Dis-continuities: The role of religious motifs in contemporary art
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Chapter I

Veronicas and Artists
The repositioning of contemporary art with regard to its past, and as dominated by religious images cannot be conceptualised solely as a movement of emancipation, as breaking with, and even breaking of the older, religious image. The difference between religious and non-religious images, besides being decided by their subject matter, is determined by the specific period and context in which they are produced and circulated, and is characterised by specific rules of image production and image appreciation.

The history of the image before “the era of art” begins in late antiquity with the adoption of pagan image cults and their re-definition into Christian image practices. Hans Belting describes a set of important features concerning the status of religious images and their transformation in what he calls “the era of art.” Trained as art historian and Byzantinist, he had written on variety of topics related to modern and contemporary art, as well as methodological issues. Importantly, he had argued for an anthropology of images and considering their lives beyond being art works. In his book Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art (Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst) Belting makes a distinction between the status of the early Christian image, which he calls the “cult” image, and the “art” image. The defining feature of such images was that they were venerated and treated as real, living persons who participated in different rituals: “it served in the symbolic exchange of power, and finally embodied the public claims of a community.” The special status of the cult was supported by legends that traced it back to a supernatural origin – direct contact with the body of Christ (as the Holy Face), or Mary herself posing for her first icon. Such images had a life of their own and were considered to have supernatural powers. Belting defines the cult of images as the practice of involving the public display of an image only on particular days and according to a prescribed program. Such displays had an important function for the community.

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Before the “era of art”, most images produced and circulated were religious, even if they also served political or economic purposes. Belting defines the public practices of veneration of images according to “a prescribed program” as cult.4 Two aspects, which are not determined by the visual qualities of the image, characterise the cult image. On the one hand, the legend that gives an account of the image’s origin, and, on the other, the power of the image, was a result of its function as a material and visible support of a community’s identity. Religious images were used to elicit public demonstration of faith and loyalty.5 The later medieval narrative image “which presented sacred history” and implied an act of reading rather than viewing, was followed by a type of image that took on a different meaning and “was acknowledged for its own sake.” The term “art” came to designate a category of images as works created by artists and defined by a theory. This era of art, Belting argues, “lasts until this present day,” and forms another history, a history of artists and not of cult objects.6

Early images with religious functions had a specificity that cannot be explained within the interpretative agendas of theology or art history.7 These images with communal, and precisely not aesthetic, significance were associated with practices of veneration.8 They were “actors” in communal practices, and were treated as living persons; they were protected and, in turn, they offered the community protection. A very significant element is the way the role of the image-maker was defined in regards to such images:

The intervention of a painter in such a case was deemed something of an intrusion; a painter could not be expected to reproduce the model authentically. Only if one was sure that the painter had recorded the actual living model with the accuracy we today attribute to a photograph, as in the case of St. Luke … could one verify the authenticity of the results.9

There was, what we would call today, a mechanical view of authorship – the image was considered the outcome of a strict adherence to a prescribed set of rules, and the role of personal artistic invention was understood as insignificant.

In the case of a special group of images of Christ, there was a complete erasure of the author; such images were claimed to have “a supernatural origin – in effect that

4 “Often, access to an image was permitted only when there was an official occasion to honor it. It could not be contemplated at will but was acclaimed only in an act of solidarity with the community according to a prescribed program on an appointed day. This practice we identify as cult.” Ibid., p. 13.
5 Ibid., p. 1. 6 Ibid., p. xxi. 7 Ibid., p. 2. 8 “processions and pilgrimages and for whom incense was burned and candles were lighted. These were deemed to be of very ancient or even celestial origin and to work miracles… Only cult legends granted them their respective status.” Ibid., p. 3. 9 Ibid., p. 4.
it had fallen from heaven, or affirmed that Jesus’ living body had left an enduring physical impression.” They were considered as having the capacity of action and supernatural powers. In addition, such images were objects of replication, as it was believed “that duplicating an original image would extend its power.”10 But this did not yet mean that images were holy. Making them holy was delegated to priests, who had the specific power to consecrate them. As Belting describes, priests were “not only ... more important than the painters but also the true authors of the holiness of images.”11

During the late Middle Ages, images underwent a crisis that redefined their status as art.12 The era of the art image is associated with both the loss of an image’s religious power and its public role. Central moments in this transition were the rise of panel painting, and the private appreciation of the image.13 Makers of images assumed control over them, which legitimised the figure of the artist as an individual maker. The previously invisible figure of the image-maker transformed itself into the public visibility of the artist. Practices associated with the appreciation of images also underwent a transformation. The public role of the cult image was gradually replaced by a private situation of appreciation, in which the qualities of the image as a work of art were of greater importance than legends that gave account of its (divine) origins. The central moment in such a transformation was when the work lost its religious aura and ceased to exercise its power over believers by its actual presence. Instead, it became an “original” in the artistic sense in that it authentically reflected the artist’s idea.14

From this moment on, images were produced and interpreted according to the rules of art. Artists and beholders had to articulate and agree upon a set of new ways to use images, and upon aspects and qualities that made them good art. The image, then became “an object of reflection” for an educated public who knew “the rules of the game” and who replaced the previous power of priests to invent the status of images.15 It is of great significance that priests no longer determined the rules of the appreciation of images. Instead, these rules were defined by individuals with particular knowledge in the field of art.

Bram Kempers has written extensively on the professionalization of artists and the development of complex systems of patronage as central aspects of the context of the practices of production and circulation of images in Renaissance Italy, as well as on issues related to the contemporary art market and policies in the field of culture.16

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his book *Painting, Power and Patronage: The Rise of the Professional Artist in Renaissance Italy*, he argues that several main features defined the professionalization of artists: “the development of new skills, the establishment of organizations and the evolution of both historiography and theory.”\(^{17}\) From the thirteenth century onwards there is a marked specialisation of the figure of the artist and an increasingly complex definition of and reflection on the practice of producing art. In contrast to the “era of the image before art” there was a shift of focus from the image with its religious power, to the figure of the professional artist, and the inscription of his practice into social relations of power and patronage. In the fourteenth century: “The idea of the autonomous artist, who sets his own standards and acts as an independent innovator took a firm hold on Western culture from this time onwards.”\(^{18}\) However, the claim of the autonomy of art cannot be taken to mean the neat separation between the work of artists and its social context. The practice of producing artworks was embedded in, and influenced by the complex texture of social relations and was both supported and shaped by systems of power and patronage, which according to Kempers, cannot be taken as a disinterested practice as “...the many functions of painted images for those who commissioned them included elements remote from artistic appreciation.”\(^{19}\) The production and circulation of images, was influenced by and references power relations, other images and the broader social context.

