

Encountering the Way: Mysticism in Art

**Conceptualized and organized by Leeza Ahmady and Katerina Lanfranco
In collaboration with the Services to Artists Committee
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Foundation for Spirituality and the Arts in collaboration with the Services to Artists Committee presented an exceptional panel at College Art Association, entitled “Encountering the Way: Mysticism in Art.” FSA director of programs Leeza Ahmady co-chaired the program with Karen Gergely, a distinguished professor at Graceland University.

Explicitly or not, mysticism has long been a part of art and the creative process. Historically, artists believed themselves to be conduits to the muse; witnessing, as much as creating, their artworks. But as a culture of individualism and secularism emerged in the 19th century in the modern Western world, a move towards personal agency, ambition, and willpower pushed away from a sense of being connected to a larger unknowable whole. Unlike many other “isms” in Contemporary Art, mysticism is difficult to understand from an objective and analytical approach. This panel will explore a variety of perspectives related to mysticism in art, from historical models to contemporary approaches.



From left to right: Taylor Worley, Scott Davis, Linda Docherty, Noa Avron.
Encountering the Way: Mysticism in Art panel at the College Art Association (CAA) Conference, Chicago, 2024.
Co-chaired by Leeza Ahmady and Karen Gergely.

Presentation Abstracts

Linda Docherty, Bowdoin College

Creativity and Spirituality: Isabella Stewart Gardner's Mystic Way

This paper explores the connection between creative development and spiritual growth and offers a conceptual model for interpreting it. By analogizing Isabella Stewart Gardner's artistic evolution to the mystic's spiritual journey, I show how imaginative pursuit of a calling can lead to personal transformation. My reading of Gardner's museum creation also challenges strict binary opposition of secular and spiritual. It reveals that a modern artist may use material riches as a means for engaging with mystical experience. Isabella Stewart Gardner is remembered as a socialite, art collector, and philanthropist who lived in the public eye. Yet her greatest achievement, the museum she built and gave to Boston, was the product of an artistic development tied to internal spiritual growth. This paper will show how Gardner's creative pursuit of beauty paralleled the mystic's movement toward the divine.

The spiritual journey begins with Awakening to a higher Reality, to which the mystic draws closer through stages of Purgation, Illumination, and Union. In Gardner's case, beauty called her out of a profound depression following the death of her only child. Gardner found meaning in beauty and proceeded to give it original forms. In the evolution of her poetics a struggle against material temptation (Purgation) was succeeded by clarity of moral purpose (Illumination) and ultimately freedom from the demands of self (Union).

Three images illustrate Gardner's artistic and spiritual journey. Sargent's portrait, commissioned in 1888, embodies tension between secular and religious orientations. Fashion, textiles, and jewels are conjoined to express identification with the Madonna. In the Titian Room, climax of her 1903 museum, Gardner displayed *The Rape of Europa* with fine and decorative arts. The ensemble enlarges viewer experience of a Renaissance masterpiece while showcasing her aesthetic imagination. In the Spanish Cloister, part of her 1914 remodeling campaign, Gardner similarly combined diverse objects but shifted focus to another artist's work. This invitation to contemplate the beauty of Sargent's *El Jaleo* marks the culmination of her creative journey along the mystic way.



Portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner,
Image courtesy of Fine Art America.

Taylor Worley, Wheaton College

Guarding Art's Ineffability: Mysticism within the Conceptual Turn

This presentation is aimed at exploring conceptualism as a broadly influential art-making strategy in contemporary art that is distinctly orientated by an apophatic logic that generates a unique form of mystical thinking.

Sol LeWitt begins his "Sentences on Conceptual Art," with the claim that, "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach." While it may seem that he was using a religious term for rhetorical effect, it should be noted that biographers have reported that LeWitt possessed and drew from several sources on Jewish mysticism in his personal library. For his part, LeWitt's exploration into more conceptual modes of art making were fueled by his fascination with representing the relational distance between the concept of an artwork and its physical realization. Thus, what may appear as nothing more than a novel form of iconoclasm in contemporary art is, in fact, one generation's attempt to reshape visual art practice in ways that might protect the mysterious space between art's meaning and its surface in image or symbol. Despite the fact that some figures from that generation like Joseph Kosuth and Terry Smith turned from art to linguistic forms like philosophy and art criticism respectively, the ongoing influence of conceptualism on contemporary art remains and continues to leave a space for new forms of mystical thinking. This paper will explore the question of what kind of "mysticism" is invoked or inspired by conceptual art. It will do so by setting the conceptual turn and its wake within the context of a cultural moment characterized by iconoclastic sensibilities and a distinctively apophatic logic.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1994-1995. Installation view at David Zwirner Gallery, 2023.



