

2018 Company of Ideas Forum

Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park
25-27 June 2018

Art and Knowledge 1900-1950: Modernism, Spirituality, Philosophy

Modernism has traditionally been defined by its withdrawal from other art forms or disciplines, its quest for formal purity, and its embrace of autonomy as an aesthetic and political ambition. In recent decades, however, it has become increasingly clear that twentieth-century art was in fact marked by an unprecedented degree of cross-fertilization, between different artforms and fields of knowledge. This year's Forum explored the first half of the century, with particular interest in art's claim to philosophical, scientific, and spiritual knowledge.

Proceedings

Speakers began gathering in Vancouver on Sunday 24 June, for informal socializing and conversations, before departing to Hornby Island on Monday 25th on the sea plane. Again, this proved to be a highly popular experience. The speakers were welcomed to the island by **Betty Kennedy** and **Karun Koernig**, met with students from the University of Victoria, and were given tours of the Sculpture Park. They were also able to view the new temporary exhibition on Jeffrey Rubinoff's work process, curated by the guest curatorship prize winner **Danielle Ruderman**.

The Forum opened on Tuesday morning, with a presentation by **Dr Lieke Wijnia**, the first Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park Postdoctoral Award-holder. Entitled *Knowing through Seeing: Piet Mondrian's Visions of the Sacred*, Dr Wijnia's presentation argued that Mondrian's modernist practice is rooted in pre-modern ideas of spirituality and seeing. The themes of spiritual knowledge were pursued in the next two presentations as well. **Dr Lucy Kent**, in *Material Illusions: Three Seminal British Modernists and Christian Science*, explored the little-debated involvement of British modernists Barbara Hepworth, and Winifred and Ben Nicholson, with the Christian Science cult. **Dr Nicola Kozicharow**, on the other hand, explored the less-known Russian figurative painter Dimitry Stelletsy's work in emigration in *Rewriting the Canon: Dmitry Stelletsy's Designs for the Russian Orthodox Church*. The debate in all three cases touched on ways that spirituality featured in modernism, and on the ways in which abstract shapes were perceived to be an entry into a higher, non-material plane of understanding. Parallels were also drawn with Jeffrey Rubinoff's sculpture, which, while irreligious, focuses on acquiring a mature conscience through abstraction.

The second day debated connections between philosophical systems and twentieth-century modernist painting. Two very different artists were explored: first up **Dr Lucy Whelan**, in *What the Painter Knows: Pierre Bonnard and the Experience of Time*, argued that Bonnard's incessant portrayals of his wife presented a theory of time's passing that was in some ways equivalent to the views of the philosopher Henri Bergson. **Dr Maria (Masha) Mileeva**

in *On New Systems in Art: Karl Marx, Kazimir Malevich, and Heinrich Wölfflin*, considered how Malevich's work offered pedagogical segues into a Marxian philosophy. In both cases, we considered the difficult question of how the autonomous artistic practice may be seen as a mode of philosophizing. The day concluded with the presentation by **Amanda Balter**, the JRSP Undergraduate Essay Prize winner, who gave a paper on connections between aesthetic experience and empathy in *Knowledge in the Presence of Art*.

Crucial contributions were made by the graduate students of the University of Victoria, mentored by **Professor Allan Antliff**. The UVic students were encouraged to ask the first set of questions after each talk. The students remained at JRSP for an additional day, in order to further debate the topics of the Forum and write up short reflections on the Forum.

Throughout, we were joined by the family and friends of Jeffrey Rubinoff and many members of the community on the Hornby Island. All were probing and spirited dialogue partners.

As in previous years, there were many opportunities for informal discussions, both at the Sea Breeze accommodation and while exploring the island. This year, we hosted three new named Jeffrey Rubinoff Award holders (Wijnia, Balter, Ruderman), together with the Churchill College Jeffrey Rubinoff Junior Research Fellow.

The Forum was convened by **Dr James Fox** (Director of the Educational Programme at JRSP; Research Fellow, Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge) and **Dr Vid Simoniti** (Inaugural Jeffrey Rubinoff Junior Research Fellow, Churchill College, Cambridge).

–The Proceedings were written up by Vid Simoniti.