Dis-continuities: The role of religious motifs in contemporary art
Alexandrova, A.A.

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Chapter 2

Images Between Religion and Art
Contemporary artists deal with or refer to religious themes and motifs in a multiplicity of ways. Their works do not usually function in religious contexts and cannot be described as “religious art.” Instead, they are about religion and its practices, concepts, ideas and images in the sense that they thematise its continued cultural relevance. A number of group and solo exhibitions offer evidence that curators are becoming increasingly interested in the controversial issue of religion and its role in the contemporary art scene. Yet, as Dan Fox observes in a special issue of the art journal *Frieze* on religion and spirituality, it is virtually impossible to find a piece of genuinely religious art shown in a contemporary art context.¹ Religious art is taboo, with the exception of artworks that are about religion, or when a piece of religious art is displayed in the safe frame of a context that provides a critical framework of reflection, and which uses religion as a theme instead of conveying a religious message in a positive sense. It is safe to show an interest in religion, but only when it, and its texture, gesture, images and practices are considered an object of research interest.

When religion appears as a theme in an artwork or exhibition, it entails the presence of a two-fold structure. There is an object that is critically examined, and a research frame or a critical context that examines or highlights different aspects of the object that is thematised. Each context or research frame, no matter how neutral it claims to be, has its own set of rules that determine how knowledge is produced, or how visibility is assigned to objects. The object embedded in the new infrastructure is taken out of its context, which inevitably gives it new visibility and changes its meaning. It would be too easy to assume that we learn only about the object or the image placed on display. On the contrary, by virtue of its contrast with the “host” structure, the object makes visible some of its previously less visible aspects. Placing “a bit of religion” on display in an art context can shed light on aspects of that very context, which usually remain in the background.

¹ This is articulated in the following way in the introduction of the issue: “When was the last time you saw an explicitly religious work of contemporary art? Odds are you can’t remember. If you can, it’s because it will have stood out like the Pope in a brothel. Religious art, when it’s not kept safely confined within gilt frames in the medieval departments of major museums, is taboo. Of course, if we’re talking art about religion, that’s totally kosher: video or photographic documentaries that wear the vestments of anthropology and the social sciences, for instance, or any number of recent pieces that turn their eye on fringe cults or Modernist dalliances with spiritualism.” “Believe it or Not”, Dan Fox, *Frieze*, 135: 2010.
Religious motifs are present in contemporary artworks in a variety of different ways, each producing different effects. In the past two decades, artists such as Bill Viola, Jan Fabre, Sam Taylor-Wood, Ron Mueck, Wim Delvoye, and Gilbert and George have embedded and reinterpreted religious iconography and symbols in a variety of ways. In most cases, their works do not convey positive spiritual meanings. The religious motif embedded in such contexts functions as litmus paper, revealing something about its new context. Such motifs raise questions including: Why are images from the past still relevant to us? Can a religious image be used in a non-religious way and what would be the effects of such use? How are images invested with the status of being true? In other words, such questions address central issues concerning the infrastructure of the regime of visibility within which they are circulated. Religious motifs are not an exclusive tool used to pose questions concerning the framework or a particular set of rules that regulate the visibility of the image. But they do seem to have a particular specificity compared to the reuse of past motifs, insofar as they are associated with religious images and demarcate the difference between regimes of production and the circulation of images. In this sense they are not entirely neutral citations of the past.

The effects of recycling religious motifs in contemporary artworks bear at least some similarity to the Renaissance practice of borrowing motifs from the Antiquity as a means of emancipation from religion, and as establishing the grounds for a definition of a new type of art-image. Arguably, when contemporary artists use religious motifs, they no longer have a religious function. This discontinuity in their function allows both pointing to a past tradition of use of images, and claiming their difference from it. If the definition of the art-image in the Renaissance was affirmation of the figure of the artist, the contemporary reference to religious motifs makes a symmetrically opposite claim. It is a contestation of notions of origin and authorship. If, in the religious case, the divine origin of the image is invented by a constellation of procedures of consecration and presentation of the image to the community, in the contemporary case, it is those presentational procedures that are critically addressed. The borrowed visual motif functions as a tool to examine the very frame of identification of the regime that prescribes the rules of making and appreciation of images, in the words of Rancière: “what art makes or what makes art.” 2 In the process of embed-

2 “The Aesthetic regime of the arts did not begin with decisions to initiate an artistic rupture. It began with decisions to reinterpret what makes art or what art makes: Vico discovering the ‘true Homer,’ that is to say not an inventor of fables and characters but a witness to the image-laden language and thought of ancient times; Hegel indicating the true subject matter of Dutch genre painting: not the stories and descriptions of interiors but a nation’s freedom displayed in reflections of light…” , Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, p. 25, emphasis mine.
conducting older into newer images, as described by Belting, the newer image is defined as a presentational context for the old icon. It could be argued that, analogously, when contemporary artists use past images, they address issues related to presentation. They do not create new representations, but use existing ones to embed them in a contemporary context.

Contemporary artists use religious motifs, but as counter-motifs. The concept of a counter-motif is partly informed by Aby Warburg’s research on the life of motifs from the Antiquity and images in the Renaissance culture. Warburg was interested in the polyvalence and plasticity of images and their “life”, or “force” or “impersonal power.” His concept of survival refers to the continuity, or afterlife, of images and motifs throughout different historical periods, and describes the metamorphosis of bodily gestures expressing strong emotions (pathos formulae). The concept of survival allows for an understanding of the complex positioning of images in time and emphasises the fact that they, apart from having specific meaning in a particular context, always have an aspect that resists univocal interpretation. Survival implies that images (art but also non-art images) always retain fragments from the past. In other words, images are always contaminated with an element that is not of their time, or by anachronisms.

Contemporary artists such as Berlinde De Bruyckere or Lawrence Malstaf borrow images and symbols with a long history and resist univocal reading, because they simultaneously present well-known motifs, their traditional association with certain meanings and their inversions. The counter-motif becomes a tool for breaking resemblance with the older image, and creates a dialogue between two different regimes of images – religious and aesthetic. The work acquires a polyphonic aspect, and the “im-

3 Didi-Huberman, “Artistic Survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time,” Common Knowledge, 2003: 9, p. 284. 4 As Didi-Huberman describes: “When Warburg rests his eyes on a pathetic Mary Magdelene by Niccolò dell’Arca, Donatello, or Bertoldo di Giovanni, it becomes clear that gestural "expression" …is the moment of a contretemps in which the unbridled desire of Antique maenads is repeated in Mary Magdelene’s body.” Didi-Huberman “Dialektik des Monstums: Aby Warburg and the symptom paradigm”, Art History, 2001 p. 624. 5 Art historian Georges Didi-Huberman addresses the issue of the complex positioning of images in time his Devant le temps (2000). He argues that visual objects are temporally impure or anachronistic by the virtue of a complex triangulation between the image, the artist and a gaze situated in a later moment of time (that of a historian). The artist is not only a figure of a certain moment in the past, but also works with time. For instance, Fra Angelico would be an artist of the historical past, but also an artist who manipulates memory, “an artist contra his time.” Thus, in images there are multiple strata of time that appear though what Didi-Huberman calls “displaced resemblances”, or resemblances between images belonging to distant historical moments. For instance between Fra Angelico’s multicolored patches on frescoes in the convent of San Marco in Florence and the drippings in a painting by Jackson Pollock, p. 20-1.
purity" of the image, the fact that it is contaminated with a reference to a past historical period, addresses and problematises the way the image is perceived – as a work of art, religious image, or relic.\footnote{In his study of the work of Warburg, Philippe-Alain Michaud points out that an important role played by anachronisms is that for Warburg motifs from Antiquity were borrowed by Renaissance painters as a "means to analyze the mechanism of representation and the way in which figures resurface, in a mixture of persistence and effacement in which the secret work of visibility unfolds." Philippe-Alain Michaud, Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion, Trans. Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books, 2004), p. 72, emphasis added.}

In Berlinde De Bruyckere’s Jelle Luipaard, 2004, the artist uses an image from the past as a tool to address the mechanism of representation. De Bruyckere’s use of hyperrealist rendering of the texture of and colour of the body, combined with the modified religious motif, addresses issues pertaining to the very infrastructure of the image, to its presentational aspect. Hyperrealism is a specific strategy of representation that claims to show exhaustively the truth of the object. This aspect is related to the motif of acheiropoietos, insofar as it is motivated by the desire to erase the trace of manual labour from the surface of the image. Yet, the embedding of an existing image in her sculpture, and its distortion make the opposite claim – the sculpture involves a great degree of artifice, and is aware of the past, of the history of Christian art.

