

# Kalachakra Sand Mandala

DOUGLAS HYDE GALLERY, DUBLIN

February 1994



The monks preparing the completed sand mandala for the closing procession  
Photo: Gerry Farrell

After an intriguing opening ceremony, record numbers of visitors followed the daily progress of four Tibetan Buddhist monks as they gradually constructed a Kalachakra sand mandala in different coloured sands, meticulously laid out on a sky blue base. The mandala was about two metres in diameter and consisted of a series of concentric circular designs enclosing complex patterns. Its completion was immediately followed by the closing ceremony, when the monks swept up the sand, carried it in procession and scattered it on the river Liffey.

Along with Houshiary and Durham, this show constitutes a mini-programme of non-western artists, which seems to posit the Douglas Hyde Gallery in the role of 'Institute of Contemporary Ethnographic Cultures'. Such a role invites the sort of questions raised in Edward Said's critique of western constructions of the orient *Orientalism*. Whether or not post-colonial Ireland is part of the 'West' as Said constitutes it, the Douglas Hyde Gallery clearly bears the generic characteristics of Western modern art spaces. As such, it cannot but impose the contemporary occidental methods of engagement and mediation particular to such institutions.

The gallery's programme centres around issues of non-western spirituality and identity. It could be seen in the context of the continuing enchantment of (post-)modernism with Eastern spirituality and notions of transcendence. From Rothko through Houshiary, a tradition within Western art institutions has invited a gaze which invests art objects with some sort of ability to evoke a simulacra of transcendental experience. Despite the gallery's statement that "... *this event should not be considered in quite the same light as our normal exhibitions*", within the realms of the Douglas Hyde, one cannot avoid such a gaze, looking to invest the mandala itself with a presence akin to that of the Rothko chapel, intrinsically spiritual and potentially transcendental.

However, unlike Rothko, the monks' almost immediate destruction of the finished mandala would seem to deny the viewer the possibility of a modernist-type engagement with the what Michael Fried termed the *presentness* of the finished work. It would seem that the mandala is a meditative device, and it is in the process of re-tracing a celestial architecture in sand that a transcendental state can be attained. In this situation, while the monks were engaged in their meditative exercise, the gallery-goer was left out of the process, be-

coming a viewer of the spectacle of the monk's activities. This situation was in fact less reminiscent of the viewer's role in the Rothko Chapel than it was of Fried's first experiences of minimalism, which he likened to sharing a room with someone who completely ignores you. While rendering transcendental meditation as spectacle, the viewer was posited in a role wherein meditation was uniquely problematised.

This unique viewing role was further evidenced by the use of the main space. The mandala was centrally positioned on an altar-like podium painted 'Virgin Mary'-blue. It was surrounded by Tangkas depicting Buddhist deities. The whole was centred on a photograph of the Dalai Lama, surrounded in shrine-like fashion with vases of flowers, again on a blue table. The monks' manipulation of the gallery, transforming it both functionally and formally into a quasi-religious space, transgressed the Douglas Hyde's usual spare, meditative aesthetic norm. However, rather than associations of Buddhist meditational enclosures, the gallery was inescapably reminiscent of a post-Vatican II church. This atmosphere of spectacle rather than meditation was further enhanced by the unprecedented numbers of visitors in the gallery. This radically altered the prevailing viewing conditions for anyone familiar with the space otherwise, when artworks usually outnumber visitors.

While the Douglas Hyde Gallery's aesthetic and functional norms were being transgressed, leaving it in some hybrid state, the Kalachakra sand mandala was also radically altered by this encounter. Cultural difference rendered its symbolic significance largely lost on a viewing public with relatively little knowledge of Buddhism. Further, mandalas are usually produced for the Buddhist communities in which they are made; they are not designed to function outside the religious paradigm of their faith. Fundamentally then, to comprehend the significance this mandala had for those who made it would require more than education or translation. It would require a sharing of the religious faith that unites these monks and makes a mandala more than coloured sand. In the absence of such faith, it would be condescending to assume that the monks themselves were not sensitive to these problems. It would seem then, that the mandala made in the DHG specifically for us to see, could aspire to be no more than a simulation.

Ultimately then, what was the *raison d'être* behind the exhibition? The clue to this lies in some of the other elements in the space: the Tibetan flag, a video and photographs of Tibetan life and a picture of the Dalai Lama. These elements contextualised and substantiated the positing of the mandala as an assertion of the authenticity of Tibetan culture as distinct from that of atheistic communist China (which has forcibly occupied Tibet since 1950). This situation is strangely reminiscent of the (then unacknowledged) appropriation of Abstract Expressionism as a cultural weapon in the Cold War. In both instances, non-Realist art-works were employed as a mark of cultural identity and spiritual vibrancy in opposition to the other of Communism. This conflation of the mandala with (post-)modern art serves to bolster the continuing rhetoric of the gallery as a space for artistic freedom and individuality, while simultaneously perpetuating the orientalist constitution of eastern spirituality as an enchanting spectacle. However the Tibetans have willingly taken up this role, inextricably linking their plight with their orientalist constituted identity, all within a broader capitalist/communist dialectic. The pragmatism which underlies this appropriation is politically admirable, even as it casts a critical light on the rhetorical identity posturings of the artistic practices of others.

**Gerard Byrne and Ronan McCrea**

*Gerard Byrne and Ronan McCrea Artists working in Dublin.*