

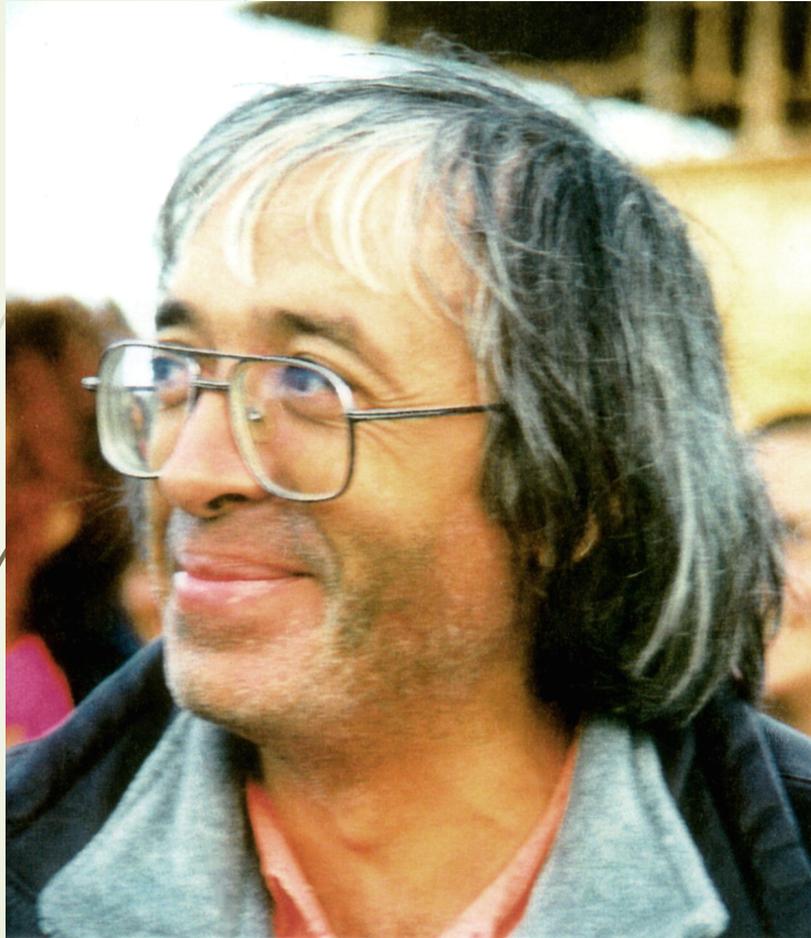


Esotericism and the Visual Arts in MISA

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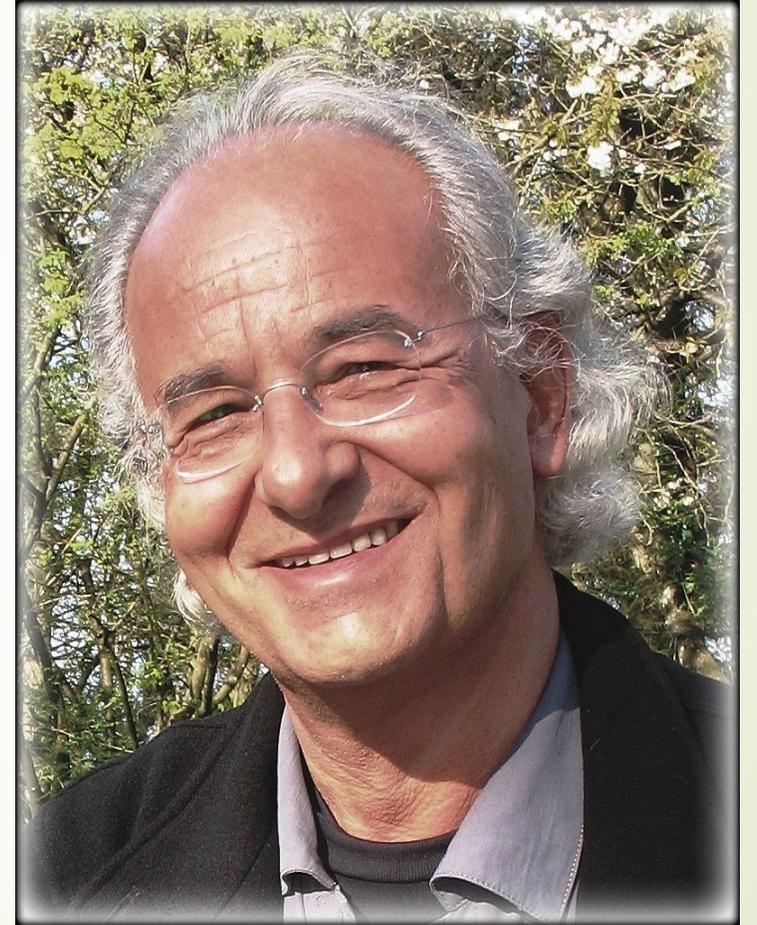
MISA's Radical Aesthetics



- ▶ This paper examines the worldview of MISA – the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA) founded by Romanian yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru (left) – as a form of radical aesthetics. In the first part, I introduce five theoretical tools derived from the sociology of aesthetics. In the second, I will use these tools to interpret MISA's worldview and societal reactions to it