**Incarnational Motifs**

Next to the distinction between different regimes or eras of the image, each characterised by a specific understanding of the role of the image and the way it is invested with religious or artistic truth, it is important to discuss a specific aspect of Christianity, that plays a crucial role with regard to the definition and circulation of religious images. The idea of the incarnation of God in a human form defines the body as the material and visible location of both relating to a divine otherness, and of humans to themselves through the mediation of that transcendent divine.

Next to the visual significance of the idea of the incarnation for the world of Christian art, its effects in contemporary visual culture are traceable on several levels. De Duve argues that it is related to the act of giving a visual and material expression to an invisible idea, and thus to the operation of presenting, placing something on display. On another level, it is still implicitly present in our contemporary concepts of medium and mediality and, in a broader sense, in cultural interpretations of the body. Women and their bodies have been traditionally interpreted as media, virgin canvas-
One work that echoes this layer of meaning is Lawrence Malstaf’s installation *Madonna*, 2000. It is a three-dimensional, and hollow semi-transparent Madonna lit from within, which slowly releases a stream of air as if it were exhaling. This contemporary image intervenes in the history of the representations of Mary and comments on the long tradition of reducing the female body to being a medium of the otherwise immaterial, invisible divine, within the economy of incarnation.

*Dead Dad*, 1996-7 (Fig. 10) by Ron Mueck (1958) is strongly reminiscent of *Dead Christ*, 1521 by Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543) (Fig. 11). The figure of a naked, dead man looks uncannily real, its skin rendered with the finest detail, with every hair or variation of colour. Only its size (20 x 38 x 102cm), significantly smaller than life-size, clearly conveys its artificiality. Mueck’s meticulous realism does not leave any trace of manual labour on the surface of the sculpture, and thus echoes the whole tradition of artists, including Dürer, who employed realism as a comment on the motif of the *acheiropoietic image.*

Evidently Mueck’s work cannot be seen as an interpretation of Christian iconography, or as conveying any religious kind of spirituality. Many of his other works are an emphatic portrayal of the very human vulnerability of anonymous contemporary characters – an old lady or a man in a boat, or a woman and her baby in the moments after giving birth. These sculptures, endowed with an uncanny bodily presence, have an element of “incarnational imagination.” On an iconic level, the citation of Holbein is not only a motif that is employed because of its visual power to convey death, but also the image itself functions as a frame in which the body of an anonymous contemporary man is “placed.” The “truth” of representation is undermined by the citation of Holbein’s painting, which clearly indicates to a spectator familiar with the work of this painter that this is an artificial image, made by an artist. In Mueck’s case, then, next to the meaning – confrontation with one’s own mortality, the corporeal logic, irreversibility and mourn-

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7 “Women have been condemned to being the medium and the vehicle of incarnation [...] They are virgins and mothers, bereft of their own flesh, or else they are fallen women. It is on the place of woman in the economy of incarnation that the status of images – and hence of art – has depended in Christianity.” De Duve, “Come on, humans, one more effort if you want to be post-Christians!” In: “Come on, humans, one more effort if you want to be post-Christians!” In: *Political Theologies* Ed by. Hent de Vries and Laurence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006). p. 663. 8 “…what Mueck creates is not a blank imitation but an invocation of reality summoned out of this minute perfectionism. Its distilled and concentrated essence fits in a very literal way Bernard Berenson’s definition of art as ‘life with a higher coefficient of reality.’ Though infinitely painstaking and laborious, his absolute technical mastery is such that that the technique disappears altogether, leaving us with the fact of the body itself. ‘His art conceals its art,’ as Ovid says of his Pygmalion.” Susanna Greeves, “Ron Mueck – A Redefinition of Realism” In *Ron Mueck*, Ed. Heiner Bastian (Hatje Cantz, 2005), p. 40.
Fig 10  Ron Mueck, *Dead Dad*, 1996-7

Fig 11  Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1521

Fig 12  Sam Taylor-Wood, *Sleep*, 2002
ing – another meaning emerges, one related to art, artifice and skill. The sculpture demonstrates the clash of realism that claims to mirror reality and artifice as conveyed by the iconic reference to Holbein that claims its opposite. The body in Mueck’s work is not a site of religious experience, but of human vulnerability and mortality.

A similar moment is present in Sam Taylor-Wood’s (1967) works. Both *Sleep*, 2002, and *Soliloquy* VII, 1999, demonstrate another aspect of presentational procedures associated with images (Figs. 12 and 13). The format and horizontal orientations of the positioned sleeping body refer to Holbein’s *Dead Christ*. In *Soliloquy* the dramatic perspectival foreshortening of the body of a sleeping man shown with his feet pointing towards the viewer at eye level restages the *Dead Christ*, 1480-90, by Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) (Fig. 14). These works use an older well-known painting as a source, but not in order to create a contemporary Christ figure. The older image becomes a *presentational device*, an extended frame that presents the object represented in Taylor-Wood’s photographs of a sleeping man. The paintings by Mantegna or Holbein, when embedded in a photograph, cease to function as figurative images that represent a dead body. In a similar fashion the image of an anonymous sleeping man becomes much more than what it shows. In such a situation what is important is how the image of the sleeping man is shown. Taylor-Wood sets in motion different strategies of *showing* to problematise the relationship between painting and photography. The artist uses the older image as a means to re-think the conditions of the medium in which she works. In this case, what is presented is precisely the image and its artifice, the very art of *making* images as opposed to “true” images that are made without the hand of a maker. The presence of another image (*The Dead Christ*) within the photograph “frames” the sleeping man, and thus indicates how highly mediated Taylor-Wood’s image is. Even though it visually shows the very tiny details such as the hairs and the freckled skin, such a high level of realism is a representational strategy that indicates to the viewer the artificial or staged nature of the photograph and, ultimately, that “truth” is, in fact, an invisible surplus of images, something they are invested with. These corporeal representations, especially in their hyperrealist version, can also be considered presentational devices, empty signs that signify the presence of the beholder, or more precisely that present her presence. Such images, however, differ from the image-imprint, which is a real material trace. Instead they offer hyper-visibility that undermines itself. The mimetic transparency is so intensified that it betrays the object it claims to represent. It becomes opaque; and mirrors the opacity of our presence as viewers.

9 The term “incarnational imagination” is central for Eleanor Heartney’s *Postmodern Heretics: the Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (New York: Midmarch Art Press, 2004). She discusses the way Catholic upbringing influenced the aesthetics of well-known and controversial artists from the 1980s (Warhol, Serrano, Witkin).
Fig. 13 Sam Taylor-Wood, *Soliloquy VII*, 1999

Fig. 14 Andrea Mantegna, *Dead Christ*, 1480-90
The recycling of religious motifs by contemporary artists is a distinctively visual practice. Insofar as the re-appropriations of religious motifs are largely critical, they do have a pronounced iconoclastic aspect. Yet, if iconoclasm is defined simply as image-destruction, as the getting rid of images, an important point would be overlooked. Iconoclasm is a practice that happens on the very surface of the image that generates more images, be those images of image-destruction. The recycling of religious motifs by contemporary artworks is a practice of criticism through using images, but that does not involve their material destruction. Contemporary artworks do not engage in iconoclastic gestures that can be qualified as religious iconoclasm. They do not re-enact the gesture of the “classical” iconoclasts who believe that it is “possible to dispose of intermediaries and to access truth, objectivity and sanctity.” The inherent paradox in this type of iconoclasm is that the iconoclast believes in the very fact that those who venerate their images naively believe in their power. Joseph-Leo Koerner argues that religious imagery “has iconoclasm built into it,” and in this sense is immune to iconoclasm. The Christian definition of the image it places at its centre is the figure of a dying God. This makes the image inherently self-iconoclastic because its central theme is the death or the “breaking” of God’s true image – Christ. This gives the Christian image the important quality of being immune to iconoclasm. For, how is it possible to break an image that is already broken? Jean-Luc Nancy, in a different context but along similar lines, has argued that the idea of the incarnation can be interpreted as marking the withdrawal of the divine through its coincidence with the human, and thus as a central self-deconstructive feature of Christianity.

