Spirituality Persists:

Unfolding an Immanent Spirituality in Annika Rixen’s Sciences of Observation

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Questions of spirituality in general are a major force woven throughout the history of art. The relationship between art and spirituality is intimately linked to philosophical explorations reflecting broader social concerns. In moments of staunch religious observation, artists and philosophers maintain a critical distance, whilst in moments of increasing secularization, they search for something more. The manifestation of spirituality in art continuously swings back and forth as a means of disenchancing or re-enchanting the world. The history of twentieth century art is identified as a response to the increasing secularization and disenchantment of the world.¹ On one side, artists were at the fore of materialism and on the other, art becomes a means through which spirituality and re-enchantment are explored. In the twenty-first century, artists and curators are reflecting back on this history to understand the contemporary resurgence of spirituality in art. However, the contemporary search for the spiritual takes on another dimension, as it coincides with a moment of “boundless materialism and cynical godlessness.”² Just as society seems to have shed any spiritual concerns because of a materialist worldview, art and philosophy return to the fore with questions of spirituality again. The curators of the 2008 exhibition “All That Is Solid Melts Into Air” activate this paradox to explore the possibility of an immanent spirituality—one that does not give up the material condition of contemporary life.³ Thus, the search for spirituality becomes a search for the ‘something else,’ which reconciles the spiritual and material conditions of life.

³ Roelstraete, All, 12.
Annika Rixen’s exhibition “Sciences of Observation” at the Or Gallery in Vancouver envelo

sand this spiritual revival in art, which unfolds as a mystical encounter between science and art. Rixen identifies the work of nineteenth century scientist, John Tyndall, as a point of departure for the six pieces included in the exhibition. Tyndall, an advocate for a scientific materialism independent of theology, also identified an inherent mystery to life, which scientific reasoning could not explain. He sought to reconcile the dialectics of the spiritual and the material in his approach to life.

Pantheism, a concept of the universe in which God is manifest in the universe, brings together Tyndall’s scientific and philosophical concerns in a concept that attempts to occupy the middle ground between transcendental religious belief and materialism. Through enfolding Tyndall’s concepts, Rixen also enfolds the sense of mystery evident in his work, which stems from his pantheistic approach to the universe. Due to our present concerns, pantheism offers a productive concept through which to understand the encounter between the material and the spiritual. Pantheism regards God or a divine unity, as a force immanent in the world. Therefore, the spirituality or mysticism Rixen unfolds in her work is not transcendent, as it does not point to a unity that exists outside the universe. Instead, it is immanent, as it privileges materiality and a creative process of observation, which stimulates new thoughts. “Sciences of Observation” creates a space in which the viewer’s presence activates the infinite possibilities that exist within the world through their experience of art.

The first work in the gallery, Consequent Production of Colours (2012) (Image One), is a digital print of three glass bottles lined up next to each other; the bottle on the left is filled with red liquid, the middle with green, and the right with blue. The bottles sit on an off-white

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background that is brightly lit from above. The red liquid casts a lightly tinted shadow on the off-white surface behind it. The three colours—red, green, and blue—make up the RGB colour model, which is based on human perception of colours. This work seems to denote the entrance into a space of perceiving and observing both light and colour. Next to this work three Polaroids each sit on two silver pins pushed into the wall. Each Polaroid in *Discontinuous Spectra* (2012) (Image Two) seems to capture the same unidentified object from slightly different angles. The object seems to consist of pink and orange reflective glass and an unknown light source. The Polaroids are overexposed resulting in an all-over pinkish-orange tinge, which further obscures the object.

Moving into the main gallery space, the object from the Polaroids is identified across the room. *Double Refraction* (2012) (Image Three) consists of two right-angled pieces of coloured glass. One piece sits perpendicular to the corner of the wall, and has a light blue tinge; the second piece sits out about a foot out from the first and has an orange and pink tinge to it. A single light bulb hangs in the middle of the two pieces of glass on a long black wire. The light filters through the glass and casts coloured shadows on the walls and floor. Moving from one side of the room to the other, the colours change from pink to orange and moving further back, for blue and purple. Turning away from the work, little spots appear in one’s vision, a residual effect that causes one to pause until the spots disappear.

