

Sex, Spirit, and Psychedelics

The Art of Ecstasy

by Claudia Müller-Ebeling



Dr. Claudia Müller-Ebeling, born 1956 in Germany, studied history of art, anthropology, and literature in Freiburg, Hamburg, Paris, and Florence, and wrote her doctoral thesis on the subject of visionary art. Her professional interest lies in the area of altered states of mind, such as shamanism and the use of entheogens in cultures throughout the world. She has participated in extensive fieldwork, together with Christian Rättsch, on shamanism in Korea, Peru and especially in Nepal. Müller-Ebeling is on the board of advisors of the European College for the Study of Consciousness (ESCS). She is co-author of *Shamanism and Tantra in Nepal*, soon to be translated into English by Inner Traditions, and she is presently living in Hamburg, Germany, preparing a book on visionary art.

When considering art images that are particularly evocative of the confluence of sex, spirit, and psychedelics, the first and oldest example to pop up in my mind is the middle panel of Hieronymus Bosch's so-called *Garden of Earthly Delights* (ca. 1503/04, Prado, Madrid, Spain). In this mysteriously symbolic image, in a setting of meadows, trees, rivers and ponds, we see groups of naked men and women in some kind of spiritual conversation, surrounded by strange fruits and architecture and a group of gigantic birds. As to the meaning of this strange iconography, we can only speculate. Many who view this art, whether they are experienced with psychedelics or not, are inclined to assume Bosch might have depicted his own visions, produced by mind-altering plants like henbane (*Hyoscyamus* species), deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*), or mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*), all well-known to Bosch's world.

Alas, there is no reliable data to support this assumption. Thus, we cannot claim with any confidence that this painting was stimulated by psychedelic experiences. Nevertheless, the *Garden* has become an archetype of visionary art depicting dream-like states of mind. And, without a doubt, Bosch inspired generations of painters whose visions were in fact partly stimulated by psychedelics. In my opinion, Bosch's famous oil painting merges psychedelics, spirit, and sex. It is psychedelic because it is viewed as such—regardless of the lack of historical certainty. Although no actions referring to any kind of sexual intercourse are implicitly represented, the painting invokes sex by its imagery. In the time of Bosch, the depiction of naked people as the center of attention in the large panel of his famous “trip” tuch *categorically* evoked erotic, sexual associations. The notion of sex being transposed to a spiritual realm of esoteric allegory refers to the spiritual quality of the painting.

The second, and this time contemporary, example of the confluence of sex, spirit, and psychedelics in art to me is the series of oil paintings Alex Grey executed between 1983 and 1989. *Kissing* (1983), *Copulating* (1984), *Nursing* (1985), *New Family* (1985/86) and *Pregnancy* (1988/89) clearly refer to physical reality through their anatomical depictions of veins, nerves, and bones—based on his precise scientific knowledge. However, Grey also introduces spiritual aspects by stylistic means of traditional *thangka*-paintings (meditation scrolls from Nepal and Tibet) as well as by energetic lines that shiver through the images. Introspection into the material as well as the spiritual levels of human existence are elementary constituents of psychedelic experiences—that is if the artist has reached a very deep, as well as high, level of understanding. To me, Alex Grey is a unique example of such an artist.

I might conclude by mentioning how very rare it is to observe a confluence of sex, spirit, and psychedelics in art. Most artwork to come to mind features just one aspect—it is either psychedelic, spiritual, or oriented towards sex. Of course, all of these aspects are very open to individual interpretations and understanding. •

[Other psychedelic artists whose work is frequently steeped in eroticism and/or spirituality include: A. Andrew Gonzalez, Mark Henson, Penny Slinger Hills, Philip Rubinov-Jacobson, Mati Klarwein, Steve Postman, Don Snyder, and Fred Weidmann. — Eds.]