A particular kind of image-breaker, the religious iconoclast, is in fact, driven by the belief that the image is everything for the party that celebrates it; he attacks not the artefact itself, but the deception he believes is attached to it. The fact that the
Fig. 15 Gert Jan Kocken, *Defacing*, 2006
iconoclast believes that others believe blindly in images make him simply “another person with ‘a strong commitment to representation,’ in this case, that of naïve belief itself.” When engaging with religious motifs, contemporary artists in fact engage with the image on a different and arguably more complex level. The modification and the displacement of religious motifs imply breaking the resemblance with the older, religious image. However, such a gesture can be made only when the source image is reproduced. Thus, it inherently involves the re-display of the religious images.

In Jelle Luipaard, 2004, De Bruyckere “frames” a representation of a mutilated, dead body with several references to religious images, most evidently a crucifix. With this she addresses image breaking as an image-producing practice, and self-iconoclasm already present in Christian images. For the project of Defacing, 2006, Gert Jan Kocken (1971) photographed religious images and objects destroyed during the Beeldenstorm in Northwestern Europe in the sixteenth century. (Fig. 15) Remains of these images and objects can still be found on site, but have rarely been documented. The embedding of these images reproduced in very highly quality prints and in approximate life-size, in the infrastructure of display in an art gallery, transforms them into works of art. If they claim to be artworks, and not documentary images, this is precisely a result of the act of presenting them again, re-presenting, portraying the result of an iconoclastic gesture. Kocken’s works involve two layers – the photograph and the very image that is photographed (for example a triptych in the Grote Kerk in Breda, defaced in 1566). Photography is not used as an entirely transparent and neutral medium of documentation; it is an integral part of the work. It functions as a tool of re-presentation, as another frame. In this sense, the relationship between the procedure of photographing and the image could be said to be structurally similar to the way contemporary artworks recycle religious images – they are deprived from their religious meaning, and embedded into art-images. Kocken comments on religious iconoclasm as a practice, and transforms it into a theme. His project demonstrates that iconoclasm is a visual practice that generates more images than it destroys.

15 Koerner, “Icon as Iconoclasm,” p. 183.
16 Defacing, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, Newsletter N 100, 2007.
The reuse of religious motifs by contemporary artists is a gesture that has many aspects, one of which retains its proximity specifically to the religious power of images – blasphemy. Creating a scandal is certainly a powerful way to attract attention, but that does not mean that the artwork that provokes it is genuinely critical. The critical potential of contemporary artworks that deal with religious themes lies somewhere apart from art’s rejection or mocking of religion. Scandal is also a tricky modality, both for those who produce it and those who condemn it, since it reproduces what it attacks and thus runs the risk of affirming its importance. No matter how the scandal is read and the scandalous issue interpreted by those who scandalise and those who are scandalised, its intention or gesture can easily be turned against itself.

Several interpretations of Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, 1987, appropriate it as religious art (Fig. 16). It can be seen as bringing back the shock of the crucifix to the eyes of those who, over the centuries, have become desensitised to it. For Serrano, *Piss Christ* was, in fact, a work laden with a spiritual element; it was part of a series of works that involved immersing religious objects in various fluids as part of an “ongoing exploration of the spiritual dimensions of base matter.” The photograph did have a critical message, not against religion, but against its misuse and commercialisation. Serrano’s strategy was to create a stark contrast between a beautiful image and a shocking title and, when seen without the text, the photograph could be interpreted as celebrating the subject it portrays. *Piss Christ* became extremely popular due...
to its perceived blasphemous gesture and, even in its broken form, continued its life. In 1996, it was used as an argument to cut funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in the United States after a scandal that involved NEA being accused of funding “anti-Christian bigotry” in 1989 and, in 2011, the artwork was attacked by a fundamentalist Christian group and damaged in the Yvon Lambert gallery in Avignon. The gallery director stated that he would open with the damaged work on show “so people can see what barbarians can do.” (Fig. 17)\(^\text{21}\)

Blasphemy is a practice in which belief plays a central role. The blasphemer believes that the other party believes in the images being attacked.\(^\text{22}\) Viewed from another perspective, blasphemy and criticism are intricately related in their historical development, as the former can be understood as a “discursive rupture” with a tradition. For example, the affirmation of Christ’s divinity was perceived as blasphemous by the religious establishment; nevertheless, it gave birth to a new religion.\(^\text{23}\) The gesture of the blasphemer might also indicate an intense interest in the idea or the image he or she is defaming. In this sense, the strategy of Serrano to use abject elements could result in neutralising its critical intention, and in affirming the necessity of symbolic order and normativity.\(^\text{24}\) This gives images considered as blasphemous an interesting quality of reversibility of their message. A more recent example, in a way structurally similar to \textit{Piss Christ}, is in \textit{The Ninth Hour}, 1999, by Maurizio Cattelan (1960), in which a realistic sculpture of Pope John Paul II is crushed by a meteorite (Fig. 18). Besides the possibility to find a religious meaning as a reference to the death of Christ, as suggested in its title, this work contains a similar shock element to \textit{Piss Christ}. It created great controversy in Poland where a museum director lost her job over the installation of the work in the National Art Gallery Zacheta in Warsaw in 2000. But where exactly resides the critical moment in the hyperrealist sculpture of the pope? Both Serrano and Cattelan seem to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Piss Christ}, 1989, by Andres Serrano.
  \item \textit{The Ninth Hour}, 1999, by Maurizio Cattelan.
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21 Angelique Chrisafis, “Attack on ‘blasphemous’ art work fires debate on role of religion in France” \textit{The Guardian}, 18 April, 2011. 22 See Joseph-Leo Koerner, “Icon as Iconoclash”, in \textit{Iconoclash}, p. 183. 23 Talal Asad refers to the thesis of the historian Alain Cabantous that blasphemy can be understood as a discursive rupture with existing tradition. Such violence, however, plays a founding role for the articulation of a new religious movement that succeeds, “Reflections on Blasphemy,” \textit{Religion Beyond a Concept}, p. 598. 24 Foster observes: “For the most part, however, abject art has tended in two other directions. As suggested, the first is to identify with the abject, to approach it somehow – to probe the wound of trauma, to touch the obscene object-gaze of the real. The second is to represent the condition of abjection in order to provoke its operation – to catch the abjection in the act, to make it reflexive, even repellent in its own right. Yet this mimesis may also reconfirm a given abjection. Just as the old transgressive surrealist once called out for the priestly police, so an abject artist (like Andres Serrano) may call out for an evangelical senator (like Jesse Helms), who is allowed, in effect to complete the work negatively.” \textit{The Return of the Real}, p. 157-8.
Fig. 16 Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*, 1987

Fig. 17 Damaged version, detail
attack the power of the church. The figure signifies a moment that is far from being religious or spiritual — the reduction of the religious authority, and spiritual figure to a dead body, a corpse, thus signifying the defeat of the Christian world. In a broader sense, this artwork is also a comment on the ambivalence of blasphemous images.

The return of religious motifs in contemporary artworks has significance on a level that is related specifically to art, beyond the offence of religious sensitivities. Thierry De Duve conceptualises the gradual transformation of the relationship between art and religion by employing the metaphor of vaccine strategy. In Édouard Manet's painting *Dead Christ and the Angels*, 1864, the religious motif is modified, thus inviting the viewer to look at the painting as an aesthetic object with its own life (Fig. 19). By modifying the scene, including the displacement of the spear wound on Christ’s chest, Manet “inoculated” the image with a small dose of doubt. He asked his audience to allow themselves to be touched aesthetically by the work precisely as an artefact, a work of art. The act of faith in the image, and its transformation from a religious into an aesthetic one, means that we have faith in things that we place on display as artworks: “Works of art, however are things; we deem them to be alive …we treat them with the respect due human beings.”

