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Critique d'art

Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art contemporain

Toutes les notes de lecture en ligne | 2018

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Jonathan Koestlé-Cate

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/46639>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.46639

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Electronic reference

Jonathan Koestlé-Cate, « Encountering the Spiritual in Contemporary Art (sous la dir. de Leesa K. Fanning) », *Critique d'art* [Online], All the reviews on line, Online since 27 May 2020, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/46639> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.46639>

This text was automatically generated on 24 September 2020.

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Encountering the Spiritual in Contemporary Art (sous la dir. de Leesa K. Fanning)

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- ¹ Art, said Vassily Kandinsky, belongs to the spiritual life and is one of its most potent expressions. V. Kandinsky assumed a spiritual register to be central to meaningful art, with its roots in “mystical-spiritual” notions of abstraction. However outmoded this idea might seem, it is a theme taken up again in this latest reincarnation of art’s spiritual life, presented as a kind of virtual exhibition, the remnant of a proposed but unfulfilled project for the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Two landmark exhibitions from the 1980s are its clear precursors: *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, and *Magiciens de la terre*, the former tracing a line of spirituality in art through esotericism, the occult and abstraction, the latter drawing parallels between modern indigenous non-western art-making and its western contemporaries. *Encountering the Spiritual in Contemporary Art* draws these two threads together aiming, like those earlier projects, to reintroduce spiritual value into the display of art. In a richly illustrated volume, ably supported by substantial essays, it draws on diverse religious and cultural traditions under the rubric of four general themes: art-making as spiritual process, material practices, sources of inspiration, and the artist’s body as signifier of spiritual content. Opening with abstraction as a locus of spirituality, it goes on to examine First Nation and American Indian art, Australian aboriginal art, African arts, Sufism, and the Judeo-Christian tradition, identifying the spiritual as a motivating force in artists globally without prioritising any one artistic expression over another. Leesa K. Fanning is the guiding voice in this collection. Her definition of the spiritual is broad, encompassing the transcendent and immanent, personal and communal, direct unmediated experience and religious ritual. It is ineffable yet also grounded in material practices. It goes beyond religion, but also beyond the “I” or ego, to all of which art at its best alludes. If there is a polemical dimension to L. K. Fanning’s argument it consists in what she sees as a persistent fascination in contemporary art for such ideas and its almost complete absence in art criticism, for which this book is presented as a

corrective. In this L. K. Fanning is a little too proud of her claim to be ploughing a unique path. Though it may be true that the spiritual is a term ill-served by art criticism, it has nonetheless inspired a steady stream of exhibitions since the 1980s, and an eloquent body of literature, to which this volume undoubtedly adds.