

Foreword

During his years in Paris, [Magnus] Enckell dreamed of an ancient pagan temple, its ruins still suffused with intense yet imprecise feelings and thoughts: “empty dreams and melancholy thoughts perhaps for those who step in from the outside, out of the sunlight; yet for those already inside, everything still appears as in the days when people gathered to worship in the temple.” He felt himself to be the guardian of this temple, moving from room to room, penetrating ever farther into the building, suffering on every threshold for each thing he had to abandon. “But in me remains the certain hope that one day all will be regained. When we have reached the innermost sanctum, then suddenly the barriers will crumble. Everything will be revealed to our eyes and restored to our hearts. Time will no longer exist.”

– Salme Sarajas-Korte¹

¹ Salme Sarajas-Korte “The Finnish View of Symbolist Painting: From Antinoüs Myth to Kalevala Mysticism,” *Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe*, ed. Donald Pistoletti (Montreal: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1995).

The symposium *Between Light and Darkness* was organized in December 2010 at the Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki. It brought together researchers working on nineteenth-century studies in various fields and disciplines – literature, art history, religion, history of science and psychology. The conference also sought to create a space where encounters and dialogues between the different historical disciplines could take place. During the conference discussions, perspectives were shared on different discourses of spirituality, mysticism and psychical research which accompanied the secularization of culture in the late nineteenth century.

The 1890s were much less unified than retrospectively constructed narratives tend to portray it as being. In the 1890s, Naturalism in its various guises – “art of the actual” as Richard Thomson has defined it – was contested especially by what was called by the umbrella term Symbolism. What Symbolism meant varied greatly from speaker to speaker. However, there is a kind of family resemblance between its proponents, as well as a surprisingly definite time period when Symbolism was at its height. After the optimism and great confidence in science and industrial development of the 1880s, the 1890s witnessed a reaction against belief in both industrial and societal progress. The Symbolists were perhaps the most critical of all. Instead of industrial and technical progress, and its concomitant mass

production, they propagated highly personal choices in every realm of life. They proposed *melancholia* and, in the words of the very young Serge Diaghilev, *new decadence*, and shared company with different varieties of seekers, anarchists, mystics, and animal activists.

Historians Alex Owen and Lynn Sharp have pointed out that even though it seems difficult to conceive how the very same late nineteenth century could evince both the rise of science and of mysticism, this is exactly what happened. Indeed, it was very often claimed that discoveries brought about by the progress of science would be able to prove the existence of formerly unseen forces and describe the laws governing their interactions. As the monolithic understanding of the nineteenth century is being increasingly questioned we are beginning to see not only how deeply intertwined artistic, scientific and religious discourses were at the end of the nineteenth century but also how these discourses were connected to new conceptions of self and identity.

In a letter to the Finnish artist Magnus Enckell, written in either 1894 or 1898, Serge Diaghilev writes: “You know about my dream of becoming purely and sincerely myself and not forever being this fine mirror of other personalities.” (“Tu sais mon rêve de devenir purement et franchement moi-même, sans être toujours ce bon miroir des personnalités étranges.”) Becoming one’s self was generally felt to be exceedingly difficult; the self was questioned in many respects while it was also felt to be unfathomable and too shifting to be known. The desire to *become oneself* was felt with particular acuity among the Symbolists. In the 1890s, artists were as deeply interested in the enigmatic cosmos of the human psyche as in mystical discourses but mysticism and esotericism were also popular phenomena. Fin-de-siècle scholars need hardly be reminded of the notoriety of Josephin Péladan’s Salons de la Rose+Croix.

For scholars of the late nineteenth century, it is centrally important to make an effort to understand what enchantment and *le merveilleux* might have meant for contemporaries and how these ideas were related to emerging new conceptions of the self. Much more attention could still be paid to the ideas and beliefs about religion, science, art, progress and different forms of spirituality held by those people who were living in the late nineteenth century, making art, writing music and literature, shaping and formulating novel ways of thinking about religion, society, art, progress, decadence. In fact, I’m inclined to believe that at the present moment we are somehow, partially and perhaps even unknowingly, still living out that very same fin-de-siècle, sharing its unresolved and hidden conflicts between different attitudes toward science, religion, art, as these categories were in the process of being formed and their borders negotiated in the nineteenth century. The late nineteenth century epistemic shift is yet to be completed.