This implies that there is a continuation of a cult element within modern art, which does not overlap with the visual refer-

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25 “Without shame, the apostate Catholic refers to the death of Christ on the ninth hour, announced by his lamentation ‘Eloi!, Eloi!, lama sabachthani’ — My God! My God!, Why hast Thou forsaken Me’ (Mark 15:33-35). Along postmodern philosophical lines, the sculpture may also be read as a (painted) oxymoron, a trope that unifies contradictory concepts. A pope who is killed by a meteorite reduces the vicarious dei to a corruptible flesh and blood alone, to the bitter reality of present day life as an undeniable and mundane matter of fact….the complete defeat of the Christian world view could not have been expressed more strikingly in every sense of the word.” Catrien Santing, “Cynical Vanity of *Fons Vitae* Anatomical Relics in Premodern and Contemporary Art,” *Fluid Flesh: The Body, Religion and the Visual Arts*, Ed by Baert, Barbara (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), p. 90.

26 Bruno Latour comments “I proposed a test to Cattelan: to replace the Pope, whom everyone (but perhaps not the Poles) expects to see smashed to the ground, by someone whose destruction would trigger the intellectuals’ indignation: for instance to show Salman Rushdie shot to death by an Islamist bullet … Too horrifying, too scandalous, I was told (Obrist, personal communication). Ah ah! so the Pope can be struck but not someone really worthy of respect in the eyes of the critically minded! But when I proposed what appeared to be a true sacrilege and not a cheap one, what was I after? Another provocation directed at faithful critics instead of faithful Popists? Who is to tell? I can’t even be sure I understand the reactions of those who recoiled in horror at my suggestion.” “What is Iconoclash?”, note 31, p. 30. 27 “We might call this the vaccine strategy: being inoculated with an infective agent in order to develop the relevant anti-bodies and strengthen the immune system. Artists felt this need before medicine understood it as mechanism.” Thierry de Duve, *Look! 100 Years of Contemporary Art*, p. 14. 28 Ibid., p. 19.
Fig. 18 Maurizio Cattelan, *The Ninth Hour*, 1999

Fig. 19 Édouard Manet, *Dead Christ and the Angels*, 1864
ence to religious iconography. This element is related to the moment of presentation. Contemporary viewers, too, must have faith in the object, or image, placed on display. This complicates Belting’s distinction between cult and art image. Both Koerner and De Duve use the term ‘immunity’ when discussing religious, particularly Christian images, in relation to other images. While De Duve’s claim is that doubt immunises against loss of faith in art and the “leveling of aesthetic hierarchies,” Koerner’s claim is that Christian images are immune to iconoclasm, because they have an iconoclastic moment built into them. Christian images are immune to iconoclasm insofar as they already represent a self-iconoclastic moment – the death of Christ as a “broken image” of God.

The non-religious appropriation of religious images implies a significant change in their meaning, which resonates with the term ‘profanation’. It implies returning sacred things previously excluded from the sphere of human law to the common use of men. There is a difference between profanation and secularisation:

Both are political operations: the first [secularization] guarantees the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model; the second [profanation] deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized.  

Such a distinction captures an important moment. There is a difference between an implicit presence of religious meaning in a work of art as an outcome of transformation or secularisation of the religious concepts or practices, and its return for common use, or profanation. Profanation attacks precisely the power mechanisms at work in religion, the transcendence of God, which functions as “a paradigm of sovereign power.”

When contemporary artists use religious motifs, in many cases they have strong critical overtones. Stuff Religion and Christian England, 2008, by Gilbert and George include the Union Jack, crucifixes and the two artists themselves whose faces and figures are distorted in various ways. These elements are included in a collage to form fractal-like structures, which are placed in large-format grids reminiscent of the structure of stained glass windows (Figs. 20 and 21). The works use existing religious images and political symbol for critical ends. A central aspect of the power of the works can be attributed to the fact that they question both political and religious power by

29 “…just as the real act of faith only makes sense in a radically belief-free world. In the same way as his Dead Christ was, for Manet the vaccine for loss of faith in art, so, for Duchamp Fountain, a ready-made object that anybody could have ‘made,’ was the vaccine against the leveling of aesthetic hierarchies.” Ibid., p. 27.

30 “And if to ‘consecrate’ (sacrarre) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, ‘to profane’ meant conversely to return them to the free use of men.” Giorgio Agamben, Profanations, Trans. Jeff Fort, (New York: Zone Books, 2007), p. 77.
Fig. 20 Gilbert and George, *Christian England*, 2008

Fig. 21 Gilbert and George, *Stuff Religion*, 2008
returning its central symbols, re-inscribing them into the “sphere of common use” on two levels, by simply including them in the context of art, and by making them a prop supporting clownesque self-portraits of the two artists.

This mode of reusing religious motifs is different from the critique of commodity culture or capitalism as is present in Haim Steinbach’s (1944) Untitled (Malevich Teasets, Hallmark Ghosts), 1989, included in the exhibition The Return of Religion and Other Myths (Fig. 22). In the words of the curator, this work is commenting on “capitalism as a mystifying system” and on the work of art as a commodity, a line inherited from the monotheist critique of idols.31 Positioned in this way, this piece can be seen as a continuation of the monotheist critique of images, and not as a critique of religion. In contrast, when religious images are recycled by contemporary artists, they “vaccinate” the work against expressing religious meaning in the positive sense of the term. The “profaned” motif thus acquires a distinctly critical edge.

Displaying Art and Religion

A number of exhibitions that put the issue of religion in different perspectives were organised between 1999 and 2010. In most cases their curators claim that they are emphatically not religious, nor trying to send a religious message. The renewed interest in the relationship between religion and contemporary art cannot be read as a resurgence of religious fervour or need for spirituality, and only part of the reason could be found in the increased role of religion as a social and largely political issue.

Two exhibitions focus on iconoclasm, understood broadly as a practice of criticism of images, but also criticism through images. In their respective ways, they try to examine the influence of the religious definition of images and the legacy of monotheism in different aspects of the present-day secular condition. Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art, 2002, was shown in the ZKM, Karlsruhe, a centre for research of art and contemporary media and information technologies in southwest Germany. Iconoclash was co-curated by an interdisciplinary team including art historians Dario Gamboni and Joseph Koerner, historian of science Peter Galison, philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour, painter Adam Lowe and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. The central aim was to examine the status of images and their criticism in the domains of science and religion. The curators turned iconoclasm into a top-

Fig. 22 Haim Steinbach, Untitled (Malevich Tea Set, Hallmark Ghosts), 1989
ic and problematised image-breaking practices in different contexts. Central to the exhibition was the desire to expose to each other the respective iconoclasms within religion, science and art, in order to learn about the power of images through the similarities and contrasts in the practices of their making and contestation.

The curators put together a wide variety of artefacts from different fields: icons, religious paintings, scientific images and models, a large selection of twentieth-century art and a number of works commissioned for the occasion of the exhibition (among others, Daniel Buren, Lucas Cranach, Marcel Duchamp, Albrecht Dürer, Lucio Fontana, Francisco Goya, Martin Kippenberger, Gordon Matta-Clark and Nam June Paik). Central to many works in this selection were a variety of gestures of image criticism and destruction. The main questions asked of Iconoclash were: “What else is being destroyed when images are destroyed? What else is being made powerful when images are cherished? and What type of invisibility is produced by images?”

In addition to the selection of existing works, contemporary artists were invited to contribute to the reflection by producing works in a dialogue with those central questions and offering alternative readings of iconoclasm.