1. Aesthetics and Aestheticization

- ▶ Postmodernist German philosopher Wolfgang Iser (right) argued that “we are without doubt currently experiencing an aesthetics boom. It extends from individual styling, urban design and the economy through to theory. More and more elements of reality are being aesthetically mantled, and reality as a whole is coming to count increasingly as an aesthetic construction to us”
- ▶ Social scientists define as *aestheticization* the process where reality in all fields is socially constructed based (inter alia) on aesthetic taste, and aesthetics is redefined in ways that go well beyond the mere field of the arts

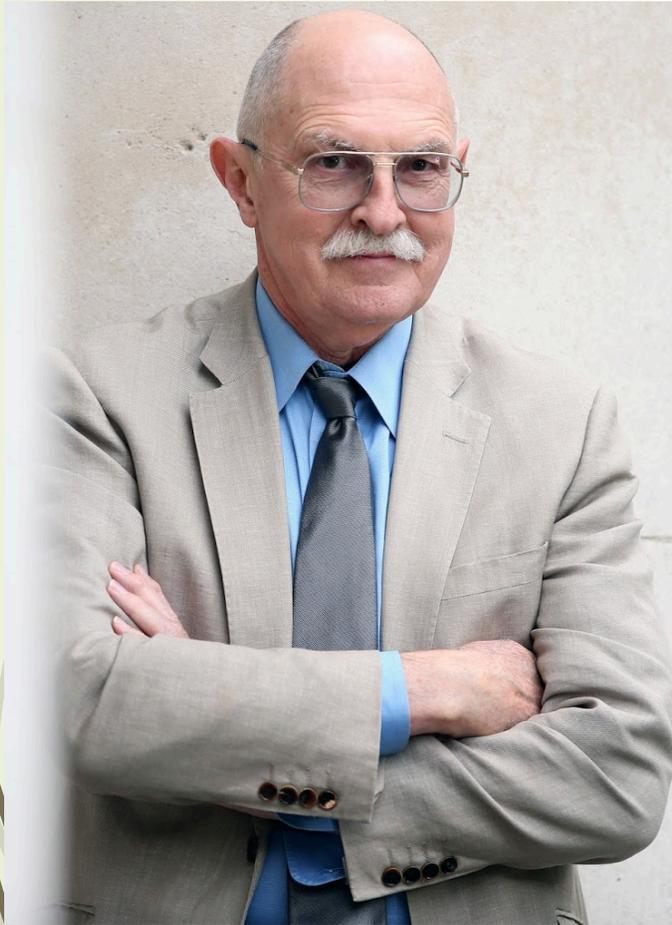


2. Aesthetics and the Arts



- It is now widely recognized that aestheticization was already noticed and theorized by German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918, left) at the end of the 19th century. Based on Simmel, we can argue that a group's aesthetics is not restricted to its idea of art, *but* determining what ideas it has about art is crucial in order to identify its aesthetics

3. Aesthetics and Ritual Interaction



- Influential American sociologist Randal Collins (left) connected aestheticization with the theory of ritual interaction first proposed by Émile Durkheim (1858-1917, right). He argued that our aesthetics is largely driven by the experience of emotional energy we derive from successful rituals, a notion that Durkheim and Collins did not restrict to religion but extended to everyday life

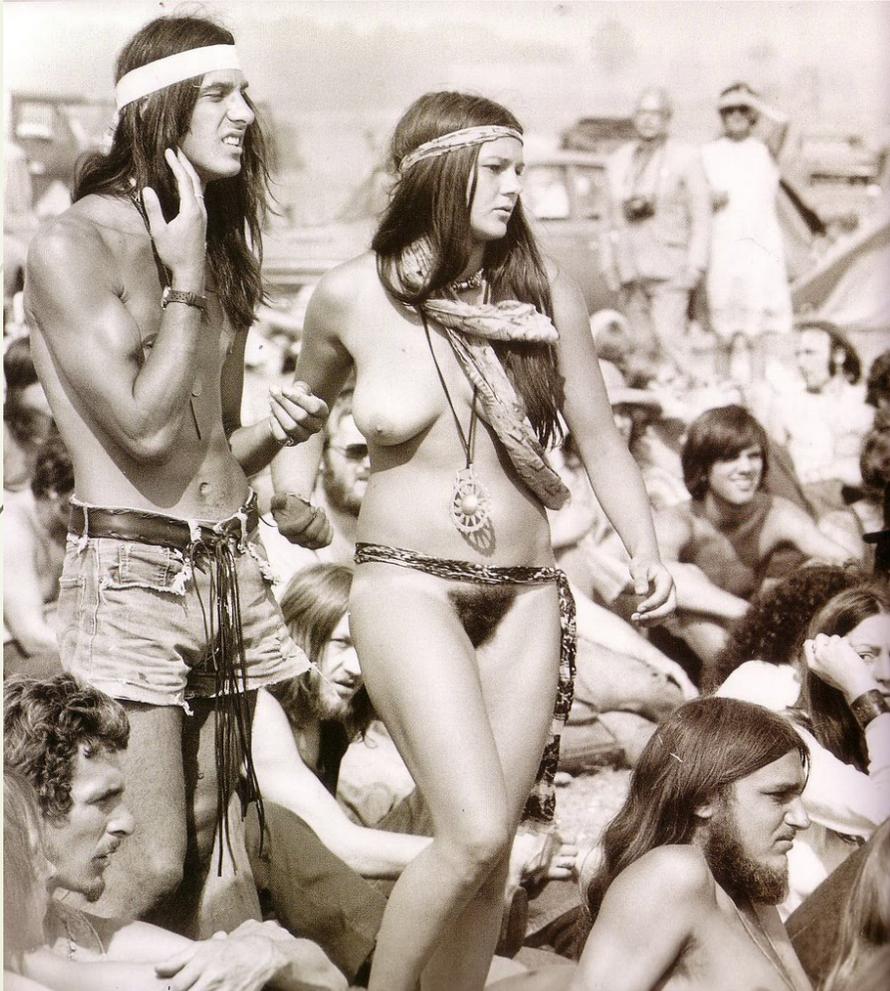


The Aesthetic Revolution of the 1960s

- ▶ Collins and others noticed that in the 1960s, daily rituals connected with politeness, class relations, gender relations, and everyday religion changed quite dramatically, determining a change of aesthetic paradigm. Collins called this the “Goffmanian revolution,” arguing that Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-1982) provided all the tools for interpreting it, although paradoxically he largely failed to notice it while it was happening



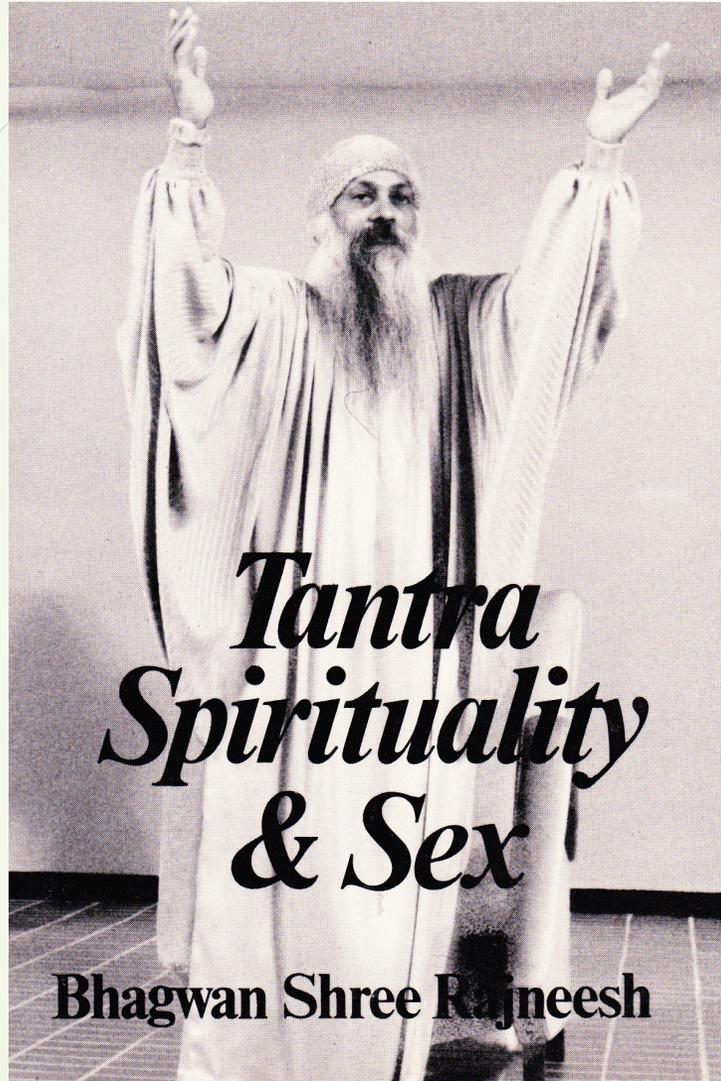
4. A New Aesthetics of Sexuality



Woodstock, 1969

- ▶ For sociologists in the Goffman tradition, sexuality is not defined by evolutionary biology only. In a large part, it is socially constructed. It also creates the most important daily interaction rituals. A new aesthetics of sexuality largely defined the aesthetics revolution of the 1960s, and ended up extending its influence to many fields

