the colonized, into an optimistic fabric of positive relativism.

A new non-sacral space of cultural relativism, yet social positivism, an enactive civic space, is emergent, not yet in any self-conscious form. This is perhaps because the ‘self’ of the globalised world has yet to locate its cultural coordinates, has yet to create an ethically justifiable architecture, or a culturally viable path of social seduction, has yet to conceive a new space dedicated to relative and episodic interpretation, to the translation of both particular and intercultural human experience. The human apprehension of art has moved from the seemingly cultural simplicity of the sacral to the apparent complexity of the intercultural and the virtual, and is, perhaps, seeking a new site, more cohesive than the documenta or biennale, in which to focus conscious visual attention and synaptic enhancement in the post-postmodern world.

Such a space cannot be created through legislation, patronage or good intentions. It must develop, like the sacral space and the museum, through the natural processes of social evolution, as a site of intentional intercultural functionality, where the treasures of the past and the images that represent cultural aspect of the present – both virtual and actual, can engage with the interpersonal aspirations of new associations of localized groups in a socially elevated space consecrated to the images pulsing with sacral value for future generations.

Notes

1. For an elaboration of this concept developed by Jean Laplanche see his *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, first published in French in 1987 and translated into English in 1989 (Cambridge, Mass: Basil Blackwell), and also his *Essays in Otherness* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).
2. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Collier Books, 1961) p. 490
3. Aron Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 32
4. See note 1
5. For a discussion of the symbolic significance of scarification and tattooing see Terence Turner, ‘The Social Skin’, in T. Cherfas and R. Lewin (eds), *Not Work Alone: A Cross Cultural View of Activities Superfluous to Survival* (London: Temple Smith, 1980) and Alfred Gell, *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) especially pp. 23-31. Both Turner and Gell, however, emphasise the social nature of body marks, rather than the spiritual or sacral, the focus of this paper.
6. For a discussion of the distinction between ‘parietal’ (fixed) and mobiliary art see Oscar Moro Abadia and Manuel R. Gonzales Morales, ‘Towards a Genealogy of the Concept “Paleolithic Mobiliary Art”’, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 60: 3, 2004, pp. 321-340
7. ‘Museums’ – originally spaces given over for the study of The Muses, began their eighteenth-century European development as

- 'cabinets of curiosities' (*kunstkamera*), where paintings and sculpture were outnumbered by 'hippopotamuses, sharks with one ear, and spiders as big as geese,' as Horace Walpole described the collection donated by Sir Hans Sloane towards what became the British Museum. See Charles Saumarez Smith, 'Museums, Artefacts, and Meanings', in Peter Vergo (ed.), *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), p. 7
8. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1986), p. 12
 9. This is a much-repeated notion in writing about the history of art in the twentieth century. See for example Pierre Bourdieu, *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984) p. 30
 10. Krauss: 1984, p. 13
 11. Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon, 1950)
 12. Arthur Danto, 'The Art World', *Journal of Philosophy*, October 1964, 61, pp. 571-84
 13. This statement by Malcolm McClaren formed part of his response to a questionnaire directed by Jérôme Sans and Marc Sanchez, *What Do You Expect from an Art Institution in the 21st Century?* (Paris: Palais de Tokyo, 2002, p. 122
 14. A passage from DJ Spooky (Paul D. Miller), *Rhythm Science*, paraphrased by Barbara Maria Stafford, *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 162
 15. It may 'exist' simply on a CD-Rom or in virtual space without any other form of materiality.
 16. Stafford: 2007, p. 161

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Peter Stupples is currently Senior Lecturer in Art History and Theory at the Art School of the Otago Polytechnic. He was formerly Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Art History and Theory 1990-1998 at the University of Otago. He has written widely about Russian visual culture, his research speciality, and the social history of art. Among the six books published is *Pavel Kuznetsov: His Life and Art*, Cambridge University Press, 1989. Recent journal articles include: 'Visual Culture, Synthetic Memory and the Construction of National Identity', *Third Text*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2003, pp. 127-139; 'On Hanging "War and Peace"', *Scope: Art 1*, November 2006, pp. 43-49; six entries in the *Dunedin Public Art Gallery Guide*, October 2009; 'Visual Voices: Heeding the Specificity of the Cultural Context of Art', *Junctures*, 2007, pp. 1-10; 'Suprematism in the Antipodes: Malevich in New Zealand', *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 41: 2007, pp. 19-35; 'Malevich and Vorticism', *Canadian American Slavic Studies*, 4: Winter, 2008; 'Ground', *Scope, Art 3*, November 2008, pp. 149-157; 'The Vestimentary and Identity: British Pop Art', *Context*, 18: May 2009, pp. 5-10. In press 'Art Education and Curating', *Scope: Art 4*, 2009. 'The Ceramics of Willem Brouwer and Maori Art', is under consideration for publication. Stupples has also curated art exhibitions at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery: – November 2004-July 2005 'Sites for the Eyes: European Landscape in the Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery', April 2006-July 2007 'War and Peace' 'RAINZ: Russian Art in New Zealand', June-September 2009.