The exhibition The Return of Religion and Other Myths, 2008, curated by art theorist and critic Sven Lütticken, takes “the supposition of religion’s return as a ‘myth,’ a collective belief of sorts that is as fictitious as it is constitutive of the contemporary condition.” There is an ambiguity, perhaps intentionally, maintained in the title: Is religion a myth, or is its return a myth? By recognising the double status of the return of religion, the exhibition acknowledges the complexity of the issue, but also differentiates itself from any idea that religion has returned and is present in art in a positive form. Lütticken points out that: “If both the narrative of secularization and that of the return of religion can be characterized as myths, this does not mean that they are simply untrue.” The exhibition explored two parallel lines “From Idol to Artwork” and “Attacking the Spectacle.” The first line in the exhibition addressed one of the “contemporary myths about religion” that portrays monotheism and its rejection of idols as leading to intolerance and violence. It is argued that secular modernity is the outcome of a tendency within monotheism, and notions of critique, as they are articulated in the present day visual culture and can be seen as evolving from the monotheist rejection of idols. In contrast to the strategy of Iconoclash, which was to examine the need of im-

32 Bruno Latour, “What is Iconoclash?”, p. 21-2. 33 Sven Lütticken, “The Art of Iconoclasm,” The Return of Religion and Other Myths, exhibition catalogue (Utrecht: BAK, 2008), p. 15. 34 Ibid., p. 30. 35 “…modern culture is profoundly indebted to religion; it sets free the secularizing impulse inherent in monotheism itself. The rejection of idolatry can be seen as a criticism of images that, while still dogmatic, was radicalized in modern thought and art.” Ibid., p. 29.
ages and their critique by comparing religion to other fields, The Return of Religion argued for, and examined, the continuity between religious culture, use of the image and the secular condition. The modern concept of the artwork was taken to be the outcome of the transformation of religious culture. “The critique of cult images as idols stimulates their re-contextualization as art” when they enter the museum collection.\textsuperscript{36}

Central to Lütticken's argument is the claim that the work of art retains an element of a cult value, which could be found in the act of fetishising commodities. This implies the continuous presence of a religious element in contemporary art related to the monotheist criticism of idols. A large part of the works in the exhibition includes critical statements toward commodity culture. This criticism, performed through images, framed art practices as performing a gesture strongly resonant with the monotheist attack of fetishism. Lütticken’s central question was “is the modern artwork not just a barely secularized idol?”\textsuperscript{37} This suggests that there is a fetishistic, pagan, pre-monotheistic mechanism at work in art, and that art shares the critical predisposition towards images with monotheism in order to criticise its own product – the artwork. This self-critical moment is indeed central to a variety of contexts and moments in the twentieth century (from the ready-made as a critical object to institutional critique), as exemplified by a selection of works by Hans Haacke, Carl Andre and Haim Steinbach. Works as Rosemarie Trockel’s \textit{Ohne Titel (Doppelkreuz)}, 1993, according to the statement of the curator, point to the “mass production of devotional items and the proliferation of editions in contemporary art”,\textsuperscript{38} and are a critique of commodity culture and the commodification of religious objects.

The second line in the exhibition thematised critiques of the spectacle and examined the relationship between “the religious” and “the secular” in the context of global capitalism. The main claim was that there is continuity between them: “Modern theory and activism contain secularized traces of the Christian attack on Roman spectacles.”\textsuperscript{39} The majority of the artworks included a commentary on someone else’s image, which produces a double-layered structure consisting of the borrowed image and the strategy of construction of the artwork. The themes of spectacle and iconoclasm were understood as derivative from monotheism, and religious images and motifs were not central.

One question that could be posed to the central theme of the exhibition is: Was the purpose of the exhibition to trace religious, monotheist elements into a secular contemporary world by showing artworks that reflect upon religion? Or it was to trace the presence of the themes of fetishism and spectacle in the artworks themselves? In other words, were the artworks the critical tools or the objects of research? The

\textsuperscript{36 - 37} Ibid., p. 31. \textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 63. \textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 32.
works by Carl Andre, Arnoud Holleman, Hans Haacke, Carel Blotkamp and Gert Jan Kocken present a heterogeneous group in which the themes of monotheism, fetishism and spectacle are loosely present, and in some cases it is only the text that frames the work to direct its meaning to support the narrative of secularised critique with its monotheist background. Carel Blotkamp’s nBN (*Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue I*) and nBN (*Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III*), 2006, are reinterpretations of Barnett Newman’s *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?* made of small pieces of glitter on sheets of paper. In the words of the curator: “Offering profane illumination, their glued-on ‘pixels’ forming a matrix of dots suggest that Newman’s cherished sublime has become a digital reality.” 40 The majority of the works themselves were presented as the objects of research, whose open meaning can support the hypothesis of the implicit presence of monotheist traces in contemporary culture – from terrorism, to reading as a process of questioning, to a post-modern mode of citationality. The exhibition succeeded only partially in bringing to visibility the monotheist or religious elements it claimed to focus on. The distinction between the image, the infrastructure and operations of display was, however, very productive, raising further questions.

*Medium Religion* in 2008, curated by philosopher Boris Groys and artist and theorist Peter Weibel, took place at the Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. Its central line explored a set of questions around religion as belonging to the public sphere of visual communication. The increased presence and visibility of different religions, the curators argued, is a result of its vast and rapid circulation in contemporary media. The central theme was the media, in particular the Internet and electronic media, and their intrinsic property of being cohesive to religion’s need to spread its message. *Medium Religion*, in the words of its curators “aims at demonstrating the medial aspect of religion based on current examples of religious propaganda and individual works by contemporary artists.” 41 The exhibition consisted of two lines unfolding in parallel: documentary material (religious TV programs, speeches of religiously inspired terrorists and propaganda material) and a selection of artworks by artists from the same contexts as the selection of documentary fragments. This strategy simultaneously provided a view on the present role of religion in various public spaces (mainly electronic mass media) and the way artists deal with this issue by providing critical commentary on religious images, texts and practices. Significantly, the curators’ selection reflected the claim that artists use symbolic language and images belonging to the religious contexts they chose to comment on: “They place religious symbolism in an unconventional context in order to provoke a different mode of perception. This enables a critical analysis of the respective religious iconography as well as its transfer to a cul-

40 Ibid., p. 39.
tural modernity." Such a choice implies that art is understood as a context that provides a critical commentary on the role of religion in the public sphere, but is itself a neutral, non-religious space.

Medium Religion was aimed at making visible the proximity between religious practice and media. Groys considered the repeatability of religious rituals as the foundation of medial reproduction. His argument followed a somewhat circular structure – the media is the result of the transformation of religious ritual, its secularized version, which returns in a new guise and flourishes in the media environment that quickly and effectively mediates it to a wide audience. While the documentary videos give an idea of how religion uses contemporary media (messages by Osama Bin Laden and Gospel Aerobics with Paul Eugene), the contemporary artworks (many of them produced for the occasion of the exhibition) take religious images, symbols and practices to recycle them critically. Paul Chan’s 1st Light, 2005, is a computer animation projected on the floor as shadow silhouettes of objects and bodies that fall to the ground and float upward to the sky. This imagery refers to the ascension to heaven but also to images of terror, utopia and apocalypse.

Wim Delvoye’s Tim, 2006-8 is an image of the Virgin Mary with scull floating above her. It is a drawing designed by Delvoye and tattooed on the back of Tim Steiner. The work is for sale and the buyer has the right to display the piece publicly and acquire the piece after Steiner’s death. It is an ironic comment on the inseparability between image and medium, and artwork and commodity. The Slovenian group IRWIN presented an installation titled Corpse of Art, 2003-2004, which recreates the scene of Malevich laying in his coffin designed by his student Nikolai Suetin in the Suprematist style. The famous Black Square hangs above the coffin. The work is a comment on the death of the Suprematist utopia, and the painter who invented his own artistic theology in the context of revolutionary Russia.


43 "In fact, however, the modern age has not been the age in which the sacred has been abolished but rather the age of its dissemination in profane space, its democratization, its globalization. Ritual, repetition, and reproduction were hitherto matters of religion; they were practiced in isolated, sacred places. In the modern age ritual, repetition, and reproduction have become the fate of the entire world, of the entire culture. Everything reproduces itself – capital, commodities, technology, and art. Ultimately, even progress is reproductive; it consists in a constantly repeated destruction of everything that cannot be reproduced quickly and effectively. Under such conditions it should come as no surprise that religion – in all its various manifestations – has become increasingly successful. Religion operates through media channels that are, from the outset, products of the extension and secularization of traditional religious practices." Boris Groys, “Religion in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” program text, Medium Religion, http://www02.zkm.de/mediumreligion.
God & Goods: Spirituality and Mass Confusion, Villa Manin Udine, 2008, was curated by Francesco Bonami and Sarah Canarutto. The exhibition addressed the relationship between religion and consumerism, as reflected in the work of contemporary artists. Spirituality in art, a “search for an alternative dimension” and the word “confusion” in the title were intended to recall “doubt in all its meanings.” In this case, similarly to Medium Religion, art was defined as a medium providing the space for critical reflection on religion. The curators selected works that “more or less directly deal with the idea of God, of spirituality or of faith in its multiple interpretations.”