In the middle of the gallery, a low wooden platform elevates an inkjet print about one foot off the floor. *Law of Incidence and Reflection* (2012) (Image Four) is a large abstract image of what appears to be bright white light cutting diagonally across the centre image. The white light cuts across bright green, pink, peach, orange and blue lights, which blur together around the edges. A clear image of the light seems just out of focus, causing one to re-focus their vision in
an attempt to access the object. In another corner of the gallery, *The Rendering of Invisible Rays Visible* (2012) (Image Five), a two-channel video installation plays on two different screens, hung on either side of the corner. On one screen the neon sign ‘PSYCHIC’ glows from the window of an old shop at night. Placed on the ledge of the window are three large crystals, cut in half, but barely visible in the light. On the other screen ‘PAST PRESENT FUTURE’ illuminates a similar window, filled with unidentifiable objects. In the window of each shop, a small chandelier hangs down casting a dim light on the furniture in the window. The light source outside of the shop repeatedly grows brighter and dimmer, however the subtle shift in light is at first difficult to detect.

The last work, *Verification of Physical Properties* (2012) (Image Six), consists of a large digital projection in the back room of the gallery. The projection appears to capture an uneven gray surface at the end of a long tube. Darkness gradually consumes and then light uncovers the gray object. The gray surface appears to be the moon, with all its dents and shadows. Further, the projection seems to be a time-elapsed video of a lunar-eclipse. However, no description accompanies the work and this inference is made from past knowledge and present experience.

Rixen’s works unfold an environment of experimentation and observation. Some works, such as *Discontinuous Spectra*, have a raw quality to them, as though they are in the early stages of experimentation. Yet they all have an aesthetic aspect that relies on the make-shift form. Each work plays with light and perception, requiring the viewer’s attentive presence in order to experience the affective shifts that transform the viewer’s experience. Through close observation, what the viewer perceives to be two static shots in *The Rendering of Invisible Rays Visible*, become two time-elapsed videos, revealed by the minute shifts in illumination. The environment outside of each window slowly becomes brighter and clearer before being
enveloped by darkness again. The rhythmic shifts in light are entrancing, as the viewer waits for the moment that reverses the process of illumination. The neon words ‘Psychic’ and ‘Past Present Future’ unfold a hint of spirituality, which is present in the exhibition as a whole. Psychic refers to an intuitive process outside of natural or scientific knowledge. Past, present, future points to an open concept of time, from which intuitive processes stem.

Rixen’s neon signs are reminiscent of Bruce Nauman’s *The True Artist Helps the World By Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967) (Image Seven). This work is a neon sign, which consists of a red neon line that spirals inward with blue neon lettering spelling out the title of the work on the inner spiral. Nauman created this work in reaction to the view that artists were able to reveal profound truths about human nature, through their work. Nauman appropriated the spiral with its weighty spiritual symbolism, as the ground for his ironic statement. At the same time, Nauman cannot help but believe the statement he has put forth. He is caught between the material process he privileges and the spirituality, which he looks to question. Rixen’s neon signs contribute to the spiritual environment she creates but also seem to question the transcendence of spirituality, through favouring what observation and process may actually reveal.

Nauman’s work was also used to open “Traces du sacré” at the Centre Pompidou, Paris in 2008. Opening the exhibition with this work emphasized the curators’ desire to lead the viewer to their own questions of the sacred and profane in modern art. The spirituality that unfolds in Rixen’s work is reflective of a continuous unfolding of spirituality in contemporary art. Many international exhibitions like “Traces du sacré” track the relationship between art and spirituality

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6 Millet and Penwarden, 12.
7 Ibid., 12.
to understand how art becomes a medium through which spirituality is communicated. In particular, the curators behind the Antwerp Museum of Modern Art’s 2008 exhibition, “All That Is Solid Melts Into Air” take up the question of spirituality and its relationship to materiality in contemporary art. This exhibition examines the dialectical pairs of the sacred and profane and the material and the spiritual, in an attempt to reconcile the seemingly disparate pairs. In other words, the “Materialist Spirituality” they conceive of deals with “the fundamental dissonance between the material ‘being’ of art and the spirituality that permits art to live in and through the material.”