During the Renaissance, the new art-image became a pictorial context of a re-mediation of the old one. A central cult image – the Holy Face, or the veil of Veronica, became a very popular motif embedded in painting. Yet, it continued its life precisely as a motif, and not as an object whose material presence was valued. The fictional space of painting, of artistic invention began to play the role of a device for the presentation of the visual motif of the true image. For instance, Hans Memling’s (1430-1494) St. Veronica, 1470: “dramatized the relationship between image and life and between cloth and image.” (Fig. 2)\(^{20}\) Veronica holds the cloth on which the face of Christ floats miraculously detached from its surface; the cloth is defined as a space embedded in the fiction of painting. Thus, the art image claimed its status as a human, artistic invention. This claim was not justified on the basis of disconnecting with, or the rejection of, the cult image. The latter was redefined as a pictorial motif of the image with a divine origin: “The old icon is ensconced in the new painting as a precious memory.”

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17 “Italian painters developed an impressive array of skills in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, broader in range than the accomplishments of their forefathers or their non-Italian contemporaries and broader than those of most other groups of craftsmen. Innovations were made in fresco work, which was practiced in far more places than before. A new system of panel paintings came into being…”Ibid., p. 300.
18 Ibid., p. 4. 19 Ibid., p. 5. 20 Belting, * Likeness and Presence*, p. 428
Jan van Eyck (1395-1441) redefined the Holy Face as a portrait, in which the second picture plane of the cloth with the face of Christ coincides with the space of the portrait (Fig. 3). His inscription “As well as I can” (als ikh khan), is a modesty formula, which also states the agency of the image-maker precisely as an artist.\(^{21}\)

The Reformation was a defining period in the process of transformation of the status of religious images, which were subject to criticism and destruction because of their intertwinement with institutional power. This crisis, similar to the previous one, resulted in the definition of new rules of image production and appreciation. It produced a very new type of image – the image of the destruction of images. As Belting explains, “the empty walls of the reformed churches were a visible proof of the absence of the ‘idolatrous’ images.”\(^ {22}\) Iconoclasm was a practice that had an important visual side to it; the defaced sculptures and paintings, in fact, became new images that visually marked the emancipation from the power of the cult image. New images were produced, but they were invested with a different, artistic truth.\(^ {21}\) With that the image began to mediate a different artistic truth; as an object of reflection it invited its beholder to “look for the artistic idea behind the work.”\(^ {24}\)

In a Catholic context the art image maintained its connection to the old one: “The former icon appears as a quotation within the modern invention of the artist.”\(^ {25}\) The art image was endowed with the task to provide a pictorial context in which the old icon was embedded. Thus the art-image was comparable to a pedestal that had the important role to present the old icon. The fictional space, a result of an artistic invention, became a host to the cult image, in terms of its extended frame and means of presentation.

**Acheiropoietos**

Within monotheism, Christianity, with its idea of incarnation implied a “huge iconic turn.” Christ became not only the visibility of the divine Word, but his body could generate further images; he: “left even an imprint on the handkerchief of Veronica whose name means ‘true image’ (vera icon).”\(^ {26}\) This kind of image is precisely not a work of art. It has, at its heart, the problem of resemblance created without the participation of the hand of an artist. Christ as the true image of the Word was made “without in-

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\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 430. \(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 458. \(^{23}\) “In the modern age, subjects remain alone with themselves. They can invent an image, but it has no other truth than the one they themselves invest it with.” Ibid., p. 472. \(^ {24}\) Ibid., p. 472. \(^ {25}\) Ibid., p. 475 \(^ {26}\) Jan Assman, “What is Wrong with Images” in: *The Return of Religion and Other Myths. A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, Eds. Maria Hlavajova, Sven Lutticken and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK, 2009), p. 26.
Fig. 2 Hans Memling, *St. Veronica*, 1470/1475

Fig. 3 Jan van Eyck, *Holy Face*, 1448
scription and formation...through the art of God."  

The Son as the image of the Father is produced without the participation of a human hand, the human body of the mother being reduced to a virgin canvas for the work of the “handless” creation. There is a clear parallel between the doctrine of the incarnation as involving the medium of the virgin body of Mary to produce the image of God – Christ as the first acheiropoieton, and theology of the icon. The icon defines the canvas as a virgin space, which has to give birth to the sacred image.

The true image has an extraordinary iconic fertility; it sets in motion an infinite series of operations of replication. In the Christian tradition the acheiropoietos incarnates: “...the dream of an autonomous, self-created image, a picture produced instantly in its perfect totality, outside the bodily conditions of human making...” It implies perfection and truth as it is a result of a divine creation. Importantly, it becomes an object with a great public significance. Precisely at this point it embodies not aesthetic, but a political moment, insofar as its aesthetic qualities do not matter, but the truth of its divine origin. This motif and its transformations relate to the conditions of the eras of the image as Belting defines them and as they concern images with religious function and religious art. Still, such a motif embodies the constellation of properties that are very relevant to image production and circulation at the present moment.


28 Marie-José Mondzain, a specialist in Byzantine culture who has written on image theory and contemporary art and a co-curator of the exhibition Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, 2002. She points out: “The theme of the image not made by human hands starts in the Bible when the book of Genesis gives God the power to produce a creature in His own image and to breathe life into him […] It is directly following this handless act, this act of the spirit, the Christianity constructed the doctrine of the incarnation of the Word, the filial image of the Father” Marie-José Mondzain, “The Holy Shroud: How Invisible Hands Weave the Undecidable”, p. 324. See also: Joseph Leo Koerner, “Icon as Iconoclasm,” In Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art, Eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 192, 324.


31 Belting points out that “In Russia, as perhaps previously in Byzantinium, the motif [of the Mandylion] was placed on military banners to represent the highest sovereign of a Christian army and to put the enemy to flight at the sight of it, like a new Gorgoneion. A flag from the time of Ivan the Terrible (1530-84), on which angels hold the Mandylion, continues this genre, which then continued to be used as late as the First World War on banners of the Russian and Bulgarian armies”, Likeness and Presence, p. 215.
The legend of the true image first appears in the sixth century. Christ “dips a piece of linen (mandylion, mindil) in water, passes it over his face, which is then miraculously inscribed with its imprint” and sends it to King Abgar of Edessa who by looking at it, is healed of leprosy. The image itself replicates itself miraculously on the wall of the city gate, where it was kept. In the tenth century, the image is taken to Constantinople and becomes “spiritual guarantor of imperial rule,” and, subsequently, multiple copies are disseminated across the Christian world. The original disappears from Constantinople and is possibly transported to Paris and placed in the Sainte Chapelle, to be allegedly destroyed during the French Revolution.

Next to the Mandylion of Edessa, there is the more popular story of Veronica, who captures an image of the face of Christ by wiping his face with a white cloth on the fourth station of the cross. The sweat and blood “formed a representation of his face.” During the thirteenth century, this legend developed into the one we are familiar with today. The cult of the veil of Veronica intensifies as was expressed in the dissemination of copies, and the large numbers of pilgrims visiting Rome. Allegedly it still exists “inside one of Bernini’s quadrature pillars in St. Peter’s.” A large number of copies were produced in various media in the late Middle Ages and the early Modern Period.

