

Exhibition Review

***Alchemy: The Great Art*, exhibition at Kulturforum, Berlin, Germany,
06.04.2017 – 23.07.2017**



This temporary exhibition at Kulturforum, part of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, presented a selection of around 200 objects from its collection, alongside loans from prominent cultural institutions, including the Getty Research Institute in California with whom they have collaborated. In 2016, the Institute itself ran an exhibition entitled *The Art of Alchemy* which appears to have laid out the curatorial objectives for this recent show. Working with and beyond the alchemist's fabled quest for the creation of gold, both exhibitions investigated the production of objects, substances and artworks through the efforts of the alchemist, artist, philosopher, theologian and scientist. Recent years have witnessed a number of exhibitions focusing on alchemy. In 2013, the Science Museum in London displayed a selection of its archive which examined the secrecy of much of the symbolism, imagery and cipher employed by practitioners. The Kunstpalast Düsseldorf hosted *Art and Alchemy* in 2014, an exhibition which investigated this relationship through a range of artworks spanning multiple epochs. Split over two floors, Kulturforum's exhibition was divided into sub-themes, which examined the culture of alchemy and its relationship to divinity and artistry, not only through its historical collection, but also through contemporary art intervention - a museological approach which has seen an increase in the last decade.

Visitors were introduced to the concept of alchemy through its 'founding figure', Hermes Trismegistos. This semi-mythical sage was associated with mercury - the fluid metal which alchemists believed was capable of uniting opposites. Referenced regularly throughout the

exhibition, the image of the metal's animate, slinking quality was also used in Kulturforum's promotional material for the show. It even meandered its way down the stairs of the venue, guiding the visitor to the exhibition entrance - a visual primer for what lay ahead.

A second-century marble statue of Hermes welcomed visitors as they entered, preceding an area within which the vital elements of ancient alchemy were relayed. This included the important relationship between planets and metals, gender and geometry, and continued on to the intellectual culture of late antiquity, merging science with both pagan and Christian theology. Visitors oscillated between different zones - some depicting supernatural or celestial concepts and others referencing the more palpable aspects of alchemy. The latter included the thematic sections *Material Culture: Origins of Alchemy*, *Artists Artisans Alchemists*, *The Cabinet of Art*, *Ora et Labora: The Philosopher's Stone* and *Synthetic Worlds*. We were introduced to the idea of material transmutation through a selection of ancient Greek glass rods and vessels that were intended to resemble precious gemstones. This idea of mimicry continued through to some third- and fourth-century ornaments, many of which were often only constructed out of base metals, albeit achieving the appearance of gold. The alchemist's attempts at achieving *chrysopeia* (the creation of gold) were of course alluded to several times in the exhibition. Continuing with the creation of skeuomorphic materials, artist Jeff Koon's sculpture *Dom Pérignon Balloon Venus*, was juxtaposed with these ancient objects. Based on the ancient fertility figure, the *Venus of Willendorf*, this artwork is coated in a pink, high-gloss polyurethane resin. Made to look precious but of course appearing mass-produced and crass, it strives nonetheless to create an illusion of perfection and appearance of value.

Within the *Artists Artisans Alchemists* area, visitors encountered a selection of portraits depicting the alchemist in a variety of guises. *The Alchemist* (c. 1652), an etching by Rembrandt, depicts the nominal figure receiving a cryptic message which might have come from the Kabbalah.¹ The images also illustrate 'the charlatan', who, by the fifteenth century, is already part of the alchemical pictorial repertoire (Kulturforum 2017) and the destitute occultist, whose family are making their way to the poor house. Within this discussion on representation it might have been appropriate to have mentioned some of the female alchemists which we learned nothing of in the exhibition. Marie Prophetissima (who lived between the first and third centuries AD) for example, devised and improved alchemical apparatus and was famously known for inventing the *balneum Mariae*, or water-bath. Or perhaps Hypatia of Alexandria (born c. AD 350–370; died AD 415), who was the earliest known female mathematician, inventor and astronomer and authored thirteen books on algebra (Greenberg 2003:156). During the exhibition, visitors were taught of female deities, allegories of women, and were able to view contemporary art works produced by female artists: but when referencing 'the alchemist', the wall text and labels always employed the masculine personal pronoun.