Noa Avron Barak

Art, The Eternal Thou, and the Mystical Interface: Martin Buber's Dialogical Aesthetics in Contemporary Practice

My proposal, rooted in Martin Buber's theo-aesthetic framework, directly addresses the session's theme of mysticism in art. It brings to the fore a unique intersection of theology and aesthetics, offering a fresh perspective on the enduring bond between art and the mystical. By examining Emunah College's approach, which melds contemporary artistic practice with Buber's spiritual encounters, I present a nuanced counterpoint to the modern trend of secularism. My research not only echoes the historical essence of artists as "conduits to the muse" but also situates it in a present-day context, making it highly pertinent to this session's explorations.

Martin Buber, a pivotal figure in German-Jewish thought, posited a theo-aesthetic discourse that defies the confines of Western secularism. Situated within a nuanced dialectic of mysticism, his iconic philosophy of the "I-Thou" relationship, rooted in spiritual encounters, offers a counter-narrative to the burgeoning culture of individualism. This presentation explores how Buber's concept of the "Eternal Thou" interfaces with art, elucidating a mystical continuum that resonates in the pedagogical approach and artistic endeavors at Jerusalem's Emunah College.

Emunah, an art academy for observant Jewish women, becomes a vital ground for examining the interplay of art, faith, and mysticism. Evoking the Hebrew term for "faith", the college's very essence appears rooted in a Buberian dialogical framework. Here, art transcends mere representation, evolving into a medium fostering a sacred dialogue between the artist and the Eternal. While modern paradigms might seek to distance art from its mystical origins, the creative process at Emunah College stands as testament to art's timeless and inherent connection to the divine, the mystical, or the uncharted terrains of spiritual encounter.

This exploration seeks not just to appreciate Buber's theoretical contribution to the realms of theo-aesthetics but also to perceive how his inherently mystical approach to art and dialogical relationships reverberates in contemporary artistic milieus, like that of Emunah College. Through this lens, I aim to delve into larger questions: How does a faith-driven art practice interface with contemporary notions of mysticism? Can the age-old paradigms of art as a spiritual conduit offer fresh perspectives in today's secular-dominated art world?



Raya Bruckenthal, *He is back!*, circa 2014.

Scott Davis, Amon Carter Museum of American Art
A Sacredness Without Specificity: Scarves, Cognac, and Teddy Bears in the Art of Charlemagne Palestine

In 1987 Charlemagne Palestine created a monumental sculpture consisting of a 16 foot tall, two-bodied, and three headed teddy bear for Documenta 8. Invited to contribute a work to the exhibition's performance program, Palestine's work diverged from the minimalist and performative work he had become most closely associated with throughout the 1970s. Its focus on the teddy bear was not itself a new feature in Palestine's oeuvre, he had included stuffed animals in many of his earliest performances and video works. What was new was his increasingly explicit focus on the reception of such objects as not just toys but as sacred beings in and of themselves.

This paper seeks to examine the role of teddy bears, along with cognac and scarves, as integral to Charlemagne Palestine's mystical gesamkunstwerke. Throughout his sixty year career Palestine has evoked a world of spiritual assemblage, one highlighting his jewish heritage along with encompassing a broad multi-cultural outlook. By focusing on the artist's self-described "sacredness without specificity" his work is contextualized within an increasingly globalized contemporary art world that mixes cultural heritage and capital with little regard.

Such a lens takes seriously Palestine's use of divine teddy bears, cognac that functions as a rite of ritual performance, and scarves that contain sacred connotations beyond their materiality. This perspective incorporates alternative concepts of mysticism and sacredness outside of traditional art historical models, allowing for a richer understanding of not just Palestine's work but the idea of the sacred in a global context.



God Bear presented at the Grand Palais, Paris as part of FIAC 1990. Photographer: Galerie Eric Franck.