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THE TROJAN HORSE OF SPIRITUALITY: ART AS A STRATEGIC TOOL FOR TRANSFORMING POP CULTURE AND THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the detrimental impact of consumer society (ecological crisis, social inequality, spiritual emptiness) and explores the potential of contemporary art as a vehicle for introducing spiritual values into popular culture and counteracting these negative aspects. The author examines the possibility of employing art as a “Trojan horse,” capable of bypassing superficial perception to “penetrate” societal consciousness and foster spiritual transformation. Particular attention is given to the role of spirituality in this process, and the necessity of returning to profound spiritual values through art that leaves a lasting impact on the viewer is substantiated. The article draws upon the ideas of prominent thinkers such as Erich Fromm, Jean Baudrillard, and Wassily Kandinsky, and proposes strategies and techniques for creating new trends in the art world based on the utilization of symbolism, the creation of meditative spaces, and appeals to universal values. The examples of Damien Hirst, Banksy, and Marina Abramović are analyzed in relation to the influence of the market on art and the commodification of spiritual themes, while James Turrell and Wolfgang Laib demonstrate alternative approaches rooted in profound spiritual expression. This study aims to reveal how art can serve as a means to introduce spiritual values into popular culture and counteract the negative consequences of consumerism.

KEYWORDS

Art Strategies, Contemporary Art, Consumerism, Popular Culture, Spirituality, Trojan Horse

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Do you have any idea how many lives we must have gone through before we even got the first idea that there is more to life than eating, or fighting, or power in the Flock?

Richard Bach, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (Bach, 1994, p. 9)

Introduction

“The art of living is not a battle, but a voyage; it requires understanding the winds, the ebb and flow of tides, the currents, the rhythms of the seasons, and the natural laws of growth and decline. These are to be navigated, not opposed.” (Watts, 2022, p. 67)

Contemporary consumer society, characterized by an immoderate pursuit of material possessions, engenders significant environmental problems (IPCC, 2023) social inequality (World, 2022) and psychological distress (Kasser, 2002). In light of this, a substantial portion of contemporary art integrated into popular culture seeks to develop strategies to counter consumerism, employing various methods and approaches. The objective of these strategies is to stimulate discussion, raise awareness, and inspire a more conscious lifestyle.

However, despite their well-intentioned aims, such anti-consumerist art strategies rarely achieve their desired success. Paradoxically, they often become integrated into the very system they seek to critique. In our view, the root of the problem lies in the word “anti” itself. It implies opposition, struggle, the creation of an antagonist. In a consumerist world, this often leads to anti-consumerist art simply becoming a new, fashionable

trend, a commodity purchased and consumed by the very individuals it was meant to transform. Thus, anti-brand clothing becomes a brand, and critiques of capitalism become grounds for exclusive exhibitions and costly art objects. For instance, ironic paintings mocking the logos of famous companies are sold at auction for millions. Performances protesting fast fashion are sponsored by the very brands that produce it. Even street art, originally created outside of galleries, becomes an object of collecting and investment. Consequently, the energy directed towards resistance paradoxically fuels the system, lending it new forms.

Thus, anti-brand clothing becomes a brand (Klein, 1999), and critiques of capitalism become grounds for exclusive exhibitions and costly art objects (Aspden, Mar 6 2015). For instance, ironic paintings mocking the logos of famous companies are sold at auction for millions (Relaxnews, 2020, October 02). Performances protesting fast fashion are sponsored by the very brands that (Guy, 2021). Even street art, originally created outside of galleries, becomes an object of collecting and investment (Relaxnews, 2020, October 02).

Pop culture and art are interconnected. Art always keeps pace with the times, reflecting the values, ideals, and moral compass of society. Accordingly, art, as an integral part of pop culture, possesses immense potential for positive change in today's consumer society. In this article, we explore the possibility of using art as a kind of "Trojan Horse," capable of introducing spiritual values into the consciousness of consumer society not through confrontation, but through creation, by offering alternative values and meanings. Instead of fighting against consumer pop culture, we propose injecting it with content that will uplift, inspire, and enrich. Spirituality plays a key role in this process, offering new values and meanings. In the following sections, we will examine specific examples of such art, analyze strategies that can be used to achieve this goal, and assess the potential of this approach to transform society.

Art imbued with spirituality becomes not just a beautiful picture, but a powerful tool for transforming consciousness. Imagine spirituality – compassion, mindfulness, connection with nature, self-discovery – conveyed through the language of pop culture – short, vivid, memorable consciousness clips – not destroying the energy of consumerism, but redirecting it towards the search for deeper meaning. In our view, spirituality is the fundamental component of this process, and the task is to make it fashionable and accessible to everyone. Not in the form of religious dogma, but as inspiring images, like a "Trojan Horse" carrying the seeds of positive change. When spirituality becomes not just a beautiful word, but a fashionable and accessible way of life, then art can truly change the world.

This discourse will be dedicated to how contemporary art, integrated into pop culture, can act as a catalyst for positive change. Our goal is to explore how art can inspire spiritual growth and conscious consumption, not by fighting against the existing system, but by creating alternative and more appealing options. We invite you to consider: what role can art play in shaping a more conscious and harmonious society of the future?

1. Research Methodology

This study employs a comprehensive qualitative approach. The aim of the work is to identify and analyze the ways in which contemporary art utilizes spiritual concepts to transform pop culture and critique consumer society, considering both the possibilities of art serving as a "Trojan Horse" of spirituality and its susceptibility to the influence of market forces. To achieve this goal, an interdisciplinary approach is applied, incorporating elements of art history, philosophy, cultural studies, and sociology.

1.1 Analysis Methods:

- **Semiotic Analysis:** The study of signs, symbols, and metaphors to identify spiritual ideas and critiques of consumer society. The analysis includes iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs, as well as their influence on the viewer.
- **Cultural-Historical Analysis:** Examination of artworks within their historical and cultural context. The analysis aims to reveal the influence of market forces and the consumer system on artists' work and to assess their ability to resist these influences.
- **Discourse Analysis:** The analysis of discourses related to spirituality, pop culture, and consumer society as presented in the artworks.
- **Analysis of Viewer Impact:** Assessment of the impact of art on the formation of values, with particular attention given to the analysis of emotional impact and influence on the spiritual transformation of viewers.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical framework draws upon a broad range of theoretical sources to facilitate a comprehensive analysis. The key theoretical works include:

- The works of Erich Fromm (humanistic psychology, spiritual values, analysis of society).
- The works of Jean Baudrillard (consumer society, simulacra, hyperreality).
- The aesthetic and philosophical ideas of Wassily Kandinsky (influence of art on spiritual perception and the transmission of emotions).
- Concepts concerning the influence of market economics on art and the role of art in the spiritual development of the individual.

1.3 Additional Sources:

- Poverty and Shared Prosperity (World Bank): Data on economic inequality and social problems will inform the analysis of the critique of consumer society in art.
- Kasser, Tim, "The High Price of Materialism": Analysis of materialism's negative influence on psychological well-being will clarify the critique of consumerism.
- Rifkin, Jeremy, "The Zero Marginal Cost Society": Rifkin's ideas on societal transformation in the digital age will illuminate new art-society interactions.
- Debord, Guy, The Society of the Spectacle: Debord's analysis of the society of the spectacle will deepen the understanding of consumerism and manipulation in art.