The importance of the motif of the image not made by a human hand is proven by its survival in several different versions. The transition between the imprint of the face of Christ and the story of a burial Shroud that had preserved the imprint of his body appears centuries later. The Bishop of Troyes, who claimed that he knew the

32 In Koerner’s words “The vera icon is simultaneously a cult object and an implicit aesthetic, what Hans Belting could call a theory of the image before the era of art.” The Moment of Self-Portraiture, p. 91
36 “The new image borrowed its conception from its Eastern rival and in fact is indistinguishable from it. But it had a different legend to explain its origin. The Veronica or vera icona, which was kept in St. Peter’s in Rome, made its appearance only in the early thirteenth century, after all the trace of the Byzantine cloth image has been lost. It then became in the West what its rival had long been in the East: the undisputed archetype of the sacred portrait.” Belting, Likeness and Presence, p. 208. 37 Ibid., p. 28. 38 “The Shroud of Turin has, naturally enough, been repeatedly identified with the Edessene mandylion, even though the mandylion is never supposed to have originated as the shroud in which Christ was wrapped on his burial, and even though the recorded history of the shroud that survives in Turin can really not be pushed back much beyond the fourteenth century.” Freedberg, The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 209.
The artist who created it, protested the first public ostentation in the fourteenth century. The Vatican then requested that the bishop remain silent and “with this silence as security” the Shroud was displayed. To the present day, the Shroud is kept in a reliquary at the cathedral in Torino (Figs. 4 and 5). It is a linen cloth with a constellation of stains and does not offer anything in particular to see. As one believer commented, at one of the rare occasions of its public ostentations: “...I was disappointed: non si vede niente (you can’t see anything) everyone was saying. We tried...” Then: “One actually saw, then, something else, simply in the looking forward to it or the desiring of it.”

The Holy Shroud is not a spectacular object, but it is undoubtedly a very powerful one. It provides an interpretative schema for an extraordinary variety of images. At the same time, it is an object that resists being inscribed into a mimetic economy that defines the image as an imitation. The burial shroud of Christ is the canvas of an image that appeared spontaneously, miraculously circumventing all procedures of making. Its authenticity is supported by the fact that it is not a representation, an image, but an imprint, a constellation of stains that is a result of direct contact and not of drawing or painting. “Contact having occurred, figuration would appear false.” Therefore, it resists being called a representation. It is a true image. As a result of the elimination of the role of the creative hand of the artist or of liberating the image of any form “of gestural subjectivity,” acheiropoietic images are associated with a special presence in the religious sense. They matter precisely because they are not representations or imitations. Presence and truth are central characteristics of what Belting calls the cult image in contrast to the image in the “era of art” – a result of a set of mimetic procedures carefully executed by an artist and regulated by a proper theory.

The public visibility and significance of the acheiropoietic image are defined to a large extent by the procedures of its presentation. An interesting aspect of such pro-

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39 Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, p. 196. 40 Pierre Vignon, reply to M. Donnadieu, in L’Université catholique, XL, no. 7 (1902), 368. Quoted by Georges Didi-Huberman, “The Index of the Absent Wound. Monograph on a Stain”, Trans. Thomas Repensek, *October*, vol. 29 (Summer, 1984) p. 63. 41 Didi-Huberman, “The Index of the Absent Wound”, p. 63. 42 Ibid., p. 68. 43 Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, p. 207. 44 As David Freedberg observes, this images of Christ pose questions related to the status of representation: “We can only know Christ if he is incarnate as man; and so we must be able to represent him. But if we represent him – rather than symbolize him – then he can only be represented in the most accurate possible way. Otherwise we impugn his divine wholeness and unity. One class of images allows for no inaccuracy – the direct impressions of his face, or of his body (as in the occasional case of the imprinted shroud or epitaphios). But all other images must strive toward the greatest possible verisimilitude. Then we will have not merely an image of Christ; we will have an image that so closely mirrors the miracle of the Incarnation that absence becomes presence and representation reality.” *The Power of Images*, p. 212. 45 Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. xxi.
Fig. 4 Positive and negative photographic image of the Shroud of Turin

Fig. 5 Secondo Pia, Positive photographic image ('the negative') of the Shroud of Turin, 1898
cedures is that they both bring an object to visibility and thus support its status of being a true image in the sense of having a divine origin. Moreover they conceal the real procedures of its making, erasing the figure of the maker. Cult images demonstrate a surprising similarity to the way visual objects today acquire their status as artworks through procedures of presentation that in fact invent their “truth.” A religious community would invest a visual object with a true status and simultaneously erase the operations that produced the object as significant for the communal gaze. Indeed, if such operations were visible, the object would not be true. This entanglement between belief and power also plays out in the context of the contemporary media; as Mondzain observes “the church no longer has a monopoly over it. But it was the church that provided the model.” In that sense, images considered as “true” function as focal points, an imagined stable and common point of reference for regimes of belief that give meaning to the world shared by a community. An object such as the Holy Shroud is supported by such tautological operations as it:

Incarnates incarnation and expects those who contemplate it to have the open gaze of faith. “They have eyes and do not see” becomes “we give ourselves the eyes which construct what we want to see.” An eminently modern art situation such as the cinema, stemming from photography, inaugurated it.

A photograph and the Shroud make similar claims to truth, and conceal a similar fact – the fantasy that they are not made by a human hand.

It is important to discuss in more detail the paradigmatic case of the “true image” not only because it plays a defining role for the era of the image before art, but also because this motif is revived and recycled in contemporary artworks in different ways – from the implicit presence of this motif, which in fact defines the condition of a key object as the readymade, to its iconic citations as in Bill Viola’s work. The motif of “the true image” has been in artists’ hands for centuries. Artists had the delicate task, as Georges Didi-Huberman phrases that, of “ficting’ and in a sense faking – a veritable ‘image not made a human hand.’” Veronica’s veil is a motif that legitimated the

46 Mondzain, Image, Icon, Economy, p. 221. 47 Ibid., 332. 48 For a detailed discussion of Viola’s work, see my Chapter Four. 49 Georges Didi-Huberman Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art. Trans. John Goodman (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), p. 197. Didi-Huberman is an art historian and philosopher who had written on a written on a variety of topics: the status of art history as a discipline, the complex relationship between images and time and history, on the figure and the legacy of Aby Warburg and has curated a number of influential exhibitions including, more recently Atlas: How to Carry the World on One’s Back? (Museum Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2011).
display of artistic skill and inventiveness “to capture the elusive face of Christ.” It is usually depicted as a face projected onto a cloth, miraculously floating at its surface, and separate from its material texture. Jan Van Eyck, in his interpretation Holy Face, 1438, removed the cloth and gave an interpretation of the face of Christ as a portrait. The pictorial space is presented as a fictional space by the frame, and the visible inscriptions and the signature of the artist. Simultaneously, the realism of the image in its meticulous execution and the disappearance of the picture plane conceal “the signs of painterly manufacture” and make the image transparent. In this case as Joseph Leo Koerner argues: “The myth of an image ‘not made by human hands’ serves here to articulate an idea of the quasi-divine powers of the individual artist.”