Within the *Synthetic Worlds* area, the labours and theoretical study involved in alchemy were illuminated through an engaging selection of equipment, diagrams and treatises. Visitors were made witness to the dynamic conjunction of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, during which the proliferation of hard science and new notions of order met the still-intact alchemical practice where the adept retained the position of demiurge. Early periodic tables and attempts at systematization were displayed as idiosyncratic, encouraging the examination of contemporary methods of classification. Giambattista Della Porta's illustrations of 1608 were used to show the spiritual and symbolic implications of the distillation process. He likened the shapes of vessels to conjoined twins, a hydra, a snake and a variety of other animals (Kulturforum 2017). Building on alchemy's hermetic qualities, Sarah Schönfeld 'paints' her canvases using recreational narcotics. They appear to reference the chemical process involved in the manufacture of drugs as well as indicating the substance's power and volatility. Expertly placed next to these psychedelic pictures of planets the exhibition displayed a book displaying Sigismund Bacstrom's *Apparatus to attract the Lunar Humidity* (1797) which was 'designed to capture the silvery essence of the moon by distilling the morning dew' (Kulturforum 2017). Although the idea of the contemporary artist as alchemist was never explicitly discussed in the exhibition, it was frequently implied. Yves Klein's 1965 work, *Anthropometry in IKB against a Monogold background*, was displayed to showcase his archetypal 'International Klein Blue', a colour that he created and patented. Something which was not mentioned alongside this



piece is that Klein's consistent use of blue and gold came from his preoccupation with the seascape of Nice - his place of birth. It is certainly the imitation of nature that the exhibition used so emblematically which further qualified him, in this context, as an alchemist.

Two of the more esoterically-themed sections were entitled *Chemical Wedding* and *Inner Alchemy*, and dealt largely with ancient Chinese and Indian philosophies. Some oriental Daoist theories proffered the attainment of eternal life as an alchemical objective through an amalgamation of science and spirituality. Prints and paintings from the seventeenth century depicted beautifully-crafted 'anatomical landscapes' – topographical illustrations linking sacred mountains, lunar cycles and animal deities to parts of the human body. Visitors were also offered an impressive selection of mainly Han-dynasty and Jun-ware ritual vessels whose positioning created a seamless, conceptual bridge into the next section dealing with craftsmanship. Without needing to use textual references, the curators Jörg Völlnagel and Veronika Tocha achieved an effective and sensitive 'domino effect' of objects and artefacts: nigh on all exhibits connected to the next, either through their material composition, provenance or thematic representation, whilst heralding the arrival of the next cluster of ideas.

Perhaps the star of the show was the Ripley Scroll. Attributed to the Catholic clergyman George Ripley, this outstanding eighteenth-century scroll is an illustrated guide to the alchemist at work. Measuring three or four meters long, and presented in a cabinet at waist height, it allowed the museum visitor to take on the role of the researcher. Visitors were able to identify some of the international figures associated with alchemy and understand much of the arcane symbolism depicted elsewhere in the exhibition. Well-placed towards the end of the last room, this vivid and generous document allowed visitors to consolidate much of what they had learnt about alchemy.

The thematic content did occasionally overlap however, potentially warranting a reduction in the number of sub-themes from ten, allowing for a more digestible framework. However, the largely conceptual structuring of the exhibition served the subject matter well, allowing for an understanding of alchemy's cultural and historical positioning without the need for a strict chronology. Alongside the vibrant collection and loaned objects, the inclusion of stimulating contemporary art pieces allowed for an ocular and intuitive learning experience to develop.

References

Alchemy. die Große Kunst (2017) wall text, Kulturforum, Berlin.

Greenberg, A. (2003) *The Art of Chemistry*, Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Interscience.

Sherwin, B. L. (2006) *Kabbalah: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism*, Lanham, MD:

Rowman and Littlefield.

Note

- ¹ An ancient discipline explaining the mysteries of the universe and originating in Judaism. See, for example, Byron L. Sherwin's *Kabbalah: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism*.