1.4 Selection and Analysis of Examples

As examples for analysis, the works of Damien Hirst, Maurizio Cattelan, Banksy, Marina Abramović, and Marc Quinn have been selected; these works illustrate the influence of market forces on contemporary art and the possibility of creating "disposable" art. Additionally, the works of Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, Marsden Hartley, CANAN, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman will be examined, which demonstrate the use of symbolism and visual references to religious traditions. The works of James Turrell, Wolfgang Laib, Devabil Kara, Teymur Daimi, and Medina Akkainak will also be analyzed to demonstrate the expression of spirituality in the work of artists from different countries (USA, China, Azerbaijan, Turkey).

The artworks are analyzed according to the following criteria: the presence of references to spirituality, influence in pop culture, critique of consumer society, the ability to evoke an emotional response, and the capacity to promote reflection on spiritual values.

1.5 Expected Results

The expected results of the study include identifying strategies for the use of spirituality, analyzing the critique of consumer society, determining the influence of art on the perception of spiritual values, and assessing the susceptibility of art to market forces.

1.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the research aims to reveal the potential of art as an instrument of societal transformation and to assess its ability to serve as a "Trojan Horse" of spirituality within the conditions of contemporary consumer society. The influence of market forces on art and the possibilities for artists to resist these influences will be considered.

2. Contemporary Art: Potential and Challenges

At a cursory glance, it may seem that contemporary art has made a gigantic breakthrough in its evolution. We can observe a freedom of expression that was unthinkable even in the mid-20th century. Modern artists can afford to explore virtually anything, leading to new themes, techniques, and materials. Artists experiment and go beyond once-established norms and standards, creating new ones. Contemporary art is presented by a wide range of styles, genres, and directions, from abstract expressionism to modern photography or digital art. It evokes strong emotions and impressions. Modern visual art is flexible, accessible, and does not require specialized education. Everyone can express themselves and even be caught up in a wave of success.

However, behind this outward freedom and accessibility lie certain challenges. Freedom of expression can lead to art devoid of depth and meaning, and accessibility can lead to a decline in quality and commercialization. In this chapter, we will examine both the positive and negative potential of contemporary art, and analyze whether it can serve as a "Trojan Horse" for introducing spiritual values into pop culture.

2.1. Disposable Art in a World of Disposable Things

One could say that art today is doing better than ever, but what's the other side of the coin? Freedom of expression, diversity of styles, and accessibility can all turn into superficiality and commercialization when art becomes a commodity, and its value is determined solely by its market price.

Damien Hirst, the wealthiest artist of the 21st century, creates sculptures with animals in formaldehyde, spot paintings, and sells his works for hundreds of millions of dollars. His works provoke a mixed reaction, demonstrating how art can be turned into a costly product. One of his iconic works – “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living” – is an aquarium with a tiger shark. Acquired by Charles Saatchi, the shark began to decompose, but even with this “defect” it was sold in 2004 for \$12 million (Lisakova, 2011, стр. 235).

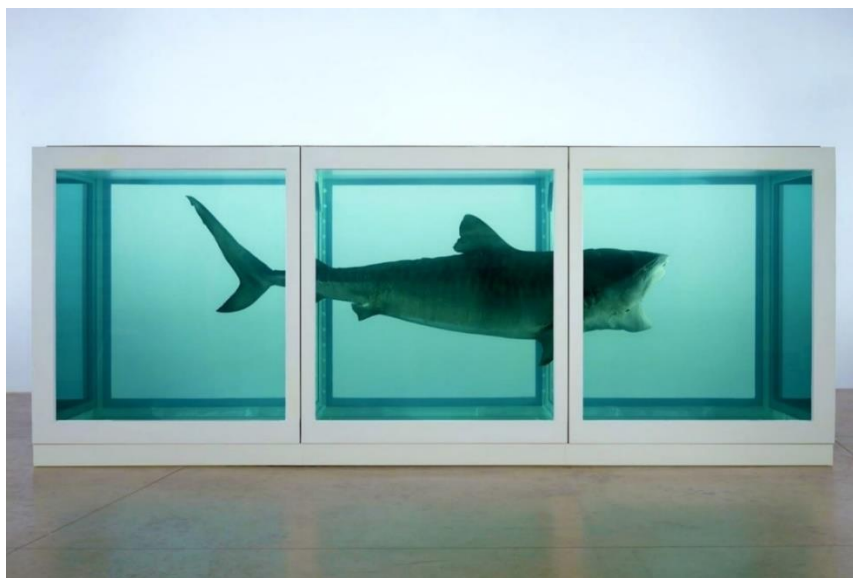


Fig. 1. Damien Hirst. 1991. *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. Private Collection. Source: (Romantsevich, 2021)

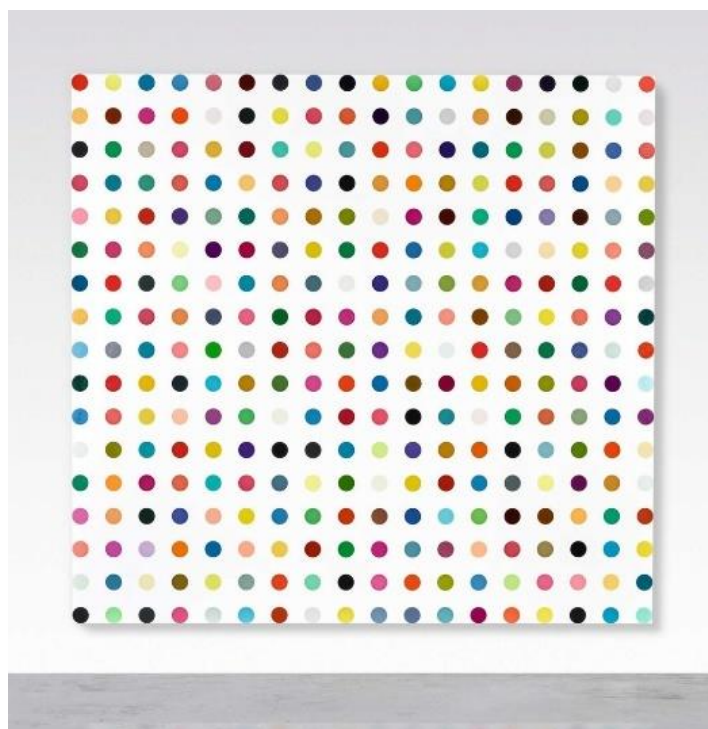


Fig. 2. Damien Hirst. Painting, 2000s, 335.3×355.6 cm. *Heptan-1*. Source: (Hirst, 2025)

Maurizio Cattelan, another successful and expensive artist without specialized education, is known for his provocative works that most often evoke emotions of rejection and aggression. His famous “Comedian” – a banana duct-taped to a wall – was sold for more than \$100,000, and was also accompanied by a 14-page list of instructions detailing how to recreate the installation. He sold 3 of these bananas. (Nelson, November 6, 2022).

