

About this issue's cover: 'Art is the Map of the Human Soul'

On Hornby Island, off the coast of British Columbia, artist Jeffrey Rubinoff (1945-2017) resolved to create a park for the public to experience over 100 of his sculptures that would also serve as a centre for annual conferences, open to anyone, addressing the role of art in society.¹ Rubinoff's sculptural production evolved dramatically over his lifetime in a themed series of works: *Series 3 – 5* (1983) is an outstanding example. Exuding dynamism, the assemblage seemingly 'lifts off' from its groundings, a visual effect that becomes all the more pronounced as one circles the sculpture, taking in its unitary cohesion across an arc of perceptual transformations. Rubinoff chose his material – 'Cor-ten' quality steel – for its capacities of endurance. Exposed to rain, snow, and natural growths such as lichen and moss, *Series 3 – 5* has been evolving since its installation in concert with the environment it is part of, integrating itself into the natural world gently, incrementally.

I had the pleasure of getting to know the artist before his untimely passing, and quickly realised his views regarding art aligned with those of the American abstract expressionist movement's anarchist founders (Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still). Like them, he sought to evoke the experience of the sublime, which he associated with a critical consciousness of our being in the world.² As Rubinoff put it, referencing the 'awesome and terrifying creative unfolding of the universe':

... we fragile humans are the only fully cognizant witnesses. With this capacity comes the great responsibility of this knowledge. This responsibility is a priori in those who are born artists ... This is the highest of human values – the recognition of the value of life itself. Therein resides the mature conscience. This is the essence of our being. Art is the map of the human soul.³

He was also deeply hostile toward the modern capitalist art market, which instrumentalised art (for commodity purposes) in much the same way as, historically, powerful elites and social institutions have mobilised art for various ends (most tellingly, nationalism).⁴ 'The commodification of art', wrote Rubinoff, 'has rendered art and artists irrelevant to the measure of human values. This includes the perception of art as political capital – a commodification that stills

the independent voices of artists even more than the market'.⁵ Again, these views merit comparison with those of the abstract expressionists, notably Still, who similarly condemned the art market and the entire gamut of societal forces pressing down on free creativity.⁶

Furthermore, converging with anarchist-inflected debates raised by anthropologist James C. Scott and others, Rubinoff traced the origins of mass warfare and prescriptive state-enforced hierarchies to the birth of agriculture and the attendant imperative of rulers to lay claim to and control territory.⁷ Inquiries concerning the social mechanisms of oppression and, conversely, humanity's impetus towards freedom, eventually led Rubinoff to Peter Kropotkin's arguments in *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902) and *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings* (1927).⁸ Highlighting, inscribing, and dog-earing pages, he parleyed with Kropotkin's analysis of uncoerced mutual aid as a foundation of humanity's relationship to the natural order and his views regarding tendencies that thwart societal cooperation. Kropotkin's ideas were clearly resonant, and they sparked engagement.

Rubinoff argued that the rebellious advent of the European avant-garde in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century marked a renewal of art's capacity to express the sublime, and he singled out the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), the path-breaking abstractionist, as exemplary.⁹ Rubinoff's well-read copy of *The Blue Rider Almanac* (1912), co-edited by Kandinsky and collaborator Franz Marc, is testimony to his admiration.

But why Kandinsky? Amongst the pages dog-eared by Rubinoff, this passage from Kandinsky's manifesto, 'On the Question of Form,' gives us an idea:

Many call the present state of painting 'anarchy'. The same word is also used occasionally to describe the present state of music. It is thought, incorrectly, to mean unplanned upheaval and disorder. But anarchy is regularity and order created not by an external and ultimately powerless force, but by *the feeling for the good*. Limits are set up here, too, but they must be *internal* limits and must replace external ones. These limits are also constantly extended, giving rise to an ever-increasing freedom that, in turn, opens the way for subsequent revelations. Contemporary art in this sense is truly anarchistic: it not only reflects the spiritual standpoint already conquered but also embodies the spirit as a materializing force, ripe for revelation.¹⁰

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NOTES

1. See <https://www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/company-of-ideas-forum/>
2. On the anarchist sublime see Allan Antliff, 'Clyfford Still on the Margins of Anarchy,' *Modernism/Modernity* 27, 3 (2020): 496-499.
3. Jeffrey Rubinoff, 'Art Beyond War: Discussions about Prehistoric War and the History of Art by Artists,' *Rubinoff on Art: The Collected Writings of Sculptor Jeffrey Rubinoff* (Hornby Island, Canada: Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park, 2013), p28.
4. Jeffrey Rubinoff, 'Through the Lens of the Endgame,' *Rubinoff on Art*, pp75-80.
5. Jeffrey Rubinoff, 'Notes on the 2012 Company of Ideas Forum,' *Rubinoff on Art*, p84.
6. See Antliff, *passim*.
7. Rubinoff's views are touched on, but not explored, in Peter Clarke, 'The Ideas of Jeffrey Rubinoff,' *The Art of Jeffrey Rubinoff*, James Fox (ed.), (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2016), pp239-240. For comparison, see James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Uplands Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009) and John Zerzan, *A People's History of Civilization* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2018).
8. Both books are housed in the Jeffrey Rubinoff Library and Archive, Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park, Hornby Island.
9. Rubinoff, 'Art Beyond War', pp26-27. On Kandinsky's anarchism see Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighten, 'Kandinsky and Radical Ecology: States of Mind, States of Abstraction', *Vasily Kandinsky: Around the Circle*, Tracey Bashkoff and Megan Fontanella (eds), (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2021), pp29-39.
10. Wassily Kandinsky, 'On the Question of Form', *The Blue Rider Almanac*, Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc (eds), (Boston: MFA Publications, 2005), pp157-158; Jeffrey Rubinoff Library and Archive, Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park, Hornby Island. Rubinoff was also deeply interested in correlates between music and visual art: his sculptures reflect this, but the topic is beyond the scope of this brief article.