A selection of pieces by well-known artists exemplified a variety of ways in which religious imagery can be present in their work. Maurizio Cattelan’s Frau C, 2007, shows a realistic sculpture of a woman floating high above the trees. The work is a reference to Pier Paolo Pasolini’s character in Teorema, 1968, and a statement about faith and miracles. Sarah Lucas’ Christ You Know it Ain’t Easy, 2003, is a crucifix made of cigarettes and is a comment on her personal suffering trying to quit smoking. She uses the iconic power of the religious symbol to comment on dependency and self-destruction. Thomas Struth’s photograph Duomo di Milano, interno, 1998, does not borrow a religious motif; it is a representation of the interior space of Milan Cathedral populated by a crowd of believers and tourists. The photograph is a reflection on viewing and participation in the ritual as collective behaviours. Darren Almond’s Fullmoon, 2007, is a series of photographs of moonlit landscapes with fog and clouds reminiscent of Friedrich’s landscapes celebrating nature and the divine creation. Artur Zmijewski’s Them, 2007, video stills from a project on which he worked with four groups of Polish people with radically different political and religious views (Catholics, left-wing students, nationalists and Israeli sympathizers) explores, in a very different vein, the clashes between religious fervour and both left and right wing ideas in present-day Poland.

God & Goods focused on consumerism, globalisation and the rise of religious fundamentalisms. Commodity was not conceptualised as a secularised idol as in the Medium Religion or The Return of Religion, but spirituality and religion were understood as opposed to consumerism. The broad theme of the exhibition resulted in the grouping together of a variety of artworks without going into detail regarding their respective approaches to religion.

The Next Generation: Contemporary Expressions of Faith, New York, 2005, shown at the Museum of Biblical Art, assembled works by artists who deal with notions

of faith in their work.\textsuperscript{45} In contrast to the aforementioned exhibitions, \textit{The Next Generation} claimed to include works of contemporary religious art. In her foreword the museum director stated that the category of contemporary religious art is highly problematic, and art no longer serves a religious ritual. Yet, artists continue to express their faith by interpreting “the meanings and symbols in the Bible in powerful ways (albeit in admittedly small numbers).”\textsuperscript{46} The exhibition shows the works of 44 artists “actively investigating Judeo-Christian themes within the terms of contemporary art.”\textsuperscript{47} The curators’ research purpose was to find out what contemporary Judeo-Christian art is, and who makes it. The curator acknowledges that the term “contemporary Christian art” is incredibly broad and difficult to define, as it cannot be reduced simply to art that has a Christian subject matter. Ultimately, contemporary religious art might mean simply “art made by Christians.” The exhibition included artists who were indeed Christian, the majority of them members of CIVA (Christians in the Visual Arts). This strategy of selection and set up demonstrated that extra-visual issues to a very large extent determine “religious” meanings in an artwork. The stated personal faith of the artist, and the institutional context in which the exhibition was organised, were the main factors that framed the works as contemporary religious art. Only to a much lesser extent was the positive expression of religiosity a result of the religious subject matter in the artworks. This exhibition visualises an important aspect of the relationship between religion, contemporary visual culture and art. Artworks that recycle religious symbols and motifs, even when intended to express a religious idea in a positive manner, are largely perceived as blasphemous by the religious establishment (as in the case of Serrano’s \textit{Piss Christ} as discussed above). And when artists do borrow religious imagery, they usually have a critical comment to make. In \textit{The Next Generation}, many artists chose to represent every-day scenes as expressing a moment of faith, while another group resorted to using the abstract language of symbols that evidently prevents their work having offensive overtones. The curatorial intention was not to thematise religion as a topic to be researched or questioned; thus art was not considered a field, which would allow critical distance with regard to the subject. Instead, art was taken to be a possible medium of expression of religious faith belonging to a particular tradition.

\textit{Soul. Inspired Art}, 2005, was shown in the Seminary in Bruges. Its curator, Willy Van den Bussche, used the site of the monastery as “a reminder of a spiritual life.” The exhibition assembled works of art by a variety of artists that do not necessarily address or thematise religion.\textsuperscript{48} The human figure was central to all the works: “The body

as a metaphor, a house, an icon, an ex voto, a relic, a place where spirit resides; it is examined in all these aspects.”49 And the central question was how notions of transcendence are present in the work of contemporary artists. Themes pertaining to spiritual or immaterial worlds were addressed through the body. The duality between the soul and the body, material and spiritual, was a central motif in the exhibition. Importantly the curator decided not to include works that referred to religious symbols, as the danger was that audiences would associate them too easily with religious art.

Instead the curator’s intention was to maintain the distinction between religion and art as fields of practice. While the former is regulated by doctrine, the latter is not bound by rules that should be followed. Such a statement indicates the desire to consider art as a practice with a spiritual aspect, but precisely as an autonomous field independent from religion. The choice to remove very obvious religious symbols in fact did not allow the artworks to be seen as problematic or offensive, thus making it easy for audiences to project spiritual meanings or to read them as resonating with Christian iconography.50 Berlindé de Bruyckere’s Inge, 2001, a sculpture of a female figure in an embryonic position with very long hair, is a motif typical of her work, and relates, though openly, to Mary Magdalene. Thierry De Cordier’s The Great Nada, 2002, is a black monochrome canvas on which a cross-like shape is barely visible. The painting appears as an erased crucifixion. Jan Fabre’s Umbraculum, 2001, is a hollow sculpture made of thinly sliced bones, of which the figure resembles a monk. Antony Gormley’s Capacitor, 2001, is a sculpture of a human figure with metal rods protruding from it in every direction. The sculpture resembles a body emitting rays of light. Marie-Jo Lafontaine’s video installation Les larmes d’acier, 1987 consists of 27 screens showing a male body builder lifting weights in which the figure appears Christ-like, a sacrifice at the altar of physical beauty.

Two other exhibitions are centred around the key word “god”: Seeing God at the Museum of Fine Art, Canton Thurgau, 2005, and 100 Artists See God shown in various locations in the United States, 2004. Both present contemporary non-religious art that deals with religious themes.51 In contrast to the spiritualising approach of Soul, Seeing God included recent art that referred to or thematised religion in a reflective or critical way. It was shown in a former Carthusian monastery. The curators invited artists to submit or produce works that responded to the question “What springs to mind

49 Ibid., p. 10. 50 “Soul is not an exhibition of religious art but a temporary dialogue between art and a religious environment.” Ibid., p. 20. 51 It is difficult to claim that all of the artworks included were not religious because of the openness of the concept of religiosity when it comes to contemporary art. In Seeing God there are works that do claim to send a religious message, and how successful they are as art is another issue. Khudiakov’s Deisis is a hyper-real interpretation of the Orthodox icon in digital photography.
when you think of a higher authority?” and invited them to “share their associations with the divine.”52 The exhibition was conceived as a broad platform for various approaches and visions to the issue of the divine, and was intended as an invitation to the audience to consider and question their own ideas of faith. The curators claimed to assemble works that are not religious, thus using the location as a point of resonance or encounter to further problematise the relationship between art and ideas of transcendence or divinity. In contrast to Soul, however, they recognised that “Contemporary art therefore often alludes to religious iconography without conveying explicitly religious content.”53 The outcome was then not precisely a critical reflection on the status of religious motifs in contemporary art, but a panorama of personal artistic visions of the divine, ranging from highly critical to pious or spiritual. Louise Bourgeois responded with The Cross, 2002, which consisted of a vertical beam crossed by a horizontal one consisting of two hands pointing in different directions, with one thumb up, one down. Adel Abdessemed’s work, God is Design, 2005, is an animation film based on numerous drawings including the symbols of the three monotheistic traditions merged together to form a “symbolic quest for divinity.”54 The duo Usine de Boutons’ work Plug’n’Pray, 2002, is a fictional label that offers software kits for “quick and easy religious conversion – to the Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim or Christian faiths” as a critical comment on the commercialisation of religion.

100 Artists See God was curated by artists Meg Cranston and John Baldessari in 2004 at the Jewish Museum in San Francisco, and at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London. They wanted to problematise the relationship between contemporary visual art and religion, a line of inquiry that they considered rarely addressed.55 Cranston and Baldessari were interested in two questions: how contemporary art critically rethinks the role of religion in society and how art deals with its own history, largely dominated by religious imagery. The curators invited artists to create a work, or submit an existing one, which deals with the notion of God. Cranston and Baldessari viewed contemporary artists as “uncharacteristically silent” on present day issues related to the way religion and notions of God influence contemporary world events.56 The central concept was left entirely open and unbound to a particular religious or cultural context.