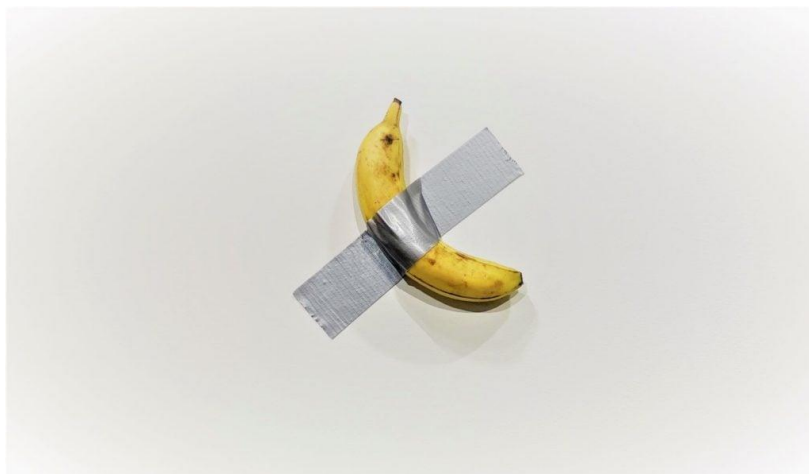


Fig. 3. Maurizio Cattelan. 2019. *Comedian*. Photo by Sarah Cascone. Source: Maurizio Cattelan's 'Comedian'. Source: (News, 2019)

Street artist Banksy, whose murals and works also sell like hotcakes for exorbitant amounts of money, clearly demonstrates how art, initially created outside of galleries and without commercial goals, can become an object of buying, selling, and investment. The sneezing grandmother graffiti in Bristol led to an increase in the house's value from £300,000 to £5 million (Izzy Nikolic and Antonia Paget, 2020).



Fig. 4. Banksy. 2020. *Sneezing Old woman*. Graffiti. Photo by Claire Hayhurst/PA. Source: (Walker, 2020)

Marina Abramović, a performance art master, has also moved into the sphere of commerce, selling the virtual performance “The Life” for £287,500. (Shaw, 2023)

And even Marc Quinn, who creates sculptures of his head from frozen blood every 5 years, demonstrates how ephemeral and seemingly short-lived art can be turned into an expensive commodity. Quinn's first sculpture was acquired by Charles Saatchi for £13,000. The refrigerator where it was stored was accidentally unplugged, and the work rotted (Barnes, 2022).



Fig. 5. Marc Quinn. 2006. *Self. Frozen Blood Sculpture*. Source: (Barnes, *Artist Uses His Own Blood to Create Frozen Self Portrait Sculptures of His Head*, 2022)

These examples illustrate how modern art, despite freedom of expression and diversity, can be influenced by market forces, leading to the creation of disposable art, the value of which is determined primarily by commercial success, and not by depth and spiritual content.

Summarizing the examples given above, the following key features of contemporary art integrated into the consumer system can be identified:

- **Dominance of Commerce:**

- The main character in most contemporary works is “Money.” Inner content and artistic value (which, as we will see below, are often ignored) take a backseat.
- It’s not the works that are bought, but the names and status – contemporary art becomes a consumer brand, where even “fighting consumerism” cleverly becomes a brand.

- **The Artist as Entrepreneur:**

Contemporary artists are increasingly acting as business people, skillfully using marketing skills to promote their works. It’s important to “stand out.” Cattelan openly says that his main character trait is healthy “idiocy.” (Kulturologia, 2025)

- **Neglect of Deep Meaning and Quality:**

- Grasping the meaning of a work by penetrating its inner intention (Groys, *Commentary on Art*, 2003, s. 27) is often impossible without an explanatory context.
- In terms of “quality and durability,” we are referring to material preservation ensured by traditional techniques. However, in contemporary art, concept, emotion, and relevance are more important. At the same time, some artists working with spirituality find ways to combine innovative technologies with traditional notions of value and durability, creating works that not only inspire and heal but also retain their relevance over time.

- **Superficiality of Themes:**

The main themes attracting contemporary artists are Death, Immortality, Transience, Meaninglessness of Existence, Money, Politics, Criticism of Consumer Society - concepts that are skillfully “juggled” by modern popular artists.

Based on the foregoing, it leads to the conclusion that contemporary art, being integrated into the consumer system, cannot serve as a “Trojan horse” of spirituality. On the contrary, it often uses the same mechanisms of manipulation as pop culture itself, promoting values far removed from spiritual ones. In the pursuit of profit and fame, artists often exploit themes related to the existential crisis but offer no solutions or alternatives. They use “childish naivety,” “mass-produced aggression,” and “ostentatious demonstration of mental flexibility,” but lack the most important thing - spirituality and moral messages based on the ideals of good, justice, duty, and honor. Instead, such art only strengthens the existing system and contributes to the further degradation of moral values.

3. Strategy - A Turn Towards Spirituality

Fromm, in his lecture at the University of California, speaking about the negative aspects that abundance creates in the politics of consumption, spoke of insatiability in everything. Man begins to constantly consume and rarely digest; about the attraction to the inanimate (to gadgets) which leads to immorality; about the love of the inorganic, which is associated with the attraction to destruction, death, decomposition; about alienation, when the products of his labor begin to dominate him. He also emphasized that by worshipping things, he himself becomes a thing and becomes dead. "People don't have time to think about the meaning of life. When full automation is achieved, the question of spirituality will become paramount" (Lecture at the University of California, 30.10.1964).

Baudrillard picks up and echoes him: "Consumption... is no longer a process of labor and overcoming, it is a process of absorbing signs and being absorbed by signs. It is characterized by.... the end of the transcendent. This society is characterized by a lack of 'reflection,' a perspective on itself." (Baudrillard, 2006, s. 163-164).⁵

In an era characterized by a lack of reflection and loss of the transcendent, as Baudrillard notes, art must serve as a catalyst for change. It must move away from superficiality and touch the deepest chords of the human soul. Culture should not be just an object of consumption, but a tool for the development of the individual and society. Only art capable of touching the soul and evoking deep feelings can become a source of change and progress. That is why it is necessary to create and support such creativity that awakens awareness, helps us look deep within ourselves and find answers to the most important questions. Art that not only entertains but makes you think, empathize, experience catharsis. An artistic practice that returns us to humanity and reminds us of the eternal values that are immeasurably more important than the fleeting pleasures of consumption and touches the deepest chords of the human soul, helping us to better understand ourselves and the world around us.

Thus, to overcome the spiritual crisis caused by the consumer society, a radical turn is needed. The fundamental strategy should be Spirituality, which does not provide ready-made answers but stimulates independent search and self-knowledge. It is Spirituality that needs to be made fashionable and in demand. Everything in art should be aimed at returning to spiritual values, at searching for the truth about man and his place in the world.

Contemporary art that only carries shock value and evokes negative emotions cannot remain valuable and meaningful for long. Art should not only be visually appealing but also have a deep meaning that can inspire and develop a person. Art should be a source of love, inspiration, and self-knowledge.

Spirituality is a key element of human essence, which distinguishes us from other living beings and without which humanity could not have survived. From the beginning to the end of human history, spirituality has been used to manipulate and influence people. Regardless of the field - religion, politics, or economics, spirituality has always played an important role. The spiritual beliefs of the people are used to achieve specific goals. To succeed, it is important to know how to appeal to spirituality.