Materialist spirituality aligns itself with the philosophy of immanence, which in the twentieth century is associated with Gilles Deleuze. The philosophy of immanence is a philosophy of the infinite potential that exists within the universe, not outside it. Deleuze’s “plane of immanence” consists of a vast surface with an infinite number of folds, where everything exists in a virtual state, which may or may not be actualized. The plane of immanence opens up the concept of time, as this virtual state contains the past and present as well as all possibilities that might become actualized in the future. Each moment becomes actualized due to specific conditions in the world that foster its actualization. In this sense, the world is full of an infinite amount of creativity, which is expressed from within not organized from outside.

In “Enfoldment and Infinity,” Laura Marks takes up Deleuze’s philosophy of immanence in order to distinguish between different forms of the infinite. Marks theorizes an ‘immanent

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8 Roelstraete, 9.
9 Ibid. 23.
10 Ibid., 9.
11 Ibid., 28.
12 Laura U. Marks, Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), 5.
infinite’ which she describes as a non-dualist, “secular and worldly alternative to transcendental religious belief.”\textsuperscript{13} The immanent infinite privileges the infinite possibilities contained within the world. However, Marks identifies that the immanent infinite retains a ‘mystical’ aspect of the infinite, and thus risks slipping into a transcendental infinite.\textsuperscript{14} The philosophy of immanence, in its various forms, is about being in the world and not transcending it. It is a world in which all creative potential exists, which may or may not manifest in material form. Materials unfold from the infinite and simultaneously, the immanent infinite cannot be perceived without a material world in which to unfold.

Annika Rixen’s work unfolds from the immanent infinite and presents the viewer with an immanent spirituality, which resists unfolding in order to foster observation and creativity. The three Polaroids that make up Discontinuous Spectra are vague images of an unrecognizable object. The work resists unfolding. It invites the viewer in close to scrutinize each image, without gaining a clear grasp of the object. Double Refraction resides in the next room, but what it is remains unclear. It requires the viewer to move around it, to move closer and further away and from side to side. The work emphasizes the materiality of light and how the material is able to alter our perception of light. At the same time, the work enacts the spiritual by abstracting the experience of light. There is a push and pull between the material object and the experience of the object, which borders on transcendence. However, the spirituality it manifests is grounded in the experience of the material, in a process of observation, which stimulates creative thinking.

This encounter between art and spirituality retains many qualities from the history of this inquiry but distinguishes itself through the preconditions specific to this reappearance. The belief in materialism that coincides with this resurgence is the culmination of an on-going process of

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 21.
secularization, which began with the enlightenment.\textsuperscript{15} The manifestation of this paradox in contemporary art is unique to this particular moment, though the interaction between the material and spiritual has a long history in science.

Historian of science Peter Galison, sums up an important theme throughout the history of science as a push and pull between the desire for images and the rejection of images for abstraction.\textsuperscript{16} In moments when images are privileged, it is due to their ability to teach through the experience of the material. However, images are also pushed aside for abstraction and logical reasoning. This occurs because images and material deceive and build reason on false premises.\textsuperscript{17} Galison highlights this historical thread to rethink the relationship between the concrete and abstract, as image is never able to shed itself of abstraction nor does abstraction rid science of images.\textsuperscript{18} The constant push and pull from one extreme to the other skips over the possibility that exists in utilizing both image and abstraction. Galison suggests acknowledging the material as not completely non-abstract, and the abstract as never completely non-material, as a productive alternative to this dialectical rift.\textsuperscript{19}

The battle between image and abstraction bears striking resemblance to that of the material and the spiritual, both of which were a concern for scientists in nineteenth century Britain. John Tyndall was at the forefront of a movement that supported scientific materialism, free from the influence of theology and politics.\textsuperscript{20} Tyndall endorsed a naturalistic conception of the universe, identifying nature’s process as one not imposed by an external force but by its own

\textsuperscript{15} Roelstraete, 26.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 300.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 302.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 323.
\textsuperscript{20} Barton, 116.
intrinsic forces.\textsuperscript{21} Tyndall grounded his scientific claims in images, believing that images and material were the basis for the formation of theories.\textsuperscript{22} However, for all his support of scientific materialism, Tyndall also recognized that scientific experimentation could not remove a sense of mystery from the universe.