Later, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) fashioned his Self-Portrait, 1500, following the prototype of the Holy Face as interpreted by Van Eyck, which is itself acheiropoietos, the self-portrait of God (Fig. 6). The significance of this motif according to Koerner, is to be found in the fact that it itself stands for the very activity of image-making and self-fashioning. Dürer created a painting that simultaneously took into account the tradition, and was a very new type of image. He drew an analogy between himself and Christ, and articulated the conditions of a new kind of autonomous pictorial representation – the self-portrait. This was done within the model of a pictorial formula with a long history – the image of the face of Christ:

In fashioning his own most fundamental likeness after the cultic image of the Holy Face, Dürer makes particular claims for the art of painting. By transferring attributes of imagistic authority and quasi-magical power once associated with the true and sacred image of God to the novel subject of self-portraiture, Dürer legitimates his radically new notion of art, one based on the irreducible relation between the self and the work of art.

This new notion of art expressed itself on the pictorial surface by legitimising itself with the tradition of the Holy Face, which it carefully interpreted. The meticulous realism of the painting, then, serves both as an affirmation of artistic skill and as a means to erase the traces of manual labour from the pictorial surface: “the visible signs of human making – for example brushwork and the material presence of the paint – are all but imperceptible.” And still “every hair, every visible surface is wholly accounted for – as if the moment of self-portraiture had indeed been the total and instant doubling

50 Wolf, “Original Pictures of Christ” p. 29. 51 Ibid., p. 29. 52 Koerner, The Moment of Self-Portraiture, p. 106. Joseph Leo Koerner is an art historian who has written on German painting from the Renaissance to contemporary art. He was the co-curator of Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, 2002. 53 Ibid., p. 106. 54 Ibid., p. 79, emphasis mine. 55 - 56 Ibid., p. 85.
of the living subject onto the blank surface of the panel” and an affirmation of the subject of the artist.\textsuperscript{36}

Koerner observes that the motif of the true image continues to be present, but not as a portrait of Christ, or a self-portrait of the painter. Instead, it becomes an aspect of painting; it is translated in meticulous realism that conceals the trace of manual work. Much later, Caspar David Friedrich’s \textit{Wanderer above the Sea of Fog}, 1818, provides another instance of \textit{theomimesis}, a reference to the very model of divine creation. The specific manner of the depiction of fog conceals all the signs of brushwork to make the painting appear as an instantaneous creation “without hands.”\textsuperscript{57} Artistic production legitimates itself by imitating the origin, and finds a way to claim artistic agency but within its frame.

\textbf{The Image-Instant}

This history of reproduction, imitation, or reference to the motif of the true image reached its culmination in the nineteenth century with the invention of an “acheiropoietic” technology that claimed to produce an image in an instant and without its surface being marked by the signs of manual labour – photography.\textsuperscript{58} This gave another impulse to this never-ending story, but in this instance the Shroud of Turin became its main object.\textsuperscript{59} On 2 June 1898, Secondo Pia, a lawyer who had taken the first photographs of the Shroud, was paralysed by an “intense emotion” after developing the negative plates of the photograph he had taken of the Shroud. In front of his eyes

\textsuperscript{36} “…in the specific painterly manner necessitated by the painting’s fog, which works to conceal all evidence of brushwork, the manipulation of paint and the temporal process of manual labour, Friedrich assimilated his own act of making to the model of divine creation …instantaneously and ‘without hands.’” Joseph Leo Koerner, \textit{Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape} (Yale University Press, 1995) p. 192.  

\textsuperscript{57} The apparent shared condition of photography and \textit{acheiropoietoi} is observed by many authors who discuss the issue of the truth status of images, William J. Mitchell: “…there is no human intervention in the process of creating the bond between photograph and reality, this apparent Kryptonite connection to the referent: it is automatic, physically determined and therefore presumably objective. Photographs are thus connected to the ancient Judeo-Christian tradition of \textit{acheiropoietoi} – ‘true’ images of Christ made ‘not by a human hand.’” \textit{The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-photographic Era} (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1992), p. 28.

\textsuperscript{59} In Didi-Huberman’s words: “Let us recall that the historic impetus that rendered the Shroud of Turin visible – or more precisely, figurative – is found in the history of photography.” “The Index of the Absent Wound. Monograph on a Stain”, Trans. Thomas Repensek, \textit{October}, vol. 29 (Summer, 1984), p. 65
Fig. 6 Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait*, 1500

Fig. 7 Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1818
loomed the real face of Christ (Fig. 5). It was only then, with the invention of photography, that the Shroud became the object of frenzied scientific explorations. Not only is photography an “acheiropoietic technology,” it also opened up the possibility of turning the imprint of the body of Christ from a negative into a positive; to finally see the face, and make sense of the stains on the linen cloth. From that point on, science and religion became entangled in an endless tautological loop. The Shroud was seen as providing the means for the “salvation of science,” and, in 1931, an international scientific commission headed by the biologist Paul Vignon was established to study the Shroud. The commission even made claims that photography’s invention was inspired by God “in order to reveal the realm of the invisible, the soul of the world.” The technical vocabulary associated with photography was “translated” into one laden with spirituality. Photographing the Shroud and researching its origins implies a complex set of operations of image-making, of getting closer to the true image. Yet, such operations were executed within the framework of science, a field that claims objectivity and excludes artistic work, using a technical apparatus that minimises the role of the hand of the maker.

A specific aspect of photography, the temporal dimension of the procedure of making the image in an instant of time, supports the popular fantasy that a photograph is generally a true representation of reality. Arguably, the instant functions as a screen that masks the mediated nature of the image. The concealment of the operations of the making of an image and its status of being true (and therefore powerful) can be said to be a mutually constitutive couple, the one depends on the other. Precisely this moment of mutual support is present, yet in a different way to the acheiropoietic image. Mondzain observes that a central element in the legends giving account of this type of image is that they cut the image from its cause. The traces of the operations of making are bound to remain invisible, but at the same time this paradoxically affirms the image in a foundational mode, as a type that is further copied and interpreted. Similarly, photography on whose surface no trace of human making can be discerned is “interpreted as not being the result of any material cause, any gesture.” As Mondzain argues:

[...] this fiction of photography as productive of an iconic effect without a gesture is the absence of any drawing. The photographic impression is nongraphic, or as might be said agraphic [...] The impression leaves a stain rather than makes a line.

Furthermore, photography is a medium that is particularly suited to the appropriation and re-circulation of images. Thus its very condition replicates the iconic contagiousness of the Holy Face.

Next to the medium of photography, the *acheiropoietic* image is similar to an object that occupies a key position with regard to the articulation of the condition of the work of contemporary art – the ready-made. It is an object that also claims to *not be made* by an artist’s hand, but in contrast to the *acheiropoietos* it indicates the very procedures that place an object on display consecrating it as Art. 65 The only truth of a contemporary object as the readymade is that it shows the tautological mechanisms that produce the status of the art-image. The *acheiropoietos* and the ready-made are object-images liberated of the hand of an artist that made them. They are fundamentally un-placeable.

The history of the interpretation of images not made by human hands is a history of a counter-motif, a history of its reversals and re-appropriations. The continued importance of this motif is associated with a question well examined in modern and contemporary art: is art something that is not made by an artist? The Holy Shroud, Veronica’s veil and the ready-made are objects that subvert the very definition of the work of art. They are both not art works, but things that are outside the realm of making fictions, yet they are central to the definition of the regime of representation that we identify as art. One of them is central to the era of the image before art began, and one of them tried to institute a blow to the institution of art. The readymade inverts the notion of the artwork, and questions its condition by posing questions concerning the articulation of the very concept. Objects “liberated” of the hand of an artist are similar in the operations they embody; they are also objects without a proper place:

Duchamp’s bicycle in a museum caused the same commotion as the Holy Shroud: in the reliquary it is not in its place because it is not a partial residue of the sacred; in the laboratory it is out of place because it is not a reifiable object; in the museum it is incongruous because it is not presented as a work of art. Where is it then? Preferably nowhere and never one expects to be able to grasp it. It is appended to the sites of gazes. The readymade has the same power of atopia. 66

Image-objects as the Holy Shroud or Veronica’s veil are not appreciated as regular images. They are kept hidden and shown to the public, or the religious community only on special days and are accompanied by a ritual of ostentation. In a broader sense, presentability is a key aspect of what Belting calls the “cult image,” which is also considered a real person and venerated as such. These public presentations in fact invent the power of such objects. Mondzain eloquently articulates their tautological condition: “It is not because it is true that it has power. It is because it has power that it becomes true, that it must be true.” If they draw the crowds then they should be true or powerful. Such “true” images are usually associated with presentational devices that highlight their importance and status. The public ostentations of the Shroud are actually procedures of its framing where the role of “frame” or the presentational device is played by those in power, both religious and political, who show or present it to the community of believers. The allegedly real Veronica is placed inside one of the pillars of Saint Peter’s Basilica and “is sometimes shown to the faithful, but from such a height that only its frame shines forth, a frame made of crystal gold and precious stones, a frame that designates as much as conceals it.” Such presentations simultaneously invent the “truth” of such objects and conceal its invented nature.

It is significant that “the acheiropoietic technology” of photography played an important role in presenting, and therefore in inventing the “truth” of both the Holy Shroud and the ready-made. The Urinal, 1917 by Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), perhaps the most popular of the ready-mades, was photographed by Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), himself an important photographer and “the maker of the American avant-garde” (Fig. 8). In both cases photography was used to present an existing object or an image to its audience. However it is not a neutral and transparent medium, a feature that is usually attributed to it precisely because of the fact that it suspends the role of the image-maker, but a presentational device that can be used to stage or frame an object. Thierry De Duve, an art historian and theorist who has written extensively on the work of Marcel Duchamp, argues that the procedures of presentation

69 Thierry De Duve observes “In any case, one can be certain that if Duchamp addressed Stieglitz, it was not just to obtain a photograph. The photograph had to be signed, and what better signature than that of Stieglitz, the artist, the maker of the American avant-garde…” Kant after Duchamp (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 118. In the case of the Urinal the photographer Stieglitz played the role of presenter. De Duve, Look! 100 Hundred Years of Contemporary Art, p. 25
Fig. 8 R.Mutt, *Fountain*, 1917, photograph by Alfred Stieglitz
and presentational devices play a crucial role with regard to the status of artworks. Their *presentability* is an important aspect, and an embodiment of what he calls “social pacts” that deem visual objects as “true” instances of Art.⁷⁰ Presentational devices such as frames, stands, showcases and captions present the artwork (or in the general case an object) to its beholder; they render an object presentable to a communal gaze and embody the power that “makes” it true.⁷¹ All the elements of the infrastructure of presentation are there to produce, and then to guarantee, the truth of the image or the object, or more precisely its status. Such devices are the *quasi-visible* locations of power of the institution. As De Duve eloquently phrases that: “We might say that the presentational device is what lives of God the Father when God is dead – fascination with Power in its almightiness. We might say that it’s Art with capital A, the authority of the Museum.”⁷² But presentational devices as frames are also the tools of fiction. The main role of the frame is to indicate the separation between the fictional space of the painting and the one of reality.

**Fictions of the Origin**

Notions of origin, originality, truth, authenticity and authorship were never completely erased from the vocabulary of both thinkers and image-makers. Their almost infectious quality comes from their double status. On the one hand, they are considered constitutive for the identity of the work of art, and on the other, they are criticised as being fictions that incarnate the intrinsically political condition of the image. At different historical moments, artists, critics and audiences needed to affirm one or another figure of origin: as an invocation of myth, the sacred, or a transcendent invisibility in its religious version; or as art that is absolutely new, and begins from “ground zero,” a literal origin in its modernist version; or, finally, as the critique, or the affirmation of loss of originality in its post-modernist version. The motif of the origin, then, proves to be endowed with a particular power to survive even, or perhaps precisely because of, its negations. Still, the origin is a myth itself; a myth whose fundamental condition is plasticity, and which in order to be effective has to erase its status as a fiction.⁷³

The motif of the origin and the related notion of originality are related both to the technical condition of the image, and to the (self-) articulation of the figure of the

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artist. Rosalind Krauss, an art theorist and critic, argues that the “avant-garde can be seen as a function of the discourse of originality” where originality is understood as a “literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth” related to the myth and the desire of an “absolute self-creation” postulating the self of the artist as an origin as the only safe point uncontaminated by a tradition-laden past.\(^{74}\) This vocabulary of self-creation, self-reference and autonomy is constitutive of the self-identification of many artists belonging to the historical avant-gardes, and strongly presents their manifestoes. If there were a figure of a pure origin in painting, a starting point uncontaminated by references to other images, a ground-zero that the painter can use to create absolutely new images, that would be the grid. Paradoxically, the grid is an element that can only be repeated. Moreover, it is itself a repetition of the surface of the canvas, of its infrastructure. In this sense, it is far from being non-referential and immune to repetition. Furthermore the concepts of originality and copy are a mutually sustaining couple where the former is the privileged term and the latter the discredited.