The spiritual in art, according to Kandinsky, is the aspiration toward the refinement and development of the human soul—both through the act of creation and through the perception of art. Kandinsky asserted that a work reaches its highest value when it emerges from an inner necessity, and becomes its lowest when it stems from external compulsion—such as vanity or greed (Kandinsky, 1962). It is the spirit that determines matter, not the other way around (Baudrillard, 2006).

No differences in cultural and artistic contexts can hinder the perception of a work of art that is imbued with spirit. Be it glazing, meditative brushstrokes, or bold and emotional gestures, if the artists were able to connect with the spiritual dimension of what they depicted, to get to the essence, the core, then it is understandable to everyone. After all, only works filled with spirituality can excite humanity for centuries and generations: Raphael's Sistine Madonna, Leonardo Da Vinci's enigmatic Mona Lisa, Hasegawa Tohaku's ink painting, Pine Forest, simple icons painted with sincere faith, folk songs conveying the wisdom of generations, or even photographs of nature capturing its beauty and grandeur.

It is important to understand that spirituality can manifest itself in various forms and genres - from high art to naive creativity.

Think of the simple prayer rugs, lovingly created by the hands of believers, or the spontaneous graffiti expressing protest and hope - even in these humble manifestations of creativity, there can be enormous spiritual power. It is such works of art that carry a spark of the divine, a reflection of eternal truths and values, and it is such works that excite people for many generations and leave a deep mark on the soul of every viewer or listener.

4. Features of Spirituality in Contemporary Art

In the previous chapter, we examined contemporary art as a complex and contradictory phenomenon, subject to the influence of commerce and often devoid of deep spiritual content. However, this does not mean that there is no place for spirituality in contemporary art. On the contrary, many artists strive to create works that can inspire, heal, and open new horizons for humanity.

In this chapter, dedicated to “Features of Spirituality in Contemporary Art,” we will look at specific manifestations of this trend. Emphasizing the need to return to spiritual values, we will pay attention to how contemporary artists use symbolism in their work, create visual references to religious traditions, generalize the feeling of spirituality, filling their works with both Eastern and Western elements, use natural materials, and create meditative spaces (Heartney, 2008, s. 266-288).

Throughout history, art has always served as a means of expressing human spiritual aspirations. Artists of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, for example, gave visual form to church teachings. However, with the advent of modernism in the late 19th century, the alliance between Western art and religion was broken. Modernists, such as Kandinsky, reinterpreting the concept of spirituality in his book “Concerning the Spiritual in Art” (Kandinsky, 1962), shifted the emphasis from religious dogma to the individual spiritual experience and inner experiences of the artist. Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, and Marsden Hartley sought truth through individual revelations, universal brotherhood, and spiritual ecstasy. Mark Rothko created a meditative space - a chapel in Houston, and Barnett Newman - abstract paintings depicting the Stations of the Cross (Heartney, 2008).

At the same time, towards the end of the 20th century, artists also began to express hostility towards religion, using its imagery for critical purposes. However, regardless of the attitude towards a particular religion, art in various cultures has always used metaphors and images to give shape to invisible forces and answer questions about the meaning of life and death, about good and evil.

Today, contemporary artists continue to engage with religious themes and symbolism, expressing their own visions of spirituality and the meaning of life. They integrate both Western and Eastern spiritual traditions. Some, such as the Turkish feminist-activist artist Canan (Levent Çalıkoğlu, Deniz Pehlivaner, 2023), utilize religious symbolism to critique conservative perspectives. Many artists, disillusioned with the materialism, dualism, and rationalism of the West, are turning to Eastern spiritual traditions, while Asian artists are subject to Western influences. As a result of these cultural cross-currents, a more generalized sense of spirituality emerges, combining elements of both Eastern and Western teachings.

Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, and the dematerialized objects of Conceptualism align well with mindfulness. For example, the German sculptor Wolfgang Laib seeks universal spirituality through the language of natural materials, creating spiritual installations and sculptures (Heartney, 2008).



Fig. 6. Wolfgang Laib, *Without Beginning and Without End*, Cappella Pazzi, Complesso Monumentale di Santa Croce, Beeswax, Florence, 2019 (Galerie, 2025)

Thus, throughout history, we observe how art, in its various forms, has served as a means of expressing spiritual values, sometimes explicitly religious, sometimes more abstract and individual. Today, this tendency gains renewed relevance within the context of consumer society, where art can become the very “Trojan horse” that carries the seeds of spiritual regeneration.

In order to demonstrate, through specific instances, how these characteristics of spirituality manifest in contemporary art and how they can function as a distinctive “Trojan horse,” we shall proceed to analyze the oeuvre of select artists.

4.1 James Turrell: Journey into Light and Consciousness

«My work has no object, no image and no focus. With no object, no image and no focus, what are you looking at? You are looking at you looking. What is important to me is to create an experience of wordless thought». James Turrell

The American artist James Turrell’s words challenge the fundamental concept of art as a product for consumption. His work, which dissolves the boundaries between art, architecture, and perception, offers viewers not simply an aesthetic experience, but a deep, transformative perception, an immersion in pure light, and a sense of its physical and spiritual force.

Turrell, eschewing the material art object in favor of experience (TheArtStory, 2025), explores the nature of perception and consciousness, inviting the viewer to meditative contemplation and a re-evaluation of reality. His installations, such as “Three Gems,” part of the “Skyspace” series (Artchive, 2025), create a unique space for contemplating the sky and the interplay of light within an architectural framework, immersing the viewer in a meditative state.

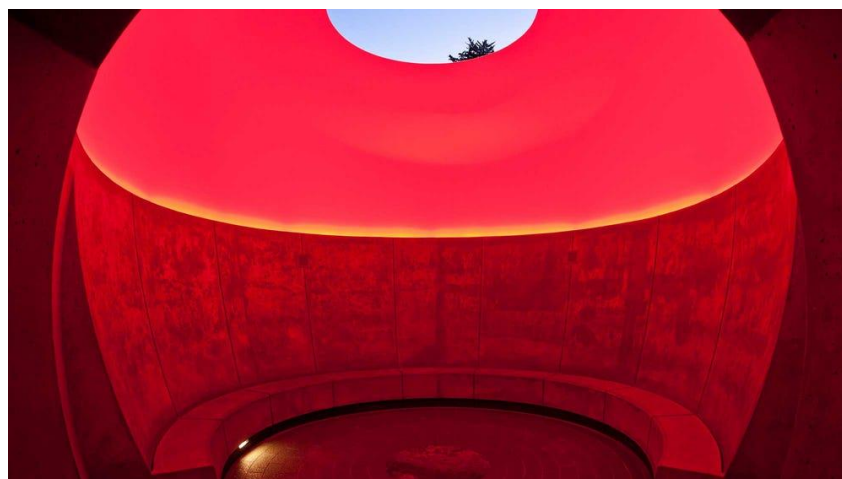


Fig. 7. James Turrell, *Three Gems*, 2005, *Installation*, Source: (Artchive, 2025)

“The Way Out” is an installation artwork showcases an architectural space with wooden paneling that gently curves around a seating area. Above, an aperture in the ceiling frames a vibrant, deep blue circle, which directs the viewer’s gaze upwards to the sky. The lighting within the space is carefully controlled, creating a serene and contemplative atmosphere. ” (Artchive, 2025).