Tyndall identified the mystery beyond science as the divine. However, he supported the conception of a divine immanence, not a transcendental immanence. He regarded religion as a personal inner experience, of which science could offer no ultimate explanations.\textsuperscript{23} This concept of the universe aligns with pantheism, a non-theistic concept of deity that views God as manifest in the world.\textsuperscript{24} In other words “Everything that exists constitutes a ‘unity’ and this all-inclusive ‘unity’ is in some sense divine.”\textsuperscript{25} Although this divine unity is not distinct from the world, it is distinct from finite beings.\textsuperscript{26} The divine unity is found in the natural world, which we are able to experience physically and intellectually. Pantheism privileges creativity, which exists within the world and is not imposed from outside it. It engages the material nature of the world and regards it as a form of divine immanence.

By enfolding the writings of John Tyndall, Rixen also enfolds a pantheistic concept of the universe, which unfolds as a mystical or spiritual quality in her work. The dim gallery lights create a hushed stillness, drawing all attention to the works, some of which create a soft glow. Rixen seems to construct an environment similar to a church, presenting the viewer with a space of reflection and contemplation. The abstract works resist unfolding or revealing the source of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 118.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 118.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 132.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Michael P. Levine, \textit{Pantheism: A non-theistic concept of deity} (London: Rutledge, 1994), 2.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 1.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 2.
\end{itemize}
abstraction. They require one to stay and observe how the light changes to reveal or conceal the work. *Verification of Physical Theories* captures light progressively traveling over the surface of a gray object, followed by darkness gradually consuming the illuminated surface. The work appears to be of a lunar eclipse, yet at the same time, something seems to be missing; the gray object seems too flat. As there is no further explanation to the work, connections can only be made through observation and how the work appears. This process draws the viewer into their perception of the material presented, creating a space to think and connect with previous experiences of celestial images. Rixen also seems to be testing the viewer’s ability to critically approach the material she presents. The work may create an affective response associated with spirituality, but it does not transcend the physical world it unfolds in. This playful approach reveals no final truths but allows the viewer to contemplate the possibilities that stem from their experience.

Annika Rixen’s “Sciences of Observation” unfolds from the immanent infinite to create an encounter between the materiality of art and science, and the spirituality that may exist through each. Rixen grounds her approach in John Tyndall’s writing, enfolding his approach to material science that fosters experimentation and observation. Further, through enfolding Tyndall, Rixen also enfolds a pantheistic concept of the universe, which becomes a source for the immanent spirituality in her work. Immanence is a constructive term through which to reconcile the material and spiritual, as each concept is not completely free of the other, but both are part of the world. We exist in a material world, but a longing or belief in something else persists. By playfully approaching her materials, Rixen’s work occupies the middle ground between these two poles, unraveling a mystical environment but also maintaining a critical distance from mysticism, which stems from the pantheistic worldview. At moments, Rixen
seems to trick our perceptions but only to reveal the materialism of her work. Using art as an emblem for accepting the materiality of the world around us, we are then able to access an immanent spirituality, a source of creativity, which in-turn sparks creativity in us.
Annika Rixen, *Consequent Production of Colours*, 2012

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²⁸ Ibid.
Image Three. Rixen, *Double Refraction*, 2012.\(^{29}\)

\(^{29}\) Ibid..

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

\(^{31}\) Ibid.
Image Six. Rixen, Still from *Verification of Physical Theories*, 2012.\(^{32}\)

Works Cited