This moment is strongly present in photography, traditionally associated with a “mechanical view of authorship.” It is far from producing authentic, or original images, as photographers usually re-edit, crop and manipulate photographs, which make them highly mediated, fictional entities.\(^{29}\) Photography is also a medium particularly suited to producing copies.\(^{26}\) This is a moment well understood and reflected in the practice of appropriation artists who did not “repress the concept of the copy,” a repression which, according to Krauss, is foundational for both avant-garde and modernism.\(^{77}\)

In Jan van Eyck’s and Dürer’s interpretations of the motif of the Holy Face there is a combination between religious definition of the origin (God as the first image-maker), and a demonstration of artistic skill. Arguably there is a structurally similar element in the modernist motif of originality – the artist as an absolute origin and a creator *de novo* who guarantees the “truth”, or the originality of the image. The old iconographers had to repeat the motif of the Holy Face, in a manner that in contempo-

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\(^{75}\) Ibid., p. 56 and 52.  \(^{26}\) As Sven Lutticken points out in his article on appropriation art, referring to Krauss’ “Notes on the Index”: “Placing an image or a text – or a fragment of one – in a new context can make the myth which it ‘hosts’ explicit. This kind of practice became common in visual art rather than in literature, once the avant-garde had made the simple ‘taking’ of a pre-existing object or image a valid artistic act. It can be argued that photography served as an important model for this: the camera facilitates the two-dimensional appropriation of objects, and in this respect Duchamp’s ready-mades can be seen as a radical manifestation of a culture informed by photography.” In: “The Feathers of the Eagle” *New Left Review*, 36:2005, p. 116.

\(^{77}\) Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” p. 64.
rary terms can be associated with a mechanical view of authorship, and to erase their agency as makers of the image.

The motif of the “true” image, or the image-origin, has a particular power to survive, which proves its structural importance. It is a fiction, an artistic invention. “Fictional” in this case signifies the status of this motif as a myth, and in a second sense relates to the fact that every “true” image is made by an artist. The metamorphosis of the motif of the origin proves that it is an inseparable part of the condition of the work of art, but precisely as a myth. And, paradoxically, the myth itself is very plastic or transformable in the sense that at different historical moments, but also from medium to medium, it takes different forms. This myth signifies a political moment inherently present in the situation of public display and appreciation of images. In Bruno Latour’s precise observation, this entails a paralysing double bind:

The second commandment is all the more terrifying since there is no way to obey it. The only thing you can do to pretend you observe it is to deny the work of your own hands, to repress the action ever present in the making, fabrication, construction, and production of images, to erase the writing at the same time you are writing it, to slap your hands at the same time they are manufacturing. And with no hand, what will you do? With no image, to what truth will you have access? With no instrument, what science will instruct you?78

This desire to “produce” images with divine origin is consistently present in different cultural contexts and practices. Images that are “true” or “objective” have to be supported in this claim by a story that they are not made, or the role of the human hand has been reduced to minimum.79

The capacity of photography to produce and to disseminate multiple copies, and its claim to produce true images, makes it particularly suited to transform common fictions into natural facts, what Roland Barthes calls myths – socially constructed ideas, narratives that are gradually taken for natural facts that support a particular ideology.80 Appropriation artists such as Sherrie Levine (1947) and Richard Prince (1949), or Cindy Sherman (1954) produced works that situate themselves explicitly in what Krauss call the “discourse of the copy”, and address critically the myth of originality. They used

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79 “Human hands cannot stop toiling, producing images, pictures, inscriptions of all sorts, to still generate, welcome, and collect objectivity, beauty, and divinities, exactly as in the – now forbidden – repressed, obliterated old days. How could one not become a fanatic since gods, truths, and sanctity have to be made and there is no longer any legitimate way of making them? My question throughout this exhibit is: how can you live with this double bind without becoming mad? Have we become mad? Is there a cure to this folly?” Bruno Latour, Ibid., p. 23.
photography as a medium whose technical condition is associated with both the claim that it produces images that are considered as true imprints of reality, and as having the exclusive capacity to produce copies. A central point in their practices was a critique and unmasking of the fiction of veracity of images. Photography, then, shares the technical condition of the acheiropoietic fantasy, and functions as the perfect medium of appropriating and recycling existing images, including religious motifs. But it is also the medium that, besides being used to support the myth of the true image, in fact undermines its absolute claim, precisely because of its capacity to produce copies. Contemporary artworks that recycle religious motifs address similar issues; they borrow existing images, and thus visibly situate themselves within the “discourse of the copy.”

Regimes of the Image

All images are the result of human making; they are fictions. The way the conditions of these fictions are negotiated, or the way the role of the maker is brought to visibility, or concealed, is a defining feature of the specific era or the regime of the image. The term regime is used by Jacques Rancière, a philosopher who have written on aesthetics, contemporary art and cinema, to distinguish between three regimes of the image. It corresponds to some extent to the one made by Belting. While Belting discusses exclusively the cult image and religious art, Rancière’s focus is on what he calls the aesthetic regime of art, which to a large extent overlaps with the period of modern and contemporary art. He proposes that with regard to what we call art, it is possible to distinguish three major regimes of identification: ethical, poetic and aesthetic, and

80 “And just as bourgeois ideology is defined by the abandonment of the name ‘bourgeois’, myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made. The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences. A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance. The function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence.” Roland Barthes, Mythologies, Trans. Jonathan Cape, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), p. 142.

81 Demonstrated by Benjamin in his famous essay The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, where he observes the waning of the aura of the cult image in the situation of its technical reproducibility.

that religious art is an instance of only one of them. In the first, ethical regime, the status of images is strictly determined by questions concerning their origin, truth-content, purpose and use. Central to this regime are the images of the divine and questions regarding the right to produce or ban them as well as the question of the status and signification of images. Religious images are part of a larger group of imitations, central to which is the way they affect “the ethos, the mode of being of individuals and communities”, and it is precisely this question that “prevents ‘art’ from individualizing itself as such.” Images are entities with strictly public significance, which are determined by an external criterion, one that prescribes the way they should be used.

Central to the second – poetic regime is the couple poiesis/mimesis, and a pragmatic principle, which isolates particular forms of art that produce specific entities called imitations. These imitations are free from the requirement to be true in the sense of the images within the previous regime. The central aspects of the poetic regime of the arts correspond to the era of art as defined by Belting. In this regime it is the substance of the image that represents activities of men and the image is considered a copy and “examined with regard to its model.” Imitations are assessed as good or bad according to a criterion partially internal to the image that determines what qualifies as a good imitation according to a principle of resemblance.

These two regimes correspond roughly to Belting’s distinction between the cult and the art image. The cult image and those produced and circulated within the ethical regime of art are subject to questions concerning their origin and truth. They are regulated by an external criterion and strictly determined by their use by a community. Belting’s category of the art image and Rancière’s poetic regime of art are similar to the extent that the image is already considered an imitation and evaluated according to a different set of rules, which determine what is good art or a good imitation.

Rancière distinguishes further the aesthetic regime of the image, in which art itself sets the criterion for identification. Central to this regime is the assertion of “the absolute singularity of art” and the elimination of “any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity.” Art images are freed from the obligation to be good imitations, or from any specific rule that prescribes a hierarchy, specific subject matter or genre. Central to that regime is that art produces its own criterion, and simultaneously questions it incessantly. The images produced in that regime are entirely artificial, made by an artist and exempt from the necessity to comply with external criteria that can guarantee their status of being true, or of being valid imitations. Images produced within the aesthetic regime are highly mediated and not characterised by presence or the power of truly religious images.

83 Ibid., p. 21. 84 Ibid., p. 22. 85 Ibid., p. 23.
Rancière argues that the aesthetic regime of arts is the true name of the problematic notion of modernity. While modernity implies a linear notion of historical time that separates and opposes the old and the new, the aesthetic regime of art allows for the coexistence of heterogeneous temporalities. As Rancière phrases: “The aesthetic regime is first of all a new regime for relating to the past.” It does not begin with a decision to break with the past regime, but with a desire to re-examine the conditions of artistic production in the past in order “to reinterpret what makes art or what art makes.” Artworks produced in the present reuse religious images or “restage the past” but not in order to create an irremediable rupture with it. They recycle past images to rethink the conditions of the regime in which they are produced and circulated. This can be described as a strategy of displacement; by placing a motif where it does not belong such artworks foreground and question the conditions of their display.

In Rancière’s view art produced in the aesthetic regime is inherently democratic and free to determine itself. In contrast, in his attempt to define several central features of contemporary art, Thierry De Duve observes that it is characterised by an inherent cult element. The art world is still ruled by social pacts that have the power to define what qualifies as Art (with a capital “A”), a social and not an aesthetic criterion still determines the status of images. Their respective positions could be reconciled if Belting’s definition of the era of the image before art is taken into account. The ethical and the aesthetic regime are intertwined to the extent that they co-determine each other. Within the ethical regime images are not considered art; crucial to their status are “the question of their origin (and consequently their truth content) and of their end or purpose.” The community that venerates the image invents their (divine) origin, but the hand of the maker, or the involvement of an author is concealed. The “truth” of the image is a matter of invention; it always involves a moment of fiction. In Belting’s view the cult image is defined by its divine origin and its public significance, while in the era of art, central points of identification are the aesthetic qualities of images and the artistic invention. While for Belting the era of art continues until the present day and corresponds roughly to the poetic regime, Rancière introduces another distinct stratum of artistic production, which he calls the aesthetic regime.

The autonomy of the aesthetic mode of the production of images, however, entails a paradox. Insofar as it annihilates any external criterion that determines the rules of production and appreciation of images, it does not allow contestation of these rules precisely because of their absence. The aesthetic regime thus borrows a mecha-

nism from the ethical one, but inverts it by claiming that it produces its own law and is no longer dependent on external criteria that determine the status of its images. Only then, on the basis of a law, is the aesthetic regime of art able to claim its freedom or autonomy. If Belting’s era of art is centred upon rules on which the artist and the audience must agree, in the aesthetic regime the artwork both sets and destroys those conditions. In Rancière’s model regime does not designate a period, in the sense of a developmental stage, but the rules of production and appreciation of images.

Religion as a Subject Matter

The Transforming relationships between religion and art, especially during the nineteenth century, can be understood adequately if considered social phenomena. Two important aspects of this process of change are related to the conditions and status of the public display of images. The first of them is the transformation of the early religious image with cult status, which had an important public role and power, into an art-image with the Renaissance articulation of art as the practice of artists. The second is related to the moment when religious images began to be displayed publicly as objects of art in museum collections.

Before the articulation of the concept of the artwork and the legitimation of the figure of the artist, the cult image was not considered art. With the era of art images changed their status and the old image lost “its aura as an ‘original’ in the religious sense – an image exercising power over believers by its actual presence,” it was considered “original” in the artistic sense, in that it authentically reflects the artist’s idea.”

The old image was incorporated into altars or surrounded by other images that provided context and commentary. Later, around the 1800s, museums began to be filled with works which otherwise hung inside churches. Existing images were embedded in a new context of display characterised by a different infrastructure and different rules of viewing and appreciation. By becoming part of the museum collection, images that previously had a religious function became art, and the question of the shifting roles of art and religion became central. As a museum visitor, the viewer of Raphael’s Sistine Madonna (acquired by the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden in 1754) was able to distinguish between its religious and aesthetic aspects, and to admire the artistic invention and skill involved in creating the painting without being distract-

ed by its Christian subject matter. Such a situation of appreciation of art for its own sake can be compared to the birth of a new religion centred upon the cult of the artist. Peter Bürger suggests that the “terminal point” of the formation of art as an autonomous institution in the Romantic period, is “…aestheticism, where art becomes the content of art” and ceased to have an illustrative relationship to religion.

In the nineteenth century, religious narratives remained appealing to artists, but were taken as narratives and not as a subject matter with religious meanings. During the course of the twentieth century, religious themes and motifs did not disappear from the work of artists. In fact, religious symbols, themes and iconography appeared in numerous works of art, which were produced in and for a secular context. If the object with religious or ritual significance announces itself proudly as the focal point of worship, the art object, in contrast, tends to hide that; it is very reluctantly that an object of art acknowledges that it has a cult aspect. Still, the modern work of art, secular due to its self-understanding, inherits some elements of what Hans Belting calls “the cult image” and Bürger “sacral art.” They are related to the status of the work of art as a public (and potentially political) object and to the conditions of its display. Next to the implicit presence of religious elements in art, the reference to religious imagery forms a continuous line that is present in the movements of the historical avant-garde as Expressionism or Surrealism and in the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s until the present day.

**Religious Motifs in Contemporary Art**

Certain aspects of the strategy of emancipation from past traditions through the re-use of older images appear relevant to understanding the recycling of religious motifs by present-day artists. The image divested from its previous meaning and power becomes a tool for testing the conditions of making and displaying images in the present moment. There is a presentational logic at work, which is quite different from the case

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91 Belting, *La vraie image* p. 61. 92 Bürger introduces the distinction between sacral art, courtly art and bourgeois art: “Although in different ways, both sacral and courtly art are integral to the life praxis of the recipient. As cult and representational objects, works of art are put to a specific use. This requirement no longer applies to the same extent to bourgeois art. In bourgeois art, the portrayal of bourgeois self-understanding occurs in a sphere that lies outside the praxis of life.” *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 2009) pp. 48-9.

of the art-image providing a pictorial context for the presentation of the older icon as described by Belting. Present-day art does not embed religious images to celebrate them, but in order to pose questions concerning central aspects of the rules that regulate the status of images as their public significance, the conditions of their production and authorship, and their connection to an origin or tradition, a context or an author that guarantees their value. In other words, it questions issues that are central to the infrastructure of the present-day regime of representation.