Thus, can the art of James Turrell be considered a “Trojan horse of spirituality,” capable of penetrating the consciousness of consumer society? By rejecting the material, Turrell offers something more profound: experience. He does not simply create an object for consumption, but rather cultivates a space for self-discovery, for an encounter with oneself and with the boundless cosmos. His art, ultimately, is not a product, but a process, an act of mindful presence aimed at awakening the spiritual principle within the individual, weary of the endless pursuit of material possessions. The work of James Turrell is a silent call to liberation from the dominion of objects and to the search for true values within oneself.



Fig. 8. James Turrell, *The Way Out*, 2005, *Installation*, Source: (Artchive, 2025)

4.2 Wolfgang Laib: The Pollen of Presence

Wolfgang Laib, the German Conceptual artist born in 1950, presents a compelling case for how seemingly quiet art can function as a potent agent of spiritual transformation. His journey, initially rooted in medicine and later blossoming into an artistic practice profoundly influenced by Zen Buddhism and Taoism, laid the groundwork for his unique approach. Laib's work, though encompassing various disciplines, is best recognized for its subtle yet powerful installations, particularly those featuring flower pollen meticulously collected by the artist himself in southern Germany.

Laib's artistic language, developed since the mid-1970s, speaks to the ephemeral nature of existence. His minimalist pieces, utilizing recurring, elemental forms and biodegradable materials, invite a shift in perspective. They are not merely objects to be observed, but rather, immersive experiences that beckon the viewer inward, towards a meditative state. This deliberate turn towards the interior, away from the demands of the external world, is crucial to understanding Laib's artistic strategy. As he eloquently stated, "I am not afraid of beauty, unlike most artists today" (Artnet, 2025).

This embrace of beauty, particularly the understated beauty found in natural materials like pollen, milk, and beeswax, becomes the key to his Trojan horse. The very essence of his work – the delicate, time-consuming process of collecting pollen, as exemplified by his monumental work "Pollen from Hazelnut" at MoMA – embodies a monastic dedication (Heinrich, 2024) (Art Basel, 2025). The act itself, described by Laib as requiring "monklike devotion," transforms the seemingly mundane into something deeply significant. He relishes this work, noting that the process occupies his time "for hours and hours and days and days" (Heinrich, 2024).



Fig. 9. Wolfgang Laib , "Pollen from Hazelnut", Installation at MoMA, Source: (Mackenzie Schmidt, 2012)

In our analysis, Laib's practice subtly challenges the prevailing aesthetic of a culture obsessed with the immediate and the material. By prioritizing the ephemeral, by working with materials that inherently possess a fleeting presence, Laib offers a counter-narrative to the values of consumerism. "The uglier the world is, the more important it is to have beauty – inner beauty," he has stated " (Heinrich, 2024). His work serves as a reminder of the possibility of experiencing beauty and finding the sacred in the ordinary. His work isn't overtly religious or explicitly didactic. However, his use of natural elements and his emphasis on the meditative process invites the viewer to pause, to breathe, and to connect with something larger than themselves. In the context of our discussion, Laib's art operates as a Trojan horse, subtly infiltrating the viewer's consciousness with a call to presence. It creates a space for contemplation, inviting us to consider that true value may lie not in acquisition, but in experience, mindfulness, and a deep connection to the rhythms of the natural world. His work, a burst of uplifting color amidst a world of gray, provides an optimistic reminder: a season of fresh new life is always within reach.

4.3 Devabil Kara: Transformation through Art

"Only the product of art is exchanged for currency, not the artist's vision. Those creators of art who have succeeded in 'achieving artistry without sacrificing their principles' will be honored in the future as the true artists and shapers of culture within this country." (Kara, 2025) writes Devabil Kara, whose work exemplifies the very "spirituality" that, like a Trojan horse, is capable of penetrating the fortress of consumer society and transforming it from within. Born in Turkey in 1962, Kara is known for his minimalist works that combine elements of landscape, architecture, and abstraction in painting, graphics, and installations.

The aim of his art, it seems, is to create a space for spiritual experience and reflection. His works, with their deliberate simplicity and lack of excessive detail, appear to invite the viewer to slow down, to detach from material concerns, and to turn inward. Kara's works, which utilize organic materials in his paintings (paper pulp, wax) that change texture over time and create new interpretations, stand in contrast to disposable artworks that quickly lose their relevance.

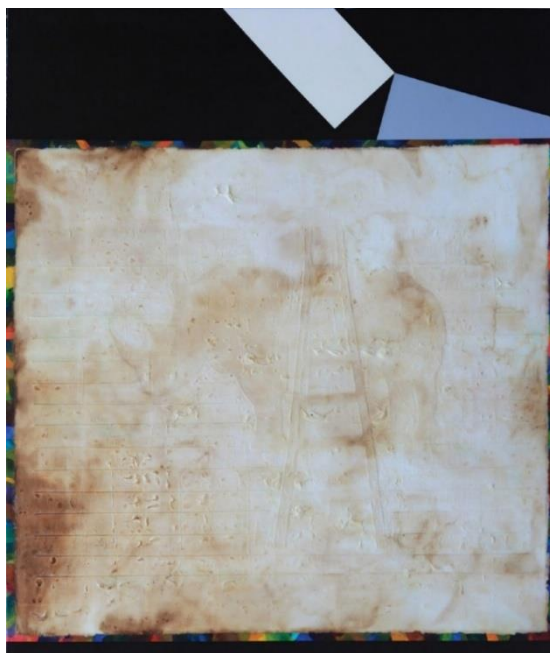


Fig. 10. Devabil Kara, *Play in the Dream Garden* Mixed media on canvas 200 cm x 170 cm Year of Production: 2011 (Sanatgezgini, 2025)

The symbolism in his works is also telling. For example, the image of the chair, on the one hand, alludes to power and status, to the pursuit of conspicuous consumption, and on the other hand, reminds us of the fragility of these attributes. The rhythmic repetitions of geometric figures in his compositions, emphasizing internal experiences and spiritual growth, encourage the viewer to diminish the influence of material values (Kara, *Shadow Memory/Intermediate States*, 2016).

