

Synergietalks11: The Vibratory Cultures of Modern Art | Friday, 23rd May 2014, 11-13, ZfL Berlin

Talk with **Linda Dalrymple Henderson** (The University of Texas at Austin, currently fellow at the American Academy in Berlin) and discussion of her book project on **The Energies of Modernism**



Histories of modern art have generally been written by scholars far removed from the context of the early twentieth century and for whom the term “science” has invariably signified Einstein and Relativity Theory. Yet, with the popularization of Einstein and his theories occurring only after the 1919 eclipse expedition, the key figures of modern art—from Cubists to the pioneers of abstraction Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich—operated in a milieu quite different from that of the 1920s onward. The ether of space, for example, dismissed by Einstein as irrelevant, was basically lost to cultural history during most of the last century. Yet, as Charles Gibson’s 1909 statement documents, the ether was still at the center of the popular understanding of the nature of reality in this period. In addition to a conception of space as filled with vibrating ether, matter had been reconceived in the wake of the discovery of X-rays, the electron, and radioactivity in the 1890s and was now often discussed as dissolving into the ether or being formed from it, as in Lord Kelvin’s “vortex atom.” How can we comprehend the works of modern artists and their theories without a better grasp of the popular understanding of science and the nature of space and matter in the first decades of the century? Linda Henderson’s current book project, “The Energies of Modernism: Art, Science, and Occultism in the Early 20th Century,” seeks to remedy this situation, focusing on the “meta-reality” beyond human vision that stimulated the imaginations of artists in the early 20th century—from higher, unseen dimensions of space (“the fourth dimension”) to the long-forgotten ether.

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