In the visual arts, fin-de-siècle art history has until quite recently been written from the point of view of Modernism understood as having as its main objective “pure visibility.” The Greenbergian strand of Modernism even emphasized the minimal requirements of painting and its final telos as perhaps just a canvas set on the stretcher. In the High Modernist narrative, the artwork came to be defined as that which remains visible, as the visual residue of all the activities and decisions of the artist – a finished, well defined work of art, set apart from its environment and from the intentions and actions, the beliefs and behaviour of the maker. Until relatively recently, historians of Symbolist and fin-de-siècle art have, accordingly, looked for signs of praiseworthy “flatness” and disregarded what artists themselves had written, what kind of activities they had been engaged in – what they themselves had felt relevant to their art, indeed what the artists themselves had placed at the centre of their art.

What was art for the fin-de-siècle artists? Art was often discussed in terms of religion, while religion in its turn was understood as having great many senses. It is perhaps salutary to remember that the Durkheimian conception of religion was yet to be defined. Esoteric Buddhism and the tradition of mysticism originating with the Alexandrians were common art theoretical currency, and Albert Aurier discussed Paul Gauguin’s work through the philosophy of Plotinus and Porphyrios. When Diaghilev described his artistic generation in an article published in the journal *Ateneum* in 1898, he portrayed it as “a tribe whose members attend vernissages as if they were participating in esoteric ceremonies, chanting masses, carrying roses, moving in processions to the accompaniment of the mystical tunes of Parsifal.”

In her dissertation, published already in 1966, Salme Sarajas-Korte brought to life the early 1890s artistic milieu in a way that was quite unusual for the time – the 1960s were after all the highest moment of Modernism. Through her work, she encountered and recreated the Parisian art scene of the early 1890s. The scene is evoked in vivid detail in her doctoral dissertation with a set of characters that she portrays with empathy, sharing in their quest for what was variously termed as self, religion, science or art. Quest is definitively a fin-de-siècle concept!

Ivan Aguéli who was condemned in the 1894 anarchist court case in Paris and later became a practicing Sufi mystic said: “I’m looking for a language, not a religion.” When he was held in detention, his friend Werner von Hausen who supplied him with books from Chamuel’s Librairie du Merveilleux wrote of him: “Even though he does not say it, he is looking for a religion.” The quest for a style of life is perhaps what feels the most contemporary aspect of the late nineteenth century artistic practices. Recently, the contemporary art curator, and now principal of Ecole-des-

Beaux-Arts, Nicolas Bourriaud proposed in *Formes de vie: l'art moderne et l'invention de soi* that the significance of art in Modernity is in its capability of imagining different attitudes – points of passage between art and life. Bourriaud sees artists as potentially exemplary in that they invent the succession of postures and gestures that permit them to create. He also says that modern art derives not only from the paintings of precursors but equally importantly – if not more importantly – from the attitudes and structures of behaviour they invented.

The French philosopher Pierre Hadot has claimed that the nature of ancient philosophy is gravely misunderstood when it is seen as a system of dogmas. Instead, he saw philosophy foremost as the practice of a certain kind of life. Perhaps the same idea could be applied to late nineteenth century art. It is, indeed, becoming more and more strenuous to hold on to simplistic oppositions projected by twentieth century modern ideals – and to believe in the strict separation of scientific, artistic, literary, and religious domains in the nineteenth century. It is increasingly evident that the late nineteenth century witnessed a great variety of attitudes, a whole spectrum of interrelated and sometimes conflicting heterodoxies.

Recognizing that Modernity in the arts is not monolithic but rather that its genealogies are several, intertwined, and for a great part heterodoxical, we dedicated the symposium to Salme Sarajas-Korte. The interdisciplinarity of her research serves as an example when the methodology of research calls for serious attention to the multifaceted and intertwined discourses of subjectivity and of different heterodoxical spiritualities.

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