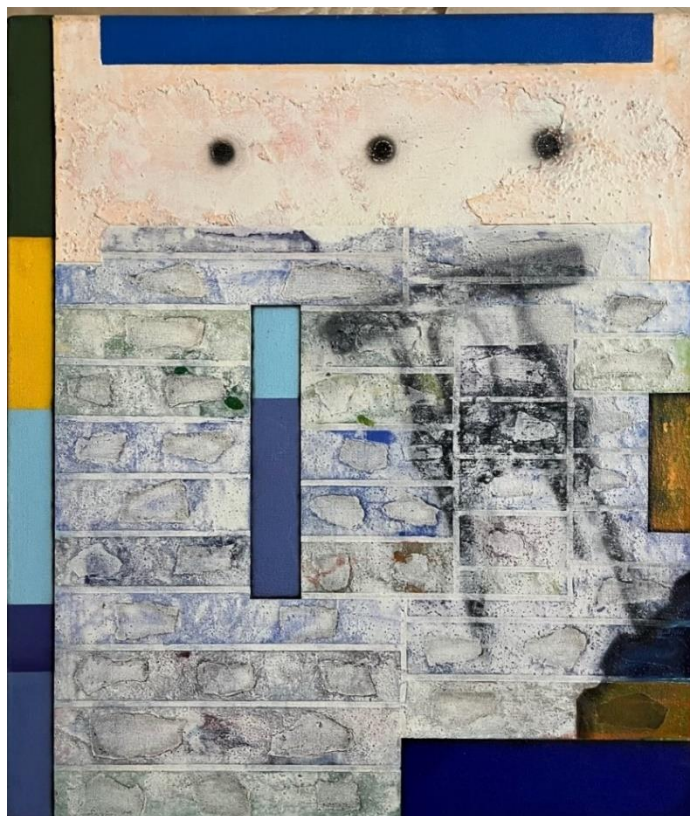


Fig. 11. Devabil Kara, *Untitled*, mixed media on canvas, 70 cm x 60 cm, 2015 (Gezgini, 2025)

Returning to Devabil Kara's quote at the beginning of this chapter, it's crucial to emphasize that what truly matters is not the commercialization of art, but the artist's judgment. Art should convey values that transcend monetary worth; it should open new horizons and help us find meaning independent of material possessions. Kara's work is a striking example of how art, employing "minimalist spirituality" as a kind of "Trojan horse," is capable not only of critiquing consumer society, but also of inspiring mindfulness, spiritual seeking, and a re-evaluation of life's priorities.

4.4 Teymur Daimi: Art as a Path to the Transcendent

"Works of art, having become akin to mass-produced consumer goods, behave as if they are desperately trying to dissolve into life. And they succeed magnificently. But this successful integration into society means that art risks losing its capacity for transcendent impact on the viewer," warns T. Daimi (Daimi, 1996, p. 17), setting the tone for reflections on the role of art in contemporary society, consumed by consumerism. Azerbaijani artist, film director, philosopher, art theorist, and publicist Teymur Daimi (born 1966) is known for his work, which is imbued with spiritual symbols, esotericism, philosophy, universal religious themes, and human emotions.

His painting, graphic practice, and films are characterized by layered, meditative compositions in an abstract style, exploring forms, colors, and textures. Daimi, like many other artists, critiques the dissolution of art into popular consumer culture. He believes that art should serve higher purposes than simply satisfying material needs, functioning as a means of reflecting on and analyzing reality, an instrument for understanding the world and oneself.

"Only in mindfulness can a person manifest spirituality," asserts Daimi (Daimi, 1996, pp. 7,70), emphasizing the inextricable link between art and spirituality. For him, spirituality in art is an expression of the yearning for the transcendent, the soul's instinctive attraction to a higher reality that gives meaning to all existence. True art, in his view, should ignite this spiritual center, serving as an "icon" for believers and a guide to the transcendent, rather than merely an aesthetic pleasure. (Daimi, 1996)

His abstract paintings, such as "Passage of Vibration I" and "Passage of Vibration II," with their contrast between order and chaos, light and darkness, geometry and abstraction, as well as their pronounced emotionality, can be interpreted as a reflection of the human inner world, its striving for harmony, its search for meaning, and its overcoming of difficulties on the path of spiritual development. These works seem to invite the viewer to reflect on the eternal questions of existence, on humanity's place in the universe, and on its connection to something greater than itself.



Fig 12. Teymur Daimi, *Vibration Passing I*, oil on canvas, 70 x 50 cm, 1989 (Daimi, *Vibration Passing*, 1989)

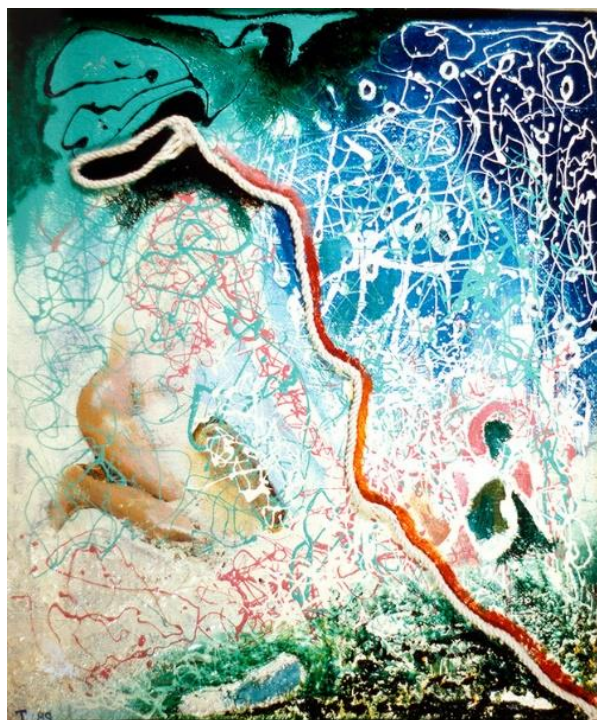


Fig. 13. Teymur Daimi, *Vibration Passing II*, oil on canvas, 70 x 50 cm, 1989 (Daimi, *Vibration Passing*, 1989)

But can art, like a “Trojan horse,” penetrate the consumer’s consciousness and awaken their spirituality? While acknowledging the danger of art dissolving into mass culture, Daimi nevertheless believes in its transformative power. He sees in art the potential for consciously changing society, for creating a new system of values where spirituality, mindfulness, and self-knowledge become priorities, and material consumption takes a backseat. Teymur Daimi’s work is a call for dialogue about the role of art in the modern world, about its ability not only to reflect reality, but also to shape it, restoring to humanity its lost connection with the spiritual.

4.5 Ding Yi: Spiritual Awakening

Contemporary Chinese artist Ding Yi is an important figure in the development of geometric abstraction in China. Born in 1969 and raised during the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai, he experienced the influence of both traditional Chinese culture and Western modernist movements from a young age. This combination is reflected in his work, which represents a unique fusion of geometric abstraction and spiritual exploration.

