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| Orphism |
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| At the Section d’Or exhibition in October 1912, Guillaume Apollinaire defined Orphism as ‘The art of painting new structures with elements that have not been borrowed from visual reality but that have been created entirely by the artist.’ The Orphic artists identified by Apollinaire were František Kupka, Francis Picabia, Roger de la Fresnaye, Jean Metzinger, Albert Gleizes, Robert Delaunay, Fernand Léger, and Marcel Duchamp, although in Apollinaire’s 1913 publication *Les Peintres cubistes: Méditations esthétiques,* Kupka was omitted (possibly due to Kupka’s rejection of the term), while Wassily Kandinsky was added. When these artists exhibited at the 1913 Salon des Indépendant with American artist Patrick Henry Bruce, Apollinaire declared: ‘If Cubism is dead, long live Cubism. The kingdom of Orpheus is at hand ... Orphism, pure painting, simultaneity!’ During the debates over Cubism, whereby Apollinaire singled out a number of Cubist paintings as Orphist, the enthusiasm with which Apollinaire embellished the burgeoning of Orphism can be interpreted as political backlash against the ongoing legitimacy of history and Naturalist painting, and the defamatory strategies by the Salon des Artistes Français and the Salon National des Beaux-Arts to oust the Salon d'Automne and its Orphists from the Grand Palais. Nevertheless he was the first writer to perceive, as articulated by Virginia Spate, ‘the first stirrings of ... an art that would dispense with recognizable subject matter and would rely on form and colour alone to communicate meaning.’ |
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Nevertheless he was the first writer to perceive, as articulated by Virginia Spate, ‘the first stirrings of ... an art that would dispense with recognizable subject matter and would rely on form and colour alone to communicate meaning.’  While none of Apollinaire's Orphists collaborated, let alone shared cultural politics and aesthetic identities, most were attuned to interdisciplinary explorations of music, dance, Neo-Symbolist poesies, and a range of concepts including simultaneity, Non-Euclidean geometry, and the Fourth Dimension. Duchamp, Picabia, and Kupka (who claimed to be a psychic medium) investigated Spiritism, occult sciences, theosophy, psychic experiences, Hippolyte Baraduc's *transcendental photography,* and animal magnetism (including the animalistic power of Orpheus invoked by Apollinaire in his quatrains, *Bestiaire ou cortège d'Orphée*)*.* Following Apollinaire's identification of Orphism as ‘not simply the prideful expression of the human species,’ all Orphists were engaged with displacement of the anthropocentricism on display at the ‘official’ Salons and exploited by the French ‘civilizing mission.’ Instead of creating three-dimensional illusions of the human body, all were devoted to developing a new language that Apollinaire called *peinture pure*, which captured the intensity of sensations experienced by the contemporary body enveloped by modern phenomena and technologies including electricity, radioactivity, magnetism, machinery, feats of engineering, cars and aeroplanes, physical cultures, and mythological and scientific concepts including lunar energy and planetary rotation. Instead of passive spectatorship, they endeavoured to provoke active sensations within the beholder in order to jolt their consciousness. Since modern life was filled with chaotic, fragmentary, and violent sensations, Léger called for the development of an art that was comparably jarring with discontinuous contrasts and dissonances that could be felt more than seen, as epitomised by his non-representational *Contrastes de formes* in which primary coloured cubes and wedges contrast and mesh with machine-like cylinders.  Image: Disc.jpg  Figure 1 Robert Delaunay, *Disque* *Simultané (Le Premier Disque),* oil on canvas, diameter 134 cm., Public Domain.  [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disque\_simultan%C3%A9#mediaviewer/File:Delaunay\_Disque\_simultan%C3%A9.jpg]  In his article ‘Du sujet dans la peinture moderne*,*’Apollinaire maintained that ‘pure painting’ was ‘what music is to literature,’ as illuminated by Kupka's two paintings, *Amorph* and *Fugue en deux couleurs.* 'I think I can find something between sight and hearing and that I can produce a fugue in two colours like Bach has done in music,’ Kupka explained. The circular movement of sunlight and colour in Kupka's *Disques de Newton* along with the ellipses of lightness, darkness, and colour can all be related to the circular lines and rotational coloured forms in this body-size painting. A reader of Madame Blavatsky's *Doctrine secrète* and Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, Kupka's *Amorpha* pursued the theosophical distinction between *rupa* (having form), and *arupa* (having formlessness engendered by music), a distinction also explored by Kandinsky. Following Rudolf Steiner's concept of eurythmy (also referred to as ‘visible music’), the radiating black and white circles in Kupka's *Amorpha* (the first basic colours in Steiner's Anthroposophical system) have been interpreted as corresponding to the rotation of the planets and the music of the spheres. With the swirls of blood reds and cerulean blue intertwining like the eurythmic rhythms of the body as choreographed by Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, Kupka’s work conveys an expanding consciousness interconnected with the cyclical movements of the cosmos. As articulated by Kupka, ‘there is a correspondence between the general activity of the whole universe and the psyche and the mental activity of man.’ Consistent with Heinrich Hertz's conception of space as vibrating electromagnetic waves that could, according to Gustave Le Bon, be emitted by objects, Kupka imagined that hypnotic telepathic waves transmitted by the spectatorial body could prompt a revolutionary consciousness, if not a ‘superconsciousness,’ devoted to an anarchistic ecological and cosmological utopia.  Image: Soleil.jpg  Figure 2 Robert Delaunay, *Soleil, Lune, Simultané 2,* 1913, oil on canvas, diameter 133 cm., The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  [http://www.abstract-art.com/abstraction/l2\_grnfthrs\_fldr/g0000\_gr\_inf\_images/g023\_delaunay\_simultaneous.jpg]  The cosmos is also evoked in Delaunay's *Soleil, Lune, Simultané 2*, his *Disques* works,and his *Formes circulaires*. While drawing upon Henri Bergson's theories of time as a perpetual flux of sensations intertwined with memory, feelings and association, as well as Michel Eugène Chevreul's concept of simultaneous contrasts generated by complementary colours, Delaunay was more concerned with exploring the simultaneous energies generated by modern sources of energy upon earth. Like Kupka, Delaunay interwove transparent and opaque planes of complementary colour so that light seemed to glow from within the painting. His play of primaries with complementaries — yellows tinged with oranges and reds amidst specks of blue, green, and violet — ensured that no colour could be perceived in isolation. As Apollinaire observed, ‘Each colour calls forth and is illuminated by all the other colours of the prism. This is simultaneity.’ The affect of optical vibration and simultaneous fluctuation was considered analogous to the electromagnetic pulsations experienced in the modern French metropolis dominated by the Eiffel Tower and its wireless transmitters — an icon featured in many of Delaunay's paintings, particularly *Les Fenêtres, Simultanéité,* and *Ville.* Galvanized by the precedents set by Kupka, Léger, and Kandinsky's *Improvisations,* as well as the burgeoning French culture of heliotherapy to regenerate organisms, Delaunay detached colour from objects in *Formes Circulaires,* abandoning gravitation for circular movements of light or ‘halos,’ which were epitomized by the sun and the moon. Increasingly convinced that the rhythms animating the earth were circular, his five foot *Disque Simultané* — also called *Le Premier Disque* — consisted of concentric circles without any reference to natural phenomenon, which compelled the beholder to concentrate on the radiation of colour and how, in the words of Delaunay, ‘all is roundness, sun, earth, horizons, fullness of intense life.’  Although the circularity in Picabia's *Udnie* and *Edtaonisl* (which were both designated as ‘pure paintings’) may seem comparable to Delaunay's *Formes Circulaires,* they arose from Picabia’s memories of sensations experienced in New York, the exotic French dancer Stacia Napierkowski, and the perverted prelate he encountered on the ocean-liner going there. Instead of creating colour simultaneity, Picabia instead deployed colour associatively. The dominant blue-green colours of his swaying fragments in *Udnie*, for example,evoke marine experiences around the arabesque undulations of the white, brown, and virtually nude Stacia. Subsequently arrested in New York for indecency, this may have provoked Picabia's to entitle his painting as an anagram of what prudish American censors decried as *Nudie,* and to print it on the top of his canvas. Yet by no means was his painting of this experience to be illusionistic, as he explained:  *Udnie* was no more the portrait of a young girl any more than *Edtaonisl* was the image of a prelate, as they are commonly conceived. These are memories of America, evocations from being there which, when subtly counterpoised like musical harmonies, became representative of an idea, of a nostalgia, of a fugitive impression.  Instead of engaging with simultaneity like Léger and Delaunay, Picabia (like Duchamp) became more absorbed by Bergson's concept of memory as an enduring sensation amidst the flux of modern life, Henri Poincaré's notion of psycho-physical space arising from body stimuli, and Pierre Janet's theory of a new psychology of time. Drawing upon the sadistically erotic fusion of organic fleshy forms and machine-pistons resonant in Duchamp's *Le Passage de a vierge et la mariée* and *Le Roi entourés de nus vites,* Picabia (who was the great-nephew of Jean Martin Charcot) triggered associations of the memory of unconscious phantasies, particularly those pertaining to scopophilia. Yet in his ‘psychological Orphism,’ as Spate calls it, Picabia belies any fixed or figurative readings, which is compounded only by his anagrammatic titles. For Picabia, Orphism was not just ‘peinture pure’ but ‘pensée pure,’ which he maintained ‘evidently blends with the infinite.’ Hence his ‘pensée pure,’ like the other Orphic ‘peinture pure,’ was not to be ingested intellectually but absorbed intuitively and psychologically so that the beholder, like the artist, could transcend the strictures of modern life and access their durational being. Hence, in their refusal to borrow from ‘visual reality,’ and in their invention of form and colour to convey non-anthropocentric meanings about the experiences of new energies fathomed on earth and in the solar system (albeit in different ways), Orphism was ultimately conceived by Picabia (as it was by Kupka, Delaunay, Léger, and Delaunay) as playing an emancipating and revelatory role: it was not just the artist who was to be revealed and liberated by what Apollinaire called these ‘new structures,’ but the beholder. |
| Further reading:  (Antliff)  (Apollinaire)  (Brauer)  (Henderson)  (Hicken)  (Leighten)  (Spate) |