



AN ART
OF OUR
OWN THE
SPIRITUAL IN
TWENTIETH
CENTURY ART
ROGER LIPSEY

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The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art

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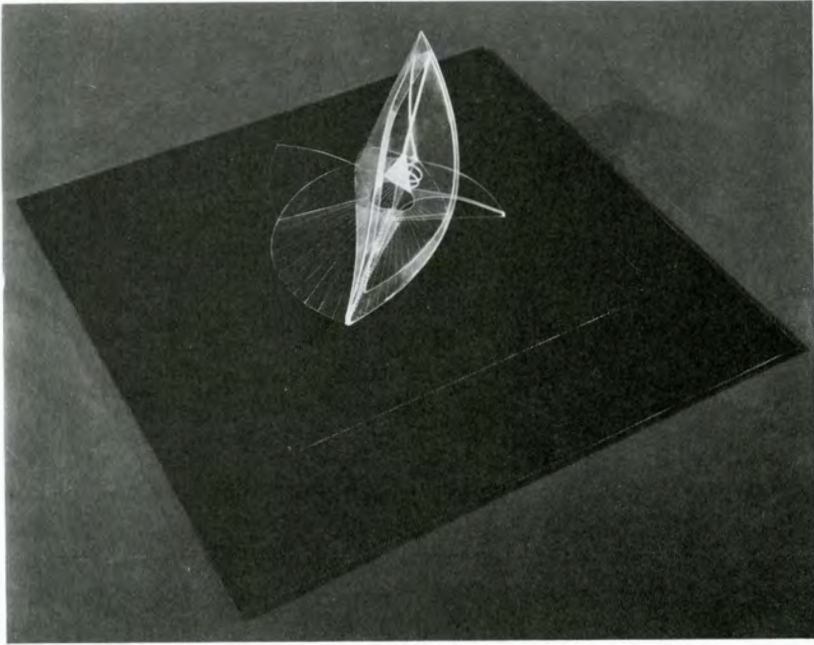
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37. Naum Gabo. *Spiral Theme*. Construction in plastic. $5\frac{1}{2}'' \times 13\frac{1}{4}'' \times 9\frac{3}{8}''$, on base 24'' square. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Advisory Committee Fund.

covered again after World War II, when a new generation of artists recognized a kinship with its extreme simplicity and scholars saw to the translations that Malevich had requested.

A short time ago I visited the New York studio of Luise Kaish, whose brilliant work in collage I have long admired (see chapter 21). Expecting to see highly colored, complex grids with telling details, reflecting a visual poet's exploration of image and experience, I was not disappointed. But at the far end of a studio wall hung a triptych of plain square canvases, carefully aligned, that took me by surprise. They depicted simple geometries—a circle inscribed in a square, an equal-armed cross, and a linear "seam"—through a combination of meticulous outline and spontaneously applied white paint. They were works of simple beauty. We spoke about them briefly, Kaish referring to the idea of archetypal symbolism, but she clearly had little wish to launch

a prolonged verbal inquiry, and there was no need to do so. These works were Malevich again, not “copied,” borrowed, or even necessarily remembered, but their eloquence was also his.

We have an art of our own. We speak it naturally, as a native language. It is, of course, not limited to the metaphysical geometries of Malevich or the bold physical structures of the Constructivists; these are only two complementary aspects of an art that includes much more. That these “signs” have survived and continue to challenge artists reflects the often unacknowledged stability of the art of our century.

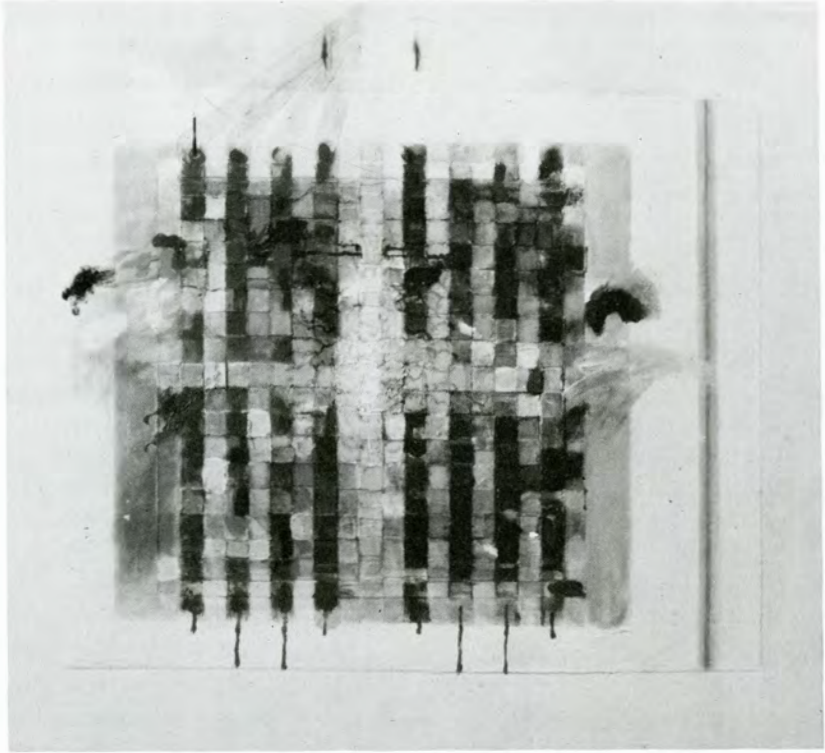
mire in the history of art. The key was to stay with something and keep making it better, cleaner, more resonant, more intense.²⁰

Hence the long series of still lifes and figure studies, dating back to the early 1960s, that have graced this artist's career and provide an imposing counterbalance to the turbulence and superficiality of much else in contemporary art.

An abrupt return from the crystalline world of Bailey's art to painterly abstraction will enforce the obvious truth that twentieth-century art is exceptionally rich in valid languages. The abstract collage-paintings of Luise Kaish carry into the 1980s a series of concerns dating back through the beautiful colored grids of Agnes Martin to those of Paul Klee, and through the deliberately reckless brushwork of Rauschenberg and Johns to Kandinsky's generation. Kaish's daring brushwork and meditative temperament yield paintings endowed with brilliant surfaces and an understated contact with age-old symbols and patterns of meaning, in which the language of abstraction comes to life again and speaks to the human condition as clearly as ever.

Lover's House I (Fig. 116) appears rough and unfinished in a black-and-white illustration; it depends a great deal on brilliant color and, further, on contrasts between smooth and gritty passages of paint. Like Jasper Johns' *Numbers* paintings—genuinely philosophical works little recognized as such—it projects the steady order of a grid and challenges it with the fluidity of paint. This "house" is one of order and disorder, cleanly drafted lines and seemingly random trickles and smudges. The pattern of a central cross is picked out on the grid, flanked at right by a cool zone of blue flecked with red and yellow, at left by a hot red zone with yellows, oranges, and smudges of blue. There is a hint of the yin–yang concept—the cool zone visited by warm colors, the warm zone visited by cool, the whole structured and unified by the "colorless" white cross articulating the grid. At the top of the image, there is a suggestion of the sun's rays illuminating only the warm side of the grid.

Is this an icon, a condensed and deliberate statement that points beyond itself? I believe so. By pure painterly means, the canvas depicts order and disorder, structure and energy wholly mingled with each other, and contrasting energies bound into one. It remains pattern and paint, fascinating in its careful construction, no less fascinating in its rhetoric of carelessness. It digs deeply into the viewer's sensibility, asking to be recognized as a meditation on experience.



116. Luise Kaish. *Lovers' House I*, 1983–84. Mixed media on canvas. 28" × 30". Private Collection.

Is this the spiritual in art, in one manifestation? Arguably so. We can restate its theme in terms that would be congenial to pupils in the Hermetic schools of late antiquity. For example, "The Two are One; the Third is neither the First nor Second, yet allows them to be One," etc. The restatement is intentionally ridiculous, but it serves to illustrate the underlying abstraction of abstraction. Most of us surely prefer the vitality of the picture, which allows us to experience many levels simultaneously: form and color, the feelings they arouse, and perhaps some unspoken acknowledgment that the design of reality pits complementary energies against each other which need to be reconciled again and again.

Kaish is a maker of abstract icons, a metaphysical artist almost de-