Ding Yi incorporated crosses into his work in the late 1980s. The majority of his works feature repetitions of the plus sign, layered in various strata, colors, and rotations. Initially, the artist associated the X and + forms with the bustling communication networks and characteristic fluorescence of the modern city, reflecting the industrial development of the urban environment in post-socialist China. The cross itself, according to the artist, was a formal sign without any particular meaning. He executed a series of painting experiments entitled “Appearances of Crosses,” in which the artist adopted the X and + forms as a recurring motif with the intention of uniting painting and design into a single form of expression. (Xiaoyan, 2025)



Fig. 14. Ding Yi, “Appearances of Crosses,” 2003-6, 2003, (Xiaoyan, 2025)

However, after 2021, the context of Ding Yi’s work shifts. Embarking on a journey to Tibet and visiting numerous temples, the artist gains a new spiritual experience. “When night fell, the strongest sensation was silence. Everything else became secondary... All the darkness accentuated the whiteness of Everest—not the whiteness of sunlight, but a structured whiteness, endless layers of whiteness... In the silence of the night studio, this state can be constantly recalled,” the artist shares (Xiaoyan, 2025)

Thus, in 2022, the installation “Haçların Ortaya Çıkışı” (Appearances of Crosses) appears, installed in a nineteenth-century temple in the form of a mandala in Lhasa. His paintings begin to resemble mandalas and carry within them something spiritual. (Xiaoyan, 2025)

Can Ding Yi’s art, with its repeating signs initially devoid of meaning but subsequently filled with spiritual content, serve as a kind of “Trojan horse of spirituality” in the context of a consumer society? Unlike straightforward religious imagery, Ding Yi’s works, at first glance, appear purely abstract and formal. However, behind this external simplicity lies a deep meditative experience, alluding to Tibetan spiritual traditions. His art, as if “deceiving” the viewer with its formal abstraction, gradually immerses them in a state of contemplation and spiritual searching. As Ding Yi himself notes, “an oasis of calm amidst the hustle and bustle may be a suitable ecology for art.” (news.artnet.com, 2025).

Ding Yi’s art functions as a “Trojan horse,” infiltrating the minds of modern individuals overwhelmed by the noise and frenzy, and ultimately offering them a path to inner peace and spiritual harmony.

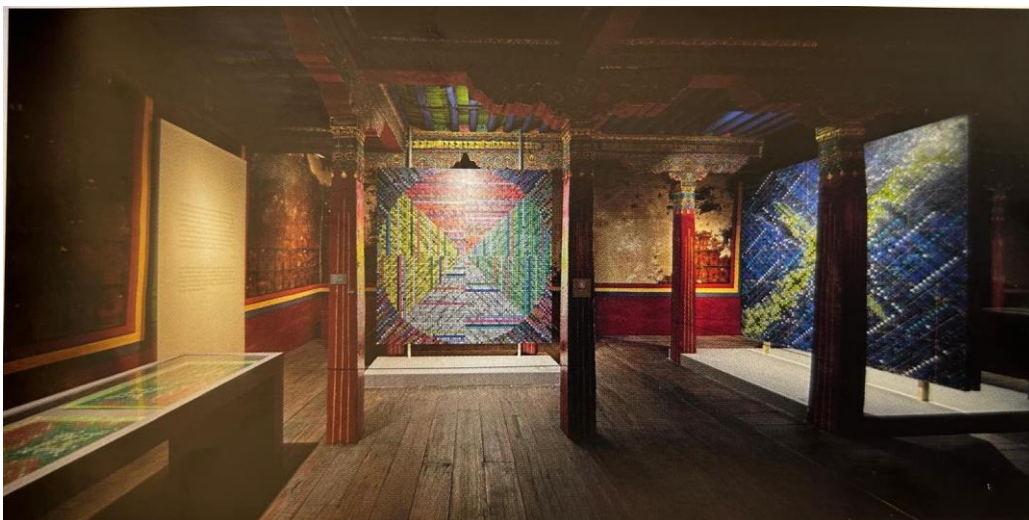


Fig. 15. Ding Yi, *Appearances of Crosses*, 2022-10, acrylic and engraving on wood, 240x240 cm, Installation. Source: (Xiaoyan, 2025)

4.6 Medina Akkaynak: Meditative Aesthetics in a Noisy World

The work of contemporary artist Medina Akkaynak is also in search of expressing the spiritual. It focuses on self-knowledge and the quest for a deeper purpose that transcends worldly ambitions. Akkaynak's artistic journey is marked by diverse experiences and a deep interest in meditative aesthetics, which is reflected in her works, executed in various media and styles.

For example, in her paintings, where metaphor is often employed, Akkaynak raises acute questions, including the problem of consumer politics and insatiability. In the paintings depicting a flock of seagulls in an eternal struggle for survival, the metaphor of danger, fury, and ruthlessness is vividly conveyed. These paintings, filled with expressions of battle and the search for food, make one reflect on the fact that survival and victory are the main tasks not only for the subjects of the painting but also for all living beings on the planet.



Fig. 16. Medina Akkaynak, «Eternal battle. We only dream of peace! №1» (2023) Canvas 90x60, mixed technique, Author's own work.

However, Akkaynak's spiritual quests are not limited to a critique of consumer society. A significant place in her work is occupied by the series "The Flow of Silence." These works, according to the artist, aim to convey the moment when time slows down and the world stills, immersing us in deep contemplation. The purpose of this series is to help the viewer slow down, see beauty in simple moments, find peace, and discover their own images, which will surface and reveal new meanings.

It is interesting to note that, despite the fact that the "Flow of Silence" series is created using digital technologies, Akkaynak's works do not remain in virtual space. They are printed and acquire a material form, which, unlike many other digital works of art, provides them with a certain durability and allows them to have a deeper and more lasting impact on the viewer. This is an example of how artists working with spirituality can rethink traditional notions of quality and value in art, finding ways to overcome the limitations associated with the use of new technologies and materials.

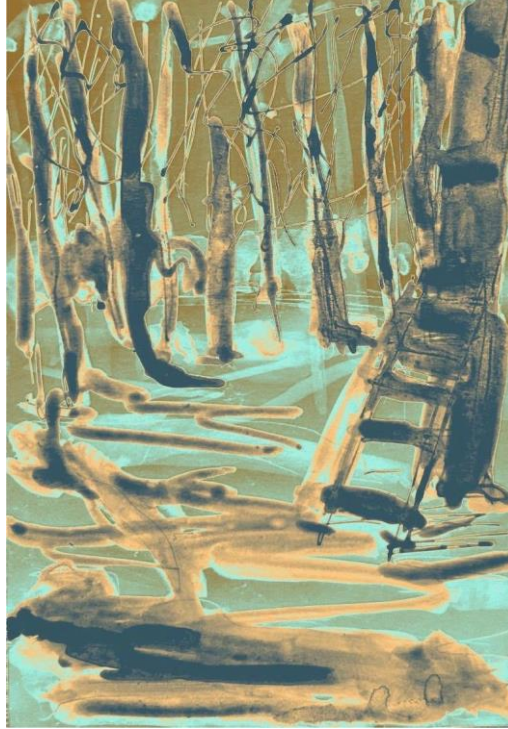


Fig. 17. "Flow of silence 7", 2025, digital artwork, Author's own work.



Fig. 18,19. (Medina AKKAYNAK, Proje: İçsel Yolculukta Öz Farkındalık, Nisan 2024), Author's own work.

Of particular importance in her work are pieces aimed at creating a meditative space conducive to self-knowledge. An example is the interactive installation “Self-Awareness in an Inner Journey.” This installation, consisting of a tent made of multicolored threads, set up on a university campus, with a tree in the center symbolizing life, creates a sense of lightness and evokes associations with safety, peace, and relaxation. A stool inside the tent invites one to enter, sit, and rest, immersing the visitor in a meditative state that helps them focus on specific thoughts, objects, or activities in order to achieve a state of tranquility and peace.