While in the context of the Reformation or the Counter-Reformation, old images were either subject to destruction or presentation through their embedding within an art image; when reused in present-day artworks, existing religious images function as critical tools. While the cult image concealed its maker in order to maintain its public significance, and the later art image celebrated the artist as a re-inventor of the old icon, contemporary artists cite religious images in order to reflect on the very procedures that produce the public significance and status of images. The strategy of citing religious motifs is not exactly a critique of cult practices, which are historically quite distant from the present moment. Instead, this strategy has a very contemporary agenda – to comment on art as a field of image-making, to reflect critically upon implicit hierarchies associated with particular definitions of authorship and to bring to visibility the procedures that invest images with the status of being true or original. In the era of the image before art, what mattered was the “thing”, the object of a cult practice, whose real maker was carefully concealed. It gradually transformed into an art-image, a fiction, visibly associated with a maker. Nowadays, when artists borrow religious images, they use them as “things” that have a public significance, but not as objects of a cult practice; on the contrary, they are popular, democratic “things” that belong to a sphere of common use.

The present day is characterised by an overproduction of images across various media. Artists, especially those whose practice involves reusing existing images, make us aware of how complex images as entities are. They address the long history of seeing that influences our contemporary ways of viewing and interpretation, and the way we attribute veracity to images according to specific concepts of authorship. For example, our understanding of documentary images and their veracity is supported by the idea of a mechanical view of authorship associated with photography, which minimises the role of the image-maker. However, this is a myth that is structurally similar to the myth of the “true image,” supported by the same view of authorship that does not involve the work of the hand of an artist. It is a central motif with regard to the articulation of the concept of what Rancière calls regime and Belting era of the image.

The continued life of religious images and their modification by contemporary artists has a double effect. The motif points to an existing tradition, thus establishing
continuity. Yet the very same motif is used a tool to claim discontinuity, a break with
the tradition, insofar as it is invested with a new meaning and is not used as a religious
image. Belting observes, following Aby Warburg, that “the use of pictorial motifs from
Antiquity that could not claim any religious significance during the Renaissance actu-
ally may have been a means of emancipation from the icon images.” Analogously,
the continued life of religious motifs is associated with the discontinuity in their use
and meaning.

A set of artistic practices inaugurated by the Duchampian ready-made, is fo-
cused on bringing to visibility rules that regulate issues such as authorship and modes
development. The practice of appropriation and re-circulation of visual motifs is used to
pose questions concerning the politics of images, in contrast to art that takes politics
as a subject matter. When religious motifs are borrowed and placed in a secular con-
text, they cease to signify religious ideas and instead acquire new meaning. They sig-
nify something borrowed; instead of being a visual translation of a religious narrative,
they represent other images or “represent representation.” Many artworks that recy-
cle religious images remain secular; for instance, Andy Warhol’s Twelve Crosses, 1981–
82 cannot be considered religious art, despite referring explicitly to a religious symbol
(Fig. 9). The work situates the cross in proximity to the mass-produced commodity
and questions oppositions between copy and original, pointing to the claim of the reli-
gious image as unique and at the same time at its mass-production, thus revealing the
proximity between religion (Catholicism) and capitalism. The religious motif functions
as a tool to address issues related to image making and circulation, authorship and
veracity, rather than issues related to spirituality. On another level, some contempo-
rary art practices, even in their most conceptual variety as that of Sol LeWitt in whose
words “Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists” contain a dose of mysti-
cism related to that fact that their significance is founded by belief.

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95 Ibid., p. 11. 96 Hal Foster makes a critical note concerning the applicability of these two models of representa-
tion to the pop-art of Warhol, and advances a third moment which he designates as traumatic realism: “Our two
basic models of representation … that images are attached to referents, to iconographic themes or real things in
the world, or, alternatively that all images can do is to represent other images, that all forms of representation (in-
cluding realism) are auto-referential modes.” Traumatic realism means the co-presence of both simulacral and ref-
97 As Hubert Damisch argues: “What is borrowed has a signifying function in itself, precisely as something bor-
rowed: it constitutes a sign in its role of representation, and an image, in its turn, insofar as it represents a
Figurative religious motifs are used largely as tools of criticism of institutions of art and religion precisely because as images that refer to other images, they are deprived of expressing religious meanings in a positive sense. In such cases, art no longer illustrates religious narrative; it is no longer “religious art” but by borrowing religious motifs it thematises religion. Religious images are used as critical tools to comment on the way the regime of representation and determination concerning the making and circulating of images are created and shared. In contrast, abstract art becomes a convenient medium for expression of a positive form of spirituality. The recycling of religious motifs in contemporary artworks cannot be understood solely as a symptom of a desire to reflect upon the role of religion in contemporary societies. The return of religious images in contemporary art poses questions related to the very practice of the making of images, their veracity and issues of authorship. These are questions that pertain to the very regime of visibility. Examining the role and the status of religious motifs interpreted in a secular context constitutes an entry point to consider the issue of religion with regard to the formation of identity of art as a field of practice, and the production and display of images.

98 “Religious conviction is taken to be a sign of intellectual weakness, and yet meaning in art is itself often a question of belief. Sol LeWitt wasn’t joking when he wrote, in his ‘Sentences on Conceptual Art’ (1967): ‘Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists.’ Art involves a conceptual investment in objects and images just as any religion invests significance in its icons and the ritual use of objects … Whilst the sectarian artistic differences that used to split friendships back in the days of high Modernism might have diffused, we still rely on artists, curators and critics to act as interpreters of contingent meaning, aesthetic creeds or art world ‘ethics’, just as rabbis, imams and priests do. People go to galleries on Sundays rather than churches. Appeals to the immaterial are buried deep within the everyday language of art too: words such as ‘spiritual’, ‘transcendent’, ‘meditative’, and ‘sublime’ frequently occur in exhibition reviews, press releases and gallery guides. Even if this fuzzy language is lazily unspecific, it’s not exactly speaking to the rationalist or atheist within us.” Fox, “Believe it or Not”, Frieze, 135:2010. 99 I use the term regime as formulated by Ranciere; it designates: “In broad terms, a regime of art is a mode of articulation between three things: ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and ways of conceptualizing both the former and the latter.” The Politics of Aesthetics, p. 20. 100 For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Chapter Three.
Fig 9 Andy Warhol, *Twelve Crosses*, 1981–82