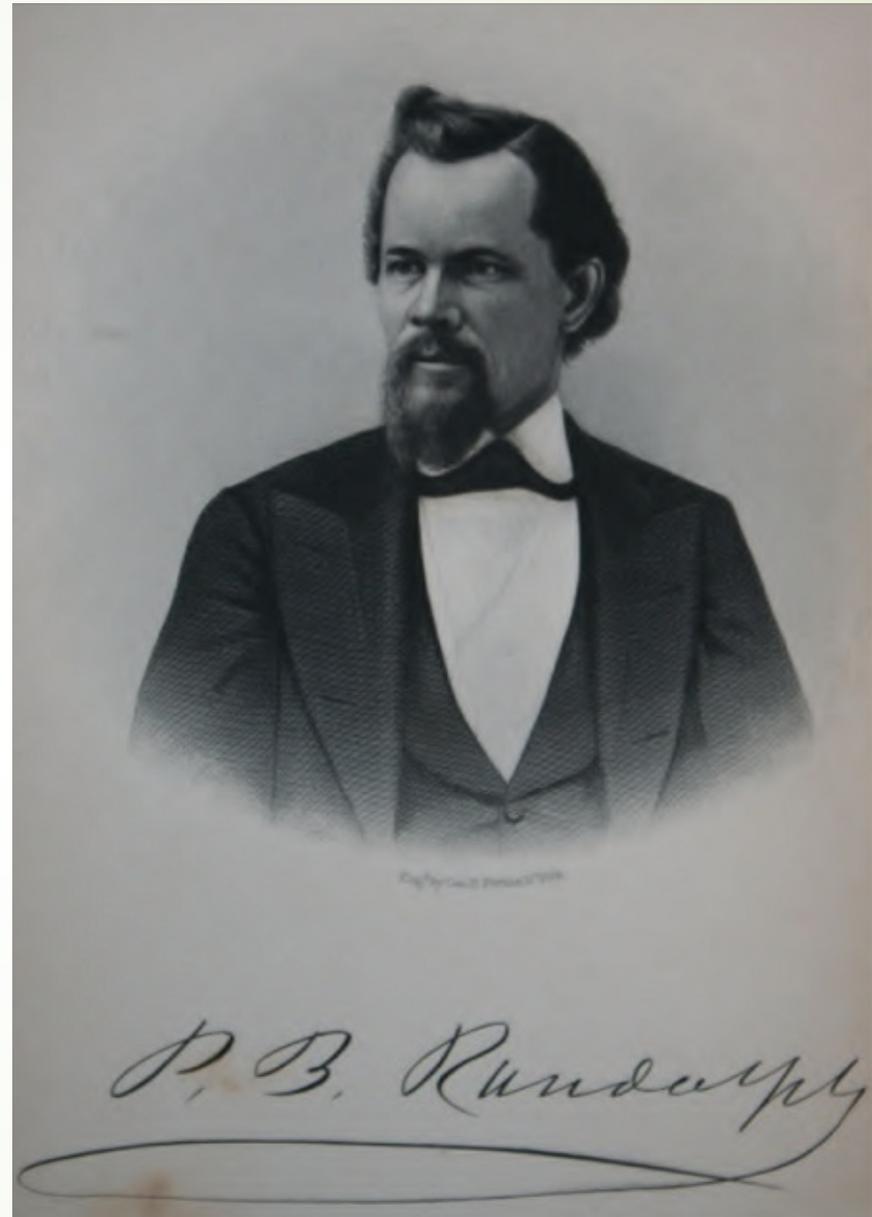
Three Sources - A. Eastern Spirituality



- ▶ I would argue that those engaged in redefining the aesthetics of sexuality in the 1960s and beyond found their sources in three traditions outside of the religious and cultural mainstream. The first was Eastern spirituality, particularly from India

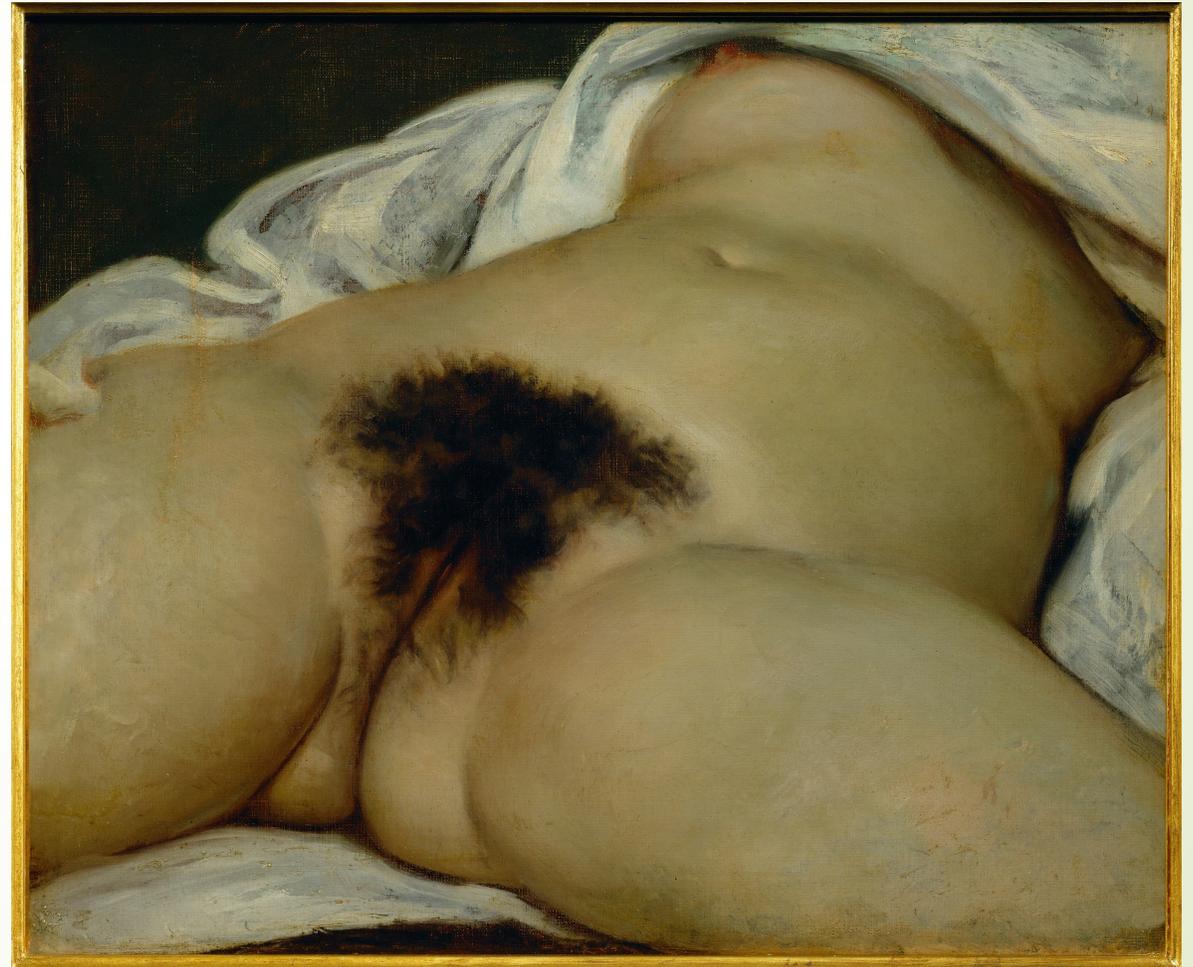
B. Western Esotericism

- ▶ The second was modern Western Esotericism, with its rich traditions of sacred sexuality and sexual magic, of which Pascal Beverly Randolph (1825-1875, right) and the OTO are just two among many examples



C. A Subversive Tradition in Modern Art

- Modernist art as a third source should not be overlooked. It included a reservoir of subversive sexual images. It is quite significant that psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), who was instrumental in defining the new aesthetics, became the owner of *L'origine du monde* (right, now at Musée d'Orsay, Paris), painted by Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) in 1866

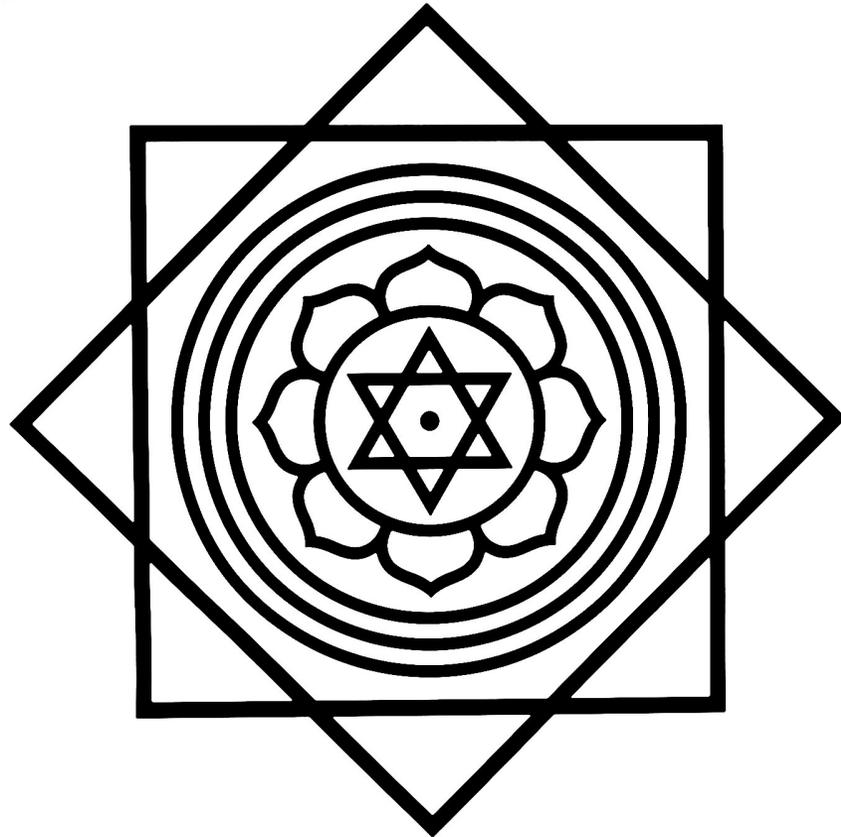




5. Counter-Movements

- ▶ Drawing on Eastern spiritualities, Western esotericism, and modernist art, the revolution of the 1960s built a radical aesthetics where the boundaries between art, religion, everyday life, and sexuality started to collapse
- ▶ This revolution generated reactionary counter-movements, led by two strange bedfellows, both with a vested interest in maintaining the boundaries
- ▶ *Mainstream churches* saw the writing on the wall and perceived (as social historians such as Callum Brown and Hugh McLeod would later note) that the new aesthetics and sexuality would call their role into question and eventually reduce church membership and attendance
- ▶ *Defenders of secularism*, including Marxists, resented that everyday life, culture, art, and sexuality were not socially constructed in purely secular terms but increasingly invested with spiritual (although “alternative” and unorthodox) meanings

MISA's Radical Aesthetics



- MISA's worldview may be defined as a radical aesthetics, based on the very sources of the aesthetics revolution of the 1960s: Eastern spiritualities (particularly Tantrism), Western esotericism, and a certain tradition in modernist art (interpreted selectively)

1. A New Aesthetics



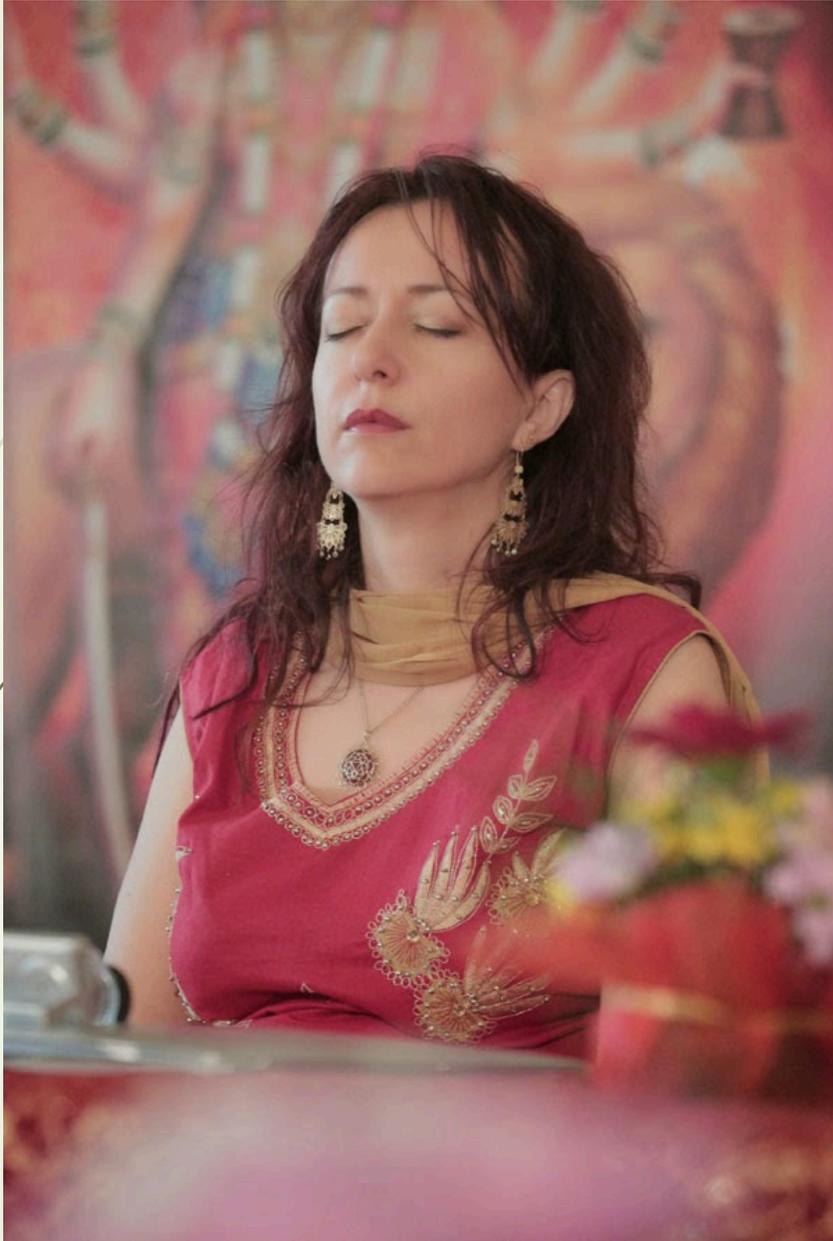
- ▶ MISA's new aesthetic was derived from multiple sources. There is, however, little doubt that a tantric form of yoga, mainly derived from tantric Shivaism of Kashmir and Siddha Yoga of Tamil Nadu, is at the center of MISA's spiritual proposal

Tantra Revisited

- It is a common popular misconception that Tantra only deals with sacred sexuality. In fact, Tantrism is based on the correspondence between divine macrocosm and human microcosm. In order to channel the divine energy into the earthly plane, it uses a variety of techniques



Tantric Feast (Indian watercolor, ca. 1790)



Collapsing the Boundaries

- Quite irrespectively from the philological question whether MISA's reinterpretation of Tantra is faithful to its Indian sources, what is important here is that Tantra is used as a tool for collapsing the boundaries between religion, art, and daily life. Microcosmic realities are regarded as a resource rather than as an obstacle for spirituality. These realities include sexuality and the human body, but also the visual arts, music, dance, geometrical forms, colors, certain foods, and dreams

2. “Objective Art”

- ▶ Faithful to its Tantric roots, MISA promotes what it calls “objective” art as yet another way of channeling divine energies through microcosmic material elements such as forms and colors. MISA also promotes music, dance and theater



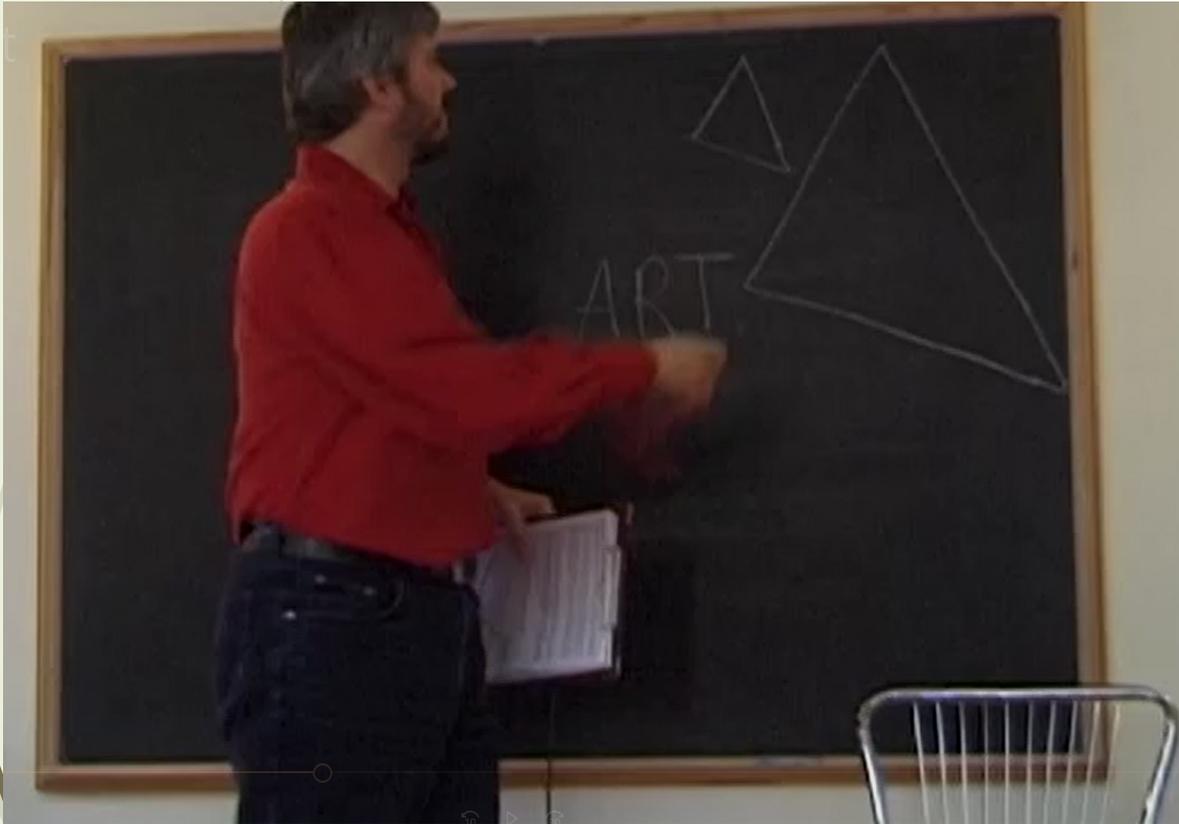
Red Space, by Argentinian MISA artist Ines Honfi

Art Awakens the Soul

- ▶ According to Mihai Stoian, one of MISA's leading yoga teachers, art is a direct method to awaken the soul. True art comes from awareness and generates transformation by expressing general laws



Resemblance and Resonance



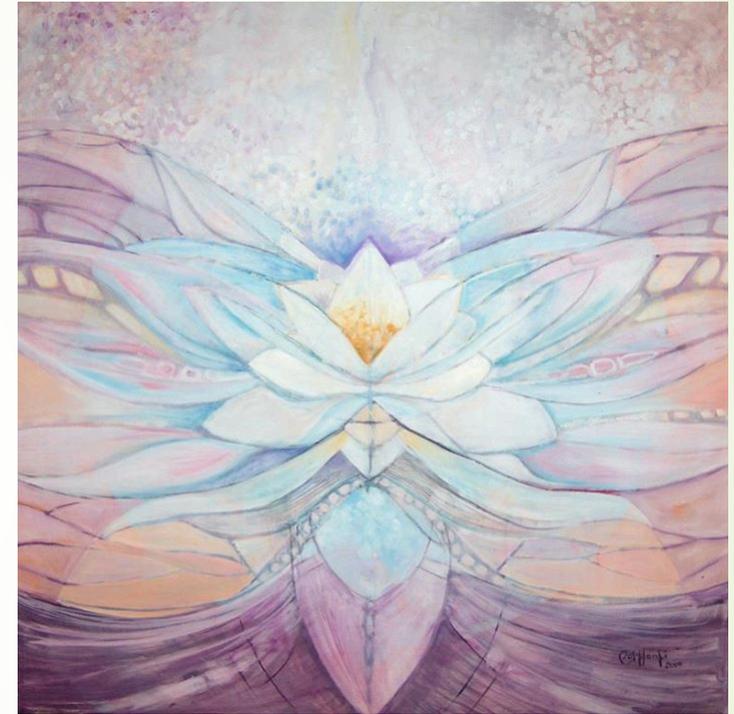
- ▶ Stoian teaches that art works through resonance, i.e. transmission of vibrations from the source to the receiver. For resonance to work, there is, however, a condition: a certain resemblance between the source and the receiver

Yantras



- Symmetrical figures are particularly easy to “resemble.” Artists connected with MISA such as Ines Honfi (above) often produce yantras, i.e. Tantric diagrams with certain proportions and colors. They believe we resonate easily with these works of art and our mind slowly takes the shape of yantra in meditation

Objective vs Subjective Art



- ▶ Subjective “art” for MISA is an expression of the ego and communicates an unimportant “point of view,” no more interesting than a CV or passport. Objective art (Ines Honfi again, above) comes from divine consciousness. The higher the level of consciousness, the better the art

The Artist as Initiate



Ines Honfi, *Blue Lotus*

- ▶ Subjective art is horizontal. Objective art is vertical and becomes a form of initiation. But initiated art can be produced only by initiated artists and audiences also need to be educated to be receptive to initiation. MISA indicates that art is a part of the yoga teaching, because without art we would remain «people who know» rather than becoming «people who are»

The Yoga of Beauty

- MISA's radical aesthetics also includes a practical aspect. MISA leading teacher Nicolae Catrina developed a "Yoga of Beauty" as a path to enlightenment through the contemplation of beauty. All genuine (objective) art can serve as the starting point for the Yoga of Beauty, whether or not it is explicitly "esoteric"



**RETREAT FOR THE REVELATION OF
THE DIVINE SELF
(ATMAN)
With Nicolae Catrina**

**DECEMBER 28, 2015 – JANUARY 3, 2016
BRASOV, ROMANIA**

Nicolae Catrina (Adinathananda) is a yoga professor with more than 30 years of experience and has established a reputation as an exceptional scholar and master of spiritual arts.

During this retreat, an exceptional secret method of revealing the divine Self (Atman) through the sublime aesthetic experience that is triggered by initiatory or divinely inspired art will be offered and exemplified.

Collective Contemplation



- ▶ Catrina also emphasizes the importance of collective contemplation of art. When a group of initiates contemplate a work of art in a state of unison, each individual aesthetic experience is mirrored in the consciousness of all the others, generating a new field of global energy

3. Transforming Ritual Interaction

- ▶ Those who participated in MISA camps report the intense emotional experiences they derive from both the public rituals and the smaller daily rituals they learn to perform in their daily life. It is a new gaze on life, which by no means is limited to sexuality but certainly includes a relationship with the body and nudity some may regard as subversive



Undefined Boundaries



- I would again insist on the undefined boundaries. We can look at this image and ask whether this is artistic performance, spiritual ritual, or celebration of the human body. From MISA's point of view, it is all the three things together as there is no separation between daily life, art, and spirituality

The Yang Yogic Spiral



- MISA also has larger public rituals. One of the most spectacular is the Yang Yogic Spiral, where thousands of people hold hand and meditate in the open air. They are arranged according to their astrological signs and the Spiral is believed to enhance the beneficial effects of their respective ruling planets

4. A New Sexuality



- MISA's radical aesthetics extend to the erotic field. Director Carmen Enache, a member of MISA, produced several erotic movies. Some of them found their way to adult portals, while others, including the recent *Continuamente amando*, cannot be regarded as pornographic in any sensible meaning of the word

Sacred Eroticism

- ▶ Enache (right) insists that even her early, sexually explicit productions were part of sacred eroticism and "objective art." Unlike common adult movies, they taught Tantric practices such as continence, i.e. orgasm without emission of semen, and other forms of sexual magic, including some centered on the ritual use of urine



Extasia: Boundary as Wound



- Members of MISA have also created a project including theater, photography, and a Web site called Extasia. This has also been presented at international erotic festivals and salons but, when one reads all the material, it becomes clear that the center of the project is a very explicit denunciation of the separation of body and spirit, and of eroticism and spirituality, as a dramatic "wound" that needs to be healed, allowing women to get in touch again with their "inner goddess"

“Obscene Art,” Illuminati and Freemasonry

**: Incredible, deeply revolting but true.
This is the obscene art that the
freemasons are promoting! ::**

Incredible, deeply revolting but true. This is the obscene art that the freemasons are promoting!

This is the obscene "art" being promoted by freemasons!

As the sublime artistic shows promoted by our Yoga School where nudity scenes were displayed have been debated in serious media controversy, not even a word has been said about a horrible spectacle of so called "art" recently performed in Paris.

A subject verging on the very bottom of decadence, that's the show "The crying body" successfully performed in Paris in the beginning of this theatrical season. We wonder what will be the lowest level of abjection and nullity the modern art, particularly the theatre, can reach?



- Critics call MISA's erotic productions simply pornographic and obscene. Obviously, the difference is not always easy to tell, but MISA insists that objective criteria exist. While legitimate erotic art celebrates the beauty of the body and sexuality, "obscene art" shows the disgusting and the revolting. In some articles, MISA suggest that there is a connection between obscene or lower forms of art and concepts promoted by the Illuminati and Freemasonry, which the movement regards as sinister groups working today against spirituality

Deformed Views

- Two deformed views often repeated in the media should be corrected. The first is that MISA as a movement produces erotic artifacts, including photographs and movies. These are private initiatives of students, who express MISA's worldview in different individual ways. The second is that sexuality is the main subject of MISA's courses. In fact, courses on sexuality represent a very small percentage of MISA's total activities, teachings, and publications. MISA's complete curriculum includes 2,100 courses, of which less than 100 refer to sexuality.



5. Counter-Movements

- Its radical aesthetics is a key for understanding reactions against MISA, culminating in the repeated incarcerations of its founder (right). One of the main arguments of counter-movements against “cults” has always been that “cults” are sexually deviant. MISA’s celebration of body, eroticism, nudity, and sexuality is rhetorically separated from its tantric roots and context, and used as an allegedly typical example of “cultic sexual abuse”





A Wider Context

- ▶ MISA's doctrines about sexuality, however, are only part of the story. Its radical aesthetics and transgression of the boundaries between religion, daily life (included, but not limited to, sexuality), generated a reaction by those interested in reaffirming these boundaries. In Romania, one component was the very conservative local Orthodox Church



Secular Critics

- ▶ Another leading role in counter-movements against MISA was, however, played by the Communist Party, which reacted very early against Bivolaru, and its post-1989 relics in Romania, secular media, and secular international movements hostile to “cults.” For them, collapsing the boundaries between religion, culture, daily life, and sexuality was a sin not against the Christian view of religion and morality but against secularism

MISA 2.0?



- As the movement continues to expand internationally, it is perhaps time for scholars to pass to a second phase of the study of MISA, focusing not only on Bivolaru's court cases or in the teachings about sexuality – as interesting as they may be – but on the group's radical aesthetics and how it is the expression of a larger aesthetics revolution



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