The curators had one important starting point: they were not interested in the

artists’ personal beliefs, but how they would render God in images, thus creating a show about representation and not necessarily belief:

We assumed that when we said “artists see God”, what we meant was “artists represent God” – that how they see is how they represent. It went without saying that the show would be about representation and not necessarily about belief. ... We guessed that the majority of the works would be by artists creating an image of how they thought other people might see God.57

The works included in the exhibition expressed artists’ personal interpretations of spirituality, notions of God or religion. The various art objects (installations, video work, painting, photography) formed a heterogeneous group that was loosely divided thematically into 16 sub-groups with titles such as: Artists See God as Architect, Artists See the Annunciation of God, Artists See God Everywhere, Artists See God as Ineffable, Artists See God as Light and so on. In the exhibition catalogue each of these groups is introduced by a short text written by the curators. In addition, the artists were given the opportunity to introduce their own work, which some did by writing a short text, whereas others left their images to speak for themselves.

Many of the responses were quite humorous. Rob Pruitt and Jonathan Horowitz present God’s grave in their installation Study for Cemetery at Peacock Hill, 2003; Michael Craig-Martin appropriates Duchamp’s Fountain and presented a urinoir in pink under the title Untitled (God), 2002, Paul McCarthy’s Untitled, 1998, shows two men “Looking under every bush”, perhaps to find God. In some instances the artists employed images associated with religious motifs as the shafts of light in Ed Ruscha’s Miracle #67, 1975, or Martin Kippenberger’s Fred the Frog Rings the Bell, 1990. The artists’ responses included in the exhibition are critical comments on the ways in which art invented God as an image, and present-day responses to the history of that invention. The variety of works indicates that God and religion left the work of contemporary artists a long time ago. And, still, at the same time, they seem to have retained a ghostly presence, but as a subject matter among many other possible ones, deposed from their traditionally high place.

Heaven: An Exhibition That Will Break Your Heart, at the Tate Liverpool, 2000, approached the theme of religion from quite a different angle. The exhibition was an inquiry into the figures of “heaven” in popular culture images and contemporary high art. The central line of argument of the curator Doreet LeVitte Harten was that con-

temporary consumerist society inadvertently produces religious places and experiences: tourist resorts are paradise, stadiums are “places of worship,” shopping offers ecstatic experiences, advertisements communicate the numinous and we worship pop icons. In the context of contemporary popular culture religion becomes “an artistic project” and Heaven sought to explore how art comments on these quasi-religious phenomena. The artworks dealt with themes such as impossible beauty, the glamour of angelic and androgynous creatures, pop idols, the sublime, the absolute and many versions of the divine in popular culture. Religion and art were taken to be similar to the extent that they produce popular figures, which are circulated widely and have an enormous capacity to survive over time. The artworks shown either “use recognizable icons and words” or “bring the sublime, in all its transformations, to the surface.”

Some of the artists in the exhibition used contemporary icons as fashion models and popstars to visualise their proximity to religious saintly figures. Olga Tobreluts’ Kate Moss from the series Sacred Figures, 1999, features the fashion model’s face mounted onto Antonello da Messina’s Virgin Annunciate in Palermo, 1476. Jeffrey Vallance Elvis Sweatclothe I, II and III are three satin scarves that Elvis gave to fans during concerts, allegedly with some of his sweat. This work is a comment on the status of the iconic popstar and the relic, and especially such a central one as the Veil of Veronica. Ed Rucha’s Eternal Amnesia, 1982, a four-metre-long painting, presenting an abstract panoramic view that looks like a sunset, invokes the motif of the sublime as a grand scene of nature. The two words “eternal amnesia” inscribed in the centre of the painting provide the ironic counter-point to the grand scene. Yinka Shonibare Alien Ob sessives, Mum, Dad and the Kids, 1998 and Ron Mueck Big Baby 2 and 3 take the figure of the alien or the child as promising “redemptive possibilities.” The exhibition argued that there is a specific sacred moment in contemporary popular culture related to the cult of beauty and glamour. This non-religious sacred is to be found in commodity culture and not in religion.

The nine exhibitions described address religion and spirituality from a broad variety of angles. The central themes, varying from iconoclasm, contemporary media, contemporary religious art, popular culture, notions of God and capitalism are evidence that the very broad and somewhat elusive topic of religion remains significant for both artists and curators. As Heavy as the Heavens was curated by Johannes Rauchenberger, Eleonora Louis, Alois in 2003 and shown at the Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz in Austria. In contrast to the other exhibitions, it focused not on religion as a theme, but on religious art and explored how the theme of gravity is mediated

in images of religious and contemporary art. In this case the central concern of the curators was with the pictorial motif associated with an abstract, but not overtly religious theme. Religious, specifically Christian art was explored as rich in pictorial interpretations of gravity. In Christian painting the material weight of the body is usually contrasted with the weightlessness and the lightness of the divine or heavenly. Instead of choosing abstract notions of “God” or “faith” and their reinterpretation by contemporary artists, Gravity focused first on the existing figurations of gravity, that is, not on the invisible but on the image.

As Heavy as the Heavens explored baroque art and its focus on lightness, gravity and the corporeal, but also painting from the Romantic period, and the early Renaissance and artworks from different periods of the twentieth century that explore themes of gravity, flying and floating. Christian art is rich in motifs of flying, floating as associated with resurrection and victory, and falling associated with sin, which set duality between heavy and light, physical and spiritual. Within the space of representation the depiction of levitating bodies that break the physical laws of gravity, implies that the image is set free from compositional principles that depict the world. This compositional logic of pictorial space can be traced in its abstracted form in contemporary art. Abstract painting in its respective way also provides figures floating or falling, of weight, balance and rotation, of forces that balance each other. This can be seen as a sort of a secular interpretation of religious iconography, which demonstrates artistic but not religious or spiritual continuity. Many of the contemporary works in a quite ironic mode focused on the impossibility of bodies to float and fly spontaneously, or on the fall and the weight of the body.

The works were grouped according to the themes of levitation, balance, rotation and heaviness. The heaviness of the dead body of Christ, relaxed in curved position at the feet of Mary, is the central compositional line in Pietà by an anonymous seventeenth century sculptor, while the same material heaviness is at work in Robert Morris’ Untitled, 1967, in which the same curved shape is produced by the weight of the heavy fabric the sculpture is made of. Gravity is associated with pictorial motifs of falling as in Hendrik Goltzius’ Phaeton, 1588, and its contemporary counter-point Yves Klein’s photomontage Leap into the Void, 1960. Levitation is associated with the motif of Christ’s transfiguration. This motif allows for a composition that creates a pictorial space, which does not conform to the physical laws of gravity. The Resurrection by Domenico Cresti, 1600, shares the motif of walking on clouds with Sky Boots Geoffrey Hendricks, 1980. The theme of balance is expressed in the contrast between Christ

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60 Himmelschwer. Transformationen der Schwerkraft, Reinhard Hoeps, Alois Kölbl, Eleonora Louis (Verlag Wilhelm Fink, 2003).
walking on water and Peter sinking in *St Peter at Sea* by Philipp Otto Runge, 1806-07. Balance is central to a number of sculptural works such as Richard Serra’s *Spine*, 1988, and constructivist works that emphasise dynamism through constructions based on complex balance as in Alexander Rodchenko’s *Spatial Construction*, 1920.

*As Heavy as the Heavens* did not claim to trace religious iconography in contemporary art; neither did it seek to trace how artists express spiritual issues through their art. Moreover, it did not invest existing artworks with spiritual meanings. Instead, this exhibition suggested a visual continuity between religious motifs and their pictorial interpretation, and contemporary art that does not cite or recycle religious images, or is not in any way concerned with religion as an issue. In contrast to all the cases discussed thus far, *Gravity* viewed religious art through the lens of contemporary art and thus offered an aesthetic, and not religious, reading of masterpieces of Christian painting. Conversely, the other exhibitions examined or traced the role of monotheism in contemporary art.