So, can Medine Akkaynak’s art, which combines a critique of consumer society with the creation of meditative spaces, and aims to slow down the pace of life and find inner peace, become a kind of “Trojan horse of spirituality”? On the one hand, her seagull works, denouncing the insatiability of the consumerist world, can provoke discomfort and force us to reflect on the values that guide our lives. On the other hand, the “Flow of Silence” series and installations like “Self-Awareness in an Inner Journey” offer the viewer the opportunity to escape from worldly bustle and immerse themselves in a state of self-knowledge and meditation. Thus, Medine Akkaynak’s art, like a “Trojan horse,” penetrates the consciousness of modern individuals, offering them not only a critical perspective on the world around them, but also the tools for achieving inner harmony, spiritual balance, and a slower pace of life—essential conditions for conscious existence.

In conclusion, art and spirituality remain interconnected and vital aspects of human existence throughout the ages. Contemporary artists continue to discover new ways of expressing their inner perspectives on spirituality and the world through their creations, integrating various spiritual traditions and symbolism, and producing unique and profound works of art. An analysis of the work of artists from different countries (the USA, Germany, China, Azerbaijan, Turkey) confirms that spirituality knows no boundaries – neither geographical, religious, nor national. Their works are united by a striving to comprehend higher truths, to express universal feelings, and this search transcends national, religious, and geographical borders. The spirituality manifested in their work is the unifying principle that makes art understandable and valuable to all people. Furthermore, the art of artists working with spirituality demonstrates that spirituality can be expressed through diverse forms and styles of art, from abstraction to expressionism. Their works are not only beautiful on the surface but also carry deep meaning and provoke reflection in the viewer. Ultimately, art imbued with spirituality is capable of becoming the “Trojan horse” that, bypassing superficial perception, penetrates the viewer’s consciousness, awakening in them a thirst for self-knowledge, spiritual growth, and the reevaluation of values, offering an alternative to consumer culture and opening the way to a more conscious and harmonious life.

5. Strategies for a “Turn to Spirituality”: Practical Techniques

For us, spirituality in art manifests in works that possess the ability to halt the moment, slow down the frenetic pace of life, and offer the viewer the opportunity to connect with their true selves. It is art that creates a space for mindfulness, silence, and inner dialogue. It serves as a kind of guide to oneself, allowing one to see and accept their true essence. In this chapter, we will examine effective techniques that can be used in a strategy for a “Turn to Spirituality” to create new trends in the art world, capable, like a “Trojan horse,” of penetrating the consciousness of consumer society.

- **Creating art that invokes nature and acts from love, rather than provocation:** As the analysis of Wolfgang Laib’s work demonstrates, art that utilizes natural materials and creates meditative spaces can have a profound impact on viewers fatigued by the artificial world of consumerism. In contrast to provocative art, which is often perceived as a cry of weakness, art that calls upon nature and acts from a place of love is capable of calming and guiding the soul, creating an “oasis of tranquility” (as Ding Yi put it) amidst the chaos of modern life. However, it’s important to consider that art that is too heavily focused on “beauty” and “harmony” may seem naive and fail to reflect the real problems of the contemporary world.

- **Shifting the focus from the politics of consumption to supporting artists who create sincere art:** In order for contemporary art to become more spiritual, we need to move away from creating “products” for consumption and towards supporting artists who are capable of creating honest and sincere art that reflects their spiritual quests. This, in turn, requires changes in socio-economic policies aimed at creating conditions in which artists can create freely and independently of commercial interests. However, it is important to acknowledge that complete independence from the market is practically impossible, and it is crucial to find a balance between creative freedom and the necessity of providing for oneself materially.

- **Turning art towards the human:** creating more accessible and understandable art while preserving depth. Contemporary art often demands significant intellectual effort from the viewer, which makes it inaccessible to the general public. To make art a more effective “Trojan Horse of Spirituality,” it is necessary to make it more accessible and understandable to all, without simplifying it to a primitive level, but by finding

ways to convey complex ideas through understandable images and symbols, as icons did in the Middle Ages. However, there is a danger of “trivializing” art and losing its depth

- in an attempt to make it too “simple” and “understandable.”

• **Utilizing the power of images and symbols in a clip-based consciousness to convey spiritual content:** Modern society is oriented towards a clip-based consciousness, where images and symbols play a vital role. Creating artistic images with spiritual content can help people become more aware and moral, as images are more easily perceived and remembered. The new art should carry high ideals in an accessible language, using the power of visual symbols and metaphors to “penetrate” the viewer’s consciousness and evoke reflection on eternal questions. However, there is a risk of manipulating consciousness through images, therefore, it is important that art remains honest and is not used for propaganda.

In conclusion, to create new trends in the art world and effectively “penetrate” spirituality into the consciousness of society, it is necessary to turn art towards love, nature, sincerity, and humanity, using the power of images and symbols to convey profound meanings. This will require not only changes in the creative approach of artists but also changes in economic and social policies aimed at supporting honest and sincere art that is accessible to all. Art filled with spiritual content can become the “Trojan Horse” that awakens intellectual and moral qualities in people, helping them become more conscious and creative, capable of resisting consumer culture and building a more harmonious future.

Conclusions

Contemporary art, as a part of pop culture, possesses tremendous potential to influence consumer society. However, rather than a direct frontal assault, a more effective path is the “Trojan Horse of Spirituality” – to inspire awareness and offer alternative values through art. As demonstrated by the examples of James Turrell, creating spaces for self-discovery and encountering the cosmos, or Devabil Kara, calling for a search for meaning independent of material possessions, this is not merely a critique of the system but a redirection of consumer energy towards self-development and harmony. Teymur Daimi believes in the potential of art for the conscious transformation of society, and Ding Yi offers the viewer the opportunity to find inner peace. The work of Medine Akkaynak, with her exploration of meditative aesthetics, aims to distract from the hustle and bustle and immerse oneself in the inner world. Similarly, Wolfgang Laib, with his quiet, nature-inspired work, invites a meditative state, prompting viewers to reconnect with the ephemeral and find beauty beyond the material.

In contrast to many contemporary works oriented towards commerce and provocation, spiritual art strives to create an experience that transcends consumer logic. It doesn’t simply reflect reality but also shapes it, restoring to the individual a lost connection with the spiritual. The key role here is spirituality, which needs to be made fashionable and accessible. Art should stop talking about problems and start appealing to the heart, offering hope, peace, and a conscious attitude toward the material world. It should stimulate reflection and help people discover the truth about themselves and the world.

Truth, learned through spiritual experience, is a powerful antidote to the consumer race, leading to a conscious, harmonious, and fulfilling life. When spirituality becomes not just a beautiful word but a fashionable and accessible way of life, art will be able to disrupt the system of consumption from within.

So, what specifically can be done? Artists can create works inspired by spiritual values, as do Turrell, Daimi, Akkaynak, and Laib. Curators can promote such art in museums and galleries, as they do with the works of Kara and Ding Yi. Viewers can support artists and organizations working in this field. It is important to understand that the transformation of consumer society is a complex and long-term process, requiring effort from all participants.

Art imbued with spirituality is not just aesthetics; it is an investment in the future. It is a call to every artist, curator, viewer: become part of this transformation! Support art that inspires, heals, and opens new horizons for humanity. Only together can we build a more sustainable and spiritual society.

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