Surprised Recognition
Scientology and the Visual Arts

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Esotericism and Modern Art

- From the pioneer research by Finnish art historian Sixten Ringbom (1935-1992, left) to the academic projects and conferences *Enchanted Modernities*, the influence of esotericism on modern art has now been largely acknowledged.
Esotericism was not just a hobby for several leading modern artists. Imagination, visualization, and other tools learned through esoteric groups and literature gave artists interested in esotericism a different way of perceiving the reality.

Left: Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), *Composition VII* (1913), a work, Ringbom argued, heavily influenced by Theosophical ideas.
Scientology and Western Esotericism

- American historian J. Gordon Melton (right) included Scientology within the general category of Western esotericism, arguing that its cosmology and worldview are firmly rooted in the gnostic tradition.
Scientology and the Visual Arts

- Did Scientology influence those modern artists who got interested in its theory and practices? Would it be possible to study Scientology’s influence on the visual arts just as we study the respective influences of Theosophy, Catholicism, or Christian Science?
- In order to address this question, I will discuss
  1. Scientology’s theory of aesthetics
  2. A survey of artists who are Scientologists (also based on personal interviews in Europe and the U.S.)
1. Scientology’s Theory of Aesthetics

Image: Scientology’s new Flag Building (2013) in Clearwater, Florida, with its statues
At the core of Scientology's worldview, there is a gnostic narrative. At the beginning there were the «thetans», pure spirits who created MEST (matter, energy, space, and time), largely for their own pleasure. Unfortunately, incarnating and reincarnating in human bodies, the thetans came to forget that they had created the world, and to believe that they were the effect rather than the cause of physical universe.
Analytical and Reactive Mind

- Mind for Scientology has two parts. The analytical mind observes and remembers data, stores their pictures as mental images, and uses them to take decisions and promote survival. The reactive mind records mental images at times of unconsciousness, incidents, or pain, and stores these images as «engrams». They are awakened and reactivated when similar circumstances occur, creating all sort of problems.
The Tone Scale

- The more the thetan believes to be the effect, rather than the cause, of the physical universe, the more the reactive mind exerts its negative effects. They affect the Tone Scale, showing the emotional tones a person can experience, and the levels of ARC (Affinity – Reality – Communication)
The ARC Triangle

- Affinity is the positive emotional relationship we establish with others. Reality is the agreement we reach with others about how things are. Communication is the most important part of the triangle: through communication, we socially construct reality and, once reality is consensually shared, we are able to generate affinity.
Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard (1911-1986) was familiar with the artistic milieus as a successful writer of fiction. In 1951, Hubbard wrote that «there is yet to appear a good definition for aesthetics and art». In the same year, he dealt with the argument in *Science of Survival*. He returned often to the arts, particularly in 17 articles included in technical bulletins from 1965 to 1984, which form the backbone of the 1991 book *Art*.
In *Science of Survival*, Hubbard wrote that above the analytical mind there are many more mind levels. The first is the aesthetic mind, which «deals with the nebulous field of art and creation». The «strange thing» is that in gifted artists it can keep working even when the analytical mind is disturbed and the reactive mind is causing its usual damage. It is, however, a false and «neurotic belief» that «when an artist becomes less neurotic he becomes less able»
Roman art, Hubbard wrote, was «fairly good». Revolting «against Roman disregard for human life», Christians refused everything Roman. The Catholic Church «recovered early and began to appreciate the artist». But «Puritanism and Calvinism» regarded artists as «moral lepers». Paradoxically, many artists believed they should conform to this image in order to be regarded as real artists.

Left: Roman statue of Livia (58-29 B.C.), wife of Emperor Augustus (63 B.C. - 14 A.D.)
Art and Society

In Science of Survival, Hubbard taught that artists «can create any reality» and «deal with any level of communication». «A culture is only great as its dreams, and its dreams are dreamed by artists». A totalitarian society «inhibits, suppresses, or regiments its artists» and is therefore «doomed»

Right: Hubbard in 1950
Hubbard’s Aesthetics

- Hubbard noted that art was «the less codified of human endeavors and therefore the most misunderstood». And less a field is known, the more it is plagued by authoritarian pseudo-experts.

- Hubbard defined art as communication. When the thetan understands himself as the cause rather than the effect of the physical reality, he perceives the world in a new way. If he masters the appropriate technique, he is also able to produce art with a very high communication potential.
On what role technique exactly plays, Hubbard mentioned in a bulletin of July 29, 1973 his discussions with «the late Hubert Mathieu». Although some who wrote about Hubbard were unable to identify him, Mathieu (1897-1954) was a distinguished South Dakota illustrator and artist, who worked for magazines Hubbard was familiar with.
Based inter alia on the ideas of Mathieu, Hubbard came to the conclusion that in the arts communication (the end) is more important than technique (the means), but technique is not unimportant. Artists who are well-trained are able to communicate in different styles, including the non-figurative – and the audience understands intuitively that they are real artists.
Interacting with the Audience

- Perceiving the world and representing it from the superior viewpoint of the thetan is not enough. One should be able to communicate this to the audience, which however should be invited to «contribute part of the meaning». This is precisely the difference between fine art and mere illustration, where little is left to the audience’s own contribution.

Right: L. Ron Hubbard, 1987
Communication is actually achieved through integration, or combination into an integral whole of elements such as perspective, lines, colors, and rhythm. Hubbard emphasized «mood lines», i.e. abstract line forms that influence the audience's emotional response. Vertical lines communicate drama and inspiration, horizontal lines, happiness and calm, and so on.

Left: Mood lines, from Hubbard’s Art
John Ormsbee Simonds

There are several systems of mood lines described in manuals for artists. Scientology uses the one developed by visionary landscape architect John Ormsbee Simonds (1913-2005, above). Simonds’ theory of form was influenced by Zen Buddhism and by Anthroposophical theories he was exposed to through mentor at Harvard, Marcel Breuer (1902-1981), formerly of the Bauhaus.
Another common tool Hubbard recommended to artists, the color wheel, was promoted in his times through references to market surveys, but in fact had been first used in a different context by Robert Fludd (1574-1637) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). Like many Theosophists – and market researchers –, Hubbard believed that colors correspond to specific emotional states.
2. Artists and Scientology

Image: Gottfried Helnwein exhibition at the Modernism Gallery, San Francisco
An Organized Influence

- Scientology would appear to be an ideal subject for the study of how a religious or esoteric worldview influences artists. Not only did Hubbard try to propose a systematic theory of aesthetics, but this theory is proposed in courses continuously offered to artists around the world. Scientology’s influence on artists is organized, in a way that finds few parallels in other contemporary movements.

The Hubbard Basic Art Course

No matter what type of art you are into, even if it’s only the art of living itself, the Hubbard Basic Art Course is a must for you. Not only will you gain increased ability to communicate, you’ll also get the ability to express your viewpoint.

The course is based on the book ART by L. Ron Hubbard.

Mr. Hubbard not only provides the first clear definition of art, but also discusses the components necessary to create a truly artistic communication.

This is knowledge that any artist, any viewer of art or anyone who intends to communicate successfully will recognize as infinitely valuable.

You not only study the relevant data, but you also drill and then apply what you learned.
A Controversial Subject

- However, Scientology’s influence on artists is understudied. One of the reasons lies in the attacks and discriminations artists have received because of their association with Scientology, particularly in Germany. There, Bia Wunderer (Horizon, right) is one of the artists who had exhibitions cancelled because she was “exposed” as a Scientologist. This made some artists understandably reluctant to discuss their relationship with Scientology.
In Germany, of all places, artists were involved in Scientology since its beginnings. When he died in 2015, painter and sculptor Waki Zöllner (above), who had joined Scientology in 1968, was the German with more years of Scientology training.
Scientology Studies 2.0?

- In 2008, the Los Angeles magazine Angeles described the circle of young artists including Mercedes Helnwein and Vanessa Prager (In Thin Air, 2015, left) as the «first generation of casual Scientologists», whose religious affiliation caused less controversies. Scholars can perhaps in turn start discussing the worldview and multiple influences of Scientology independently of the usual legal and other controversies.
Gottfried Helnwein

- The most famous international artist who took Scientology courses for several years, starting in 1972, was the Austrian-born Gottfried Helnwein. He became increasingly involved in Scientology’s activities, with all his family, and was attacked by anti-cult critics, who promoted even a book against him (right). This generated in turn court cases and Helnwein’s increasing reluctance to discuss his religious beliefs.
In 1975, Helnwein told Stuttgart’s Scientology magazine College that «Scientology has caused a consciousness explosion in me». In 1989, in an interview in Scientology’s Celebrity, Helnwein elaborated that Scientology offers to artists invaluable tools to survive in a world often hostile to them, but also gave him a «new viewpoint» and an understanding how «people would react to my art».
American novelist William Burroughs (1914-1997: photograph by Helnwein, left) took several Scientology courses between 1959 and 1968. Later, he strongly rejected Scientology as an organization, while maintaining an appreciation for its «highly valuable techniques». In 1990, he wrote an essay (right) about Helnwein, calling him «a master of surprised recognition»: «to show the viewer what he knows but does not know that he knows». In this sense, «surprised recognition» may also describe the moment when a thetan «remembers» his true nature.
The World as the Thetan Sees It?

- Helnwein’s unique style and approach to reality – a «photorealism» where paintings often look as photographs (but aren’t) – derive from multiple sources. Ultimately, however, we can perhaps see in Helnwein’s works an attempt to depict the world as a thetan sees it, finally realizing he is its creator.
Helnwein’s Children

- Seen as it really is, the world is not always pleasant, and includes suppression and totalitarianism. Some of Helnwein’s most famous paintings include suffering children. Helnwein exposes there the society’s unacknowledged cruelty. But there is also hope. The artist is aware of Hubbard’s ideas about children as spiritual beings occupying young bodies. Armed with the technology, children can survive and defeat suppression.
Criticizing psychiatry’s abuses is a cause dear to Scientologists. In 1979, leading Austrian psychiatrist Heinrich Gross (1915-2005), who participated in the Nazi program for the euthanasia of mentally handicapped children, defended himself by stating that children were killed «in a humane way» with poison. Helnwein reacted with a famous watercolor, «Lives unworthy of being lived» (right), depicting a child «humanely» poisoned by Gross.
Helnwein, the Nazis, and the Holocaust

Helnwein also looked provocatively at Nazism and the Holocaust as an evil the German and Austrian society still refused to confront. In Epiphany I (1996), the child may or may not be a young Adolf Hitler (1889-1945). Helnwein wants the audience, as Hubbard suggested, to contribute part of the meaning and to understand by itself.
Born in 1948, Helnwein reports how he escaped from Vienna’s suffocating conformism through comics, something the Austrian educational establishment did not approve of at that time. He maintains a fascination for Disney’s Donald Duck and the creator of several Donald stories, Carl Barks (1901-2000), who became his friend (left). Both Mickey Mouse and Donald are featured in Helnwein’s work.
Donald Duck as Metaphor

Barks, Helnwein wrote, created a «decent world where one could get flattened by steam-rollers and perforated by bullets without serious harm. A world in which the people still looked proper (..). And it was here that I met the man who would forever change my life – a man who (...) is the only person today that has something worthwhile saying – Donald Duck». Perhaps, again, Barks' Duckburg became a metaphor for Helnwein of the «clean» world created by a technology capable of restoring the thetans to their proper role.
In 2013, Helnwein was honored by a great retrospective at Vienna's Albertina, which attracted 250,000 visitors, a far cry from when the artist was discriminated as a Scientologist. While Helnwein became reserved on his relationship with Scientology, other artists declared it openly. Scientology through its Celebrity Centers also created a community of artists, knowing and meeting each other across different countries, continents, and styles.
Different Styles

- Scientologist artists do not share a single style – as is true for artists who are Theosophists or Catholics. German-born Carl-W. Röhrig (1953-), currently residing in Switzerland, calls his art «fantastic realism» and is also influenced by fantasy literature, surrealism, and popular esotericism (see his successful deck of tarot cards). In my interviews with several of them, however, some common themes emerged
1. Scientology Themes

- Röhrig is among the few Scientologist artists who included explicit references to Scientology doctrines in some of his paintings, including the Bridge (above), i.e. the journey to become free from the effects of the reactive mind. Röhrig (mural in Malmö, below) and other artists, including Pomm Hepner and Randy South (aka Carl Randolph), also contributed murals to churches of Scientology around the world.
California Scientologist artist Barry Shereshevsky devoted several paintings to the ARC triangle (above)
California sculptor D. Yoshikawa Wright moved «from Western to more Eastern thought», rediscovering his roots (*Vedic Hymn*, left), and finally found in Scientology something, he says, that «merges East and West» (*Space and Beingness*, center). About his *Sculptural Waterfalls* (right), he comments that the stone represents the thetan, the water the physical universe as motion, and their relationship the rhythm, the dance of life.
Flag Building Sculptures

- 62 sculptures in the Grand Atrium of the new Flag Building in Clearwater, Florida, inaugurated in 2013, illustrates the fundamental concepts of Scientology. The fact that these concepts had to be explained to the artists, none of them aScientologist, is significant. Artists who areScientologists normally are inspired by Scientology in their work, but prefer not to «preach» or illustrate it explicitly
Artists who went through Scientology’s Art course all insisted on art as communication. Winnipeg-born New York abstract artist Beatrice Findlay (Figure in Four Squares, 2007, left) told me that «art is communication, why the heck would you do it otherwise?». She also insisted that Hubbard «never said abstract art communicated less» and had a deep appreciation of music, a form of abstract communication par excellence.
Pomm Hepner is both a professional artist and a senior technical supervisor at Scientology’s church in Pasadena, as well as a leader in Artists for Human Rights, an advocacy organization started by Scientologists. As Scientology taught her «on the spiritual world», she evolved, she says, from «pretty things» (Lavender Cottage, left) to «vibrations» (Emotions, right), from «a moment that exists to a moment I create… I can bring beauty to the world and no longer need to depend on the world bringing beauty to me». By adopting the point of view of the thetan, she «reversed» the relationship between the artist and the physical universe
3. Suppression

- There is a difference between how Scientologist artists were discriminated in Europe and some mild hostility their beliefs received occasionally in the U.S. However, they all stated in the interviews that modern society is often disturbed by artists and tries to suppress them, singling out psychiatry as a main culprit. *The Trick Cyclist* by Randy South (right) depicts well-known psychiatrists and «was created to draw attention to the evil practice of psychiatry»
All artists I interviewed share an appreciation of Helnwein, although they may be very far away from both his art and his persona. Some address the theme of suffering children with obvious Helnweinian undertones. The youngest child of L. Ron Hubbard, Arthur Conway Hubbard (1958-: Sean, 2002, left: the blood is the artist’s), became himself a painter and studied under Helnwein, although he also produced works in a different style.
Pollution

- Pollution as a form of global suppression and Scientology's mission to put an end to it were also mentioned in the interviews. Ecological disasters are a main theme for Röhrig (Rainforest Destruction, left)
Endangered Edens

- Landscapes and cultures in developing countries are also in danger of being suppressed. This is a main theme in the work of Swiss Scientologist artist Claude Sandoz (Tropical Eden, below), who spends part of his time in the Caribbeans. Exhibitions of Sandoz’s works took place in different Swiss museums.
Some of those who took Scientology’s Art course were «commercial» artists. The course told them that this is not a shame and hailed success as healthy. «I do not believe in starving artists», says Barry Shereshevsky (right). They believe that the boundary between commercial and fine art is not clear-cut. Some of them were encouraged to also engage in fine arts.
Veteran Scientologist artist Peter Green understood through Scientology that commercial artists are not «coin-operated artists» but have their own way of communicating and presenting a message. Green manifested this approach in his iconic posters, such as the one of Jimi Hendrix (1942-1970).
Comics and Cards

- Green also contributed to Warren horror comics magazines (left), and keeps producing his successful «Politicards», i.e. trading and playing cards with politicians. He insists that you can «paint to live and remain sane. And in the end you may live to paint too»
Randy South (left) insists that, even when working for advertising, artists may «perceive the physical universe» as «not overwhelming spirituality» but «vice versa». He adds that «Hubbard said that life is a game. I want to play the game, and it’s fun»
Some (but not all) Scientologist artists took an interest in popular esoteric discourse. Pomm Hepner, was exposed to Anthroposophy by studying at a Steiner school. Röhrig uses the Tarots as well as the Zodiac (Virgo, left). He explains he doesn’t believe in the content of astrology or Tarot – «they are effects and as a Scientologist you try to be cause» –, but they provide a widely shared language and are «a very good tool to communicate»
6. A New Perception

«We were one hundred students doing the same [Scientology] course. Suddenly, the room took the most beautiful characteristics. Everything became magical. I became more me. The room did not change but how I perceived it changed» (Susana Diaz-Rivera, Mexican Scientologist painter)

Image: Diaz-Rivera’s contribution to the exhibition Dialogue on Death at the Diocesan Museum of Gubbio, Italy, 2015. All the words in the painting are by L. Ron Hubbard.
Several artists reported how the «static» experience, which in Scientology language means realizing your nature as thetan, completely changed how they perceive the world. Then, «art is about duplicating what you perceive. Perception is communication» (D. Yoshikawa Wright, left)
Spirituality and the Mirrors

Diaz-Rivera struggled to recapture and express this perception of herself as a thetan. She tried photographing in different locations, including Rome and Los Angeles (right), and using mirrors. «The spiritual part, she says, emerges through the mirrors.»
In conclusion

- Scientology offers to artists a number of suggestions, aimed at «putting them back in the driver’s seat» (Peter Green) of their lives, exposing the myth of the dysfunctional, starving artist.

- Scientology also creates and cultivates a community of artists, and does more than offering practical advice. By interiorizing the gnostic narrative of the thetan, artists learn to perceive the physical universe in a different way. Then, they try to share this perception through communication, with a variety of different techniques and styles, inviting the audience to enhance their works with further meanings.

Image: Yoshikawa Wright, *Infinity Column*
Thank you for your attention

Massimo Introvigne and Carl Röhrig in the artist’s studio in Dottikon, Switzerland, October 2015