One large exhibition that focused on spirituality as a central issue was *Holy Inspiration: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Art*, shown in De Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam, 2008. Its curator, art historian Marti Bax, a specialist on esotericism and art, presented a selection of diverse artistic interpretations of the issues of religion, spirituality and belief from the collection of the Stedelijk Museum. Her main point of departure was that the process of secularisation produced a variety of forms in the way “religion expressed itself through imagery,” which she traced in works belonging to the collection and grouped according to several criteria. Works of Catholic artists such as James Ensor and Jan Toorop included Christian iconography of “crosses, Christ figures, church interiors, clergymen performing rituals, people in prayer prophets and *pietàs*.” Works that use religious iconography to comment critically on consumerist society formed another group. According to Bax, such artists aspired to spirituality, which they saw as waning in contemporary focuses on consumerism and material luxury. The artists in this group such as Mike Kelley, Gilbert and George, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Bill Viola were described by Bax as “conditioned by a (post-)secular attitude.” They created a surprising combination of vastly different works, some of which in fact had a very strong spiritual claim (such as Viola) while others had harshly critical, if not blasphemous, overtones (such as Gilbert and George and Damien Hirst).

The next group of works employs “Jewish iconography” by artists such as Marc Chagall, Chaim Soutine, Jacques Lipchitz, Kasimir Malevich, Piet Mondriaan and Vasily Kandinsky. Another cluster of works was formed by the later Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer and Yves Klein, who found influence in western esotericism and includes works by artists inspired by alchemy, theosophy and spiritualism. Another group constituted Nam June Paik, Marina Abramovic and Rob Birza with their “meditative” art that
usually expresses a personal and mystical experience of the world” and for whom Zen Buddhism was a source of inspiration.\textsuperscript{64} This exhibition presented a panorama of the different ways religion is present in art: from religious art and criticism of organised religion, to spiritually inspired art. A somewhat peculiar choice, which corresponds to the cataloguing approach of the exhibition, was to transform the interior of the church into a white cube, an insertion of a “secular space” of the gallery.

*Traces of the Sacred* was a major exhibition curated by Jean de Loisy and Angéla Lampe in 2008 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. The curators aimed to present an overview of the relationship between art and the sacred in the context of twentieth-century art.\textsuperscript{65} The exhibition included a huge selection of works by 200 artists, distributed into thematic sections that focused loosely on periods and artistic groups (among others *Traces of the Fugitive Gods, Eschatology, Sacred Dances, Offences, The Doors of Perception, The Shadow of God*). The starting point, as the curators articulated, was not religion, or its practices or traditions, or religious art as such, but the big questions that religion always claimed to answer: “What are we, where do we come from, and where are we going?”

This broad theme implied that within the exhibition art was taken as a spiritual practice, and its relationship to the sacred was traced by the way artists address philosophical issues central to different periods in the twentieth century: the traumatic history of two wars and theme of the death of God as the end of morality; the modernist desire for utopias and constructing the new man; and the increased influence of esoteric ideas and the failure of those utopian visions with the historical raise of totalitarianism. The tragic condition of man as expressed in works by Francis Bacon and Antonin Artaud formed a thematic line, contrasted by the work of Matisse and Le Corbusier who created churches or art for church interiors, and tried to convey a spiritual message still within the institution of religion. The Beat generation’s quest to liberate the creativity of the individual through art formed another group. Finally, the contemporary mode of irony or melancholy was expressed in the works of Maurizio Cattelan and Pierre Huyghe who define art as a medium of metaphysical concerns.

While *The Return of Religion* and *Gods & Goods* claimed that there is an implicit connection between organised religion and contemporary consumerism, the claim of *Traces of the Sacred* was that personal artistic spirituality, and not religion, provides the counterpoint to consumerist society. The focus of the exhibition was not on artists’ critical stance towards religion (although it was present in many of the works), but the


emphasis on the spiritual aspects of their work, the transformations of the sacred. Art, in the curators’ view, inherits from religion a spiritual mission to resist social, media and commercial influences.

The thematic group *Traces of the Fugitive Gods* focused on the idea that God is dead, and the fact that art inherits the task of being in a dialogue with a transcendent, invisible world. Caspar David Friedrich expressed the presence of God in nature, and represented the death of God with the motif of the ruin.66 Next to Friedrich’s *Ruins at Dusk*, 1931, this group included Edward Munch’s portrait of Friedrich Nietzsche *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 1906, Bruce Nauman’s *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths*, 1968, and Damien Hirst’s *Forgive me Father for I Have Sinned*, 2006, a triptych consisting of three large tableaus, the surface of which is covered with dead flies. The religious format borrowed by Hirst, the black monochrome surface, is an ironic comment on the traditional association between abstract painting and the expression of spiritual ideas. Yet, in *Traces of the Sacred* it was presented as expressing the idea that God is dead without a possibility of resurrection, and conveying the idea of the mortality of the body. It is true that Hirst’s art is marked by these themes, but a much more prominent line in his art is the comment on the commercialism, and (in many cases cynical) comment on the status of art as a commodity. Placed together with works that claim to express spirituality in a positive way – such as that of Friedrich and Kandinsky – produced a stark contrast. This mode of display indicated a desire to look for positive expression of spirituality in the works, even in works that are strongly critical of religion.

Another part of the exhibition entitled *Offences* should be mentioned as it attempts to be a counter-point or deviate from the narrative that art inherits an impulse towards the sacred or the spiritual. It includes works that employ religious iconography to state a very critical position with regard to organised religion, Catholicism in particular. At the surface level such works as Max Ernst’s *The Virgin Spanking the Infant Jesus*, 1926, and Serrano’s *Piss Christ* might seem to be similar in their message, yet they are quite different in the way they offend. While the former is a comment on the Catholic hagiographic discourse to undermine and question the faith and religious fervour, the latter criticises the commercialism of the Church.

The twelve exhibitions discussed form a very heterogeneous group and approach the theme of religion from a variety of perspectives: presenting non-religious art in a religious space; religious contemporary art that is not bound to the canonical interpretation of religious themes; contemporary non-religious art commenting on the notion of god; and focusing on religious art and its iconographic resonances with contemporary art. This multiplicity of curatorial approaches, and artworks, is indic-
ative of the multifaceted relationship between religion and art in a secular context. However, a general tendency could be identified. Religious iconography becomes a tool to ask critical questions to the religious past of art, and issues related to the status of the image, the role of its maker (as in the case of the crucifixes twisted to form the double helix in Delvoye’s piece), or to organised religion as in the case of Gilbert and George. When absent from works of contemporary art, religious iconography opens a possibility for investing the work with spiritual meanings, either by its makers or the contexts in which it is shown.

All of the exhibitions share an interest in, and desire to re-examine the role of the religious past of art. The interest in religion, in its various traditions and guises, indicates a desire for self-understanding by “re-staging the past.” This present-day interest differs from the tendency, which has already lasted a couple of centuries, of affirmation of art as a secular and autonomous field of practice. The interest in religion, and not only religious art, as expressed by curators and artists, suggests that art has already reached a sufficient level of autonomy from religion and its institution, yet it also suggests a remaining tension:

that arises from the century-long conflict within the body of art between the tendency toward religion and the tendency toward science. It seems to many that art, in partially shaking off its ancient connection with religion, has begun at last to emerge from the Dark Ages. It seems best to acknowledge only with irony, then, than the ancient connection still some what hiddenly exists.

This tendency to re-examine the past, in contrast to the desire to forge it, is, nevertheless, very far from the return of religion in any positive sense. On the contrary, it entails interest in how images work, both art and those with a cultic function. All the aforementioned exhibitions, with the exception of one, share this research interest toward religion. Including such topics in the infrastructure of display associated with contemporary art creates a visibility of religion, in contrast to its transparent presence of societies. This makes religious motifs embedded in artworks into ready-mades, critical images, or tools to ask questions concerning visual practices as iconoclasm, to re-examine the construction of myths.

Present-day artworks that recycle religious motifs demonstrate that religious images still haunt our imagination and are still relevant. These motifs are both surviv-

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67 Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, p. 25. 68 In the introduction text to 100 Artists See God Thomas McEvilley states: “In the last couple of centuries much of Western art has supposedly been secular, but the religious aura still clung to it.”, p. 10. 69 Ibid., p. 12.
als that allow artists to consider the “mechanism of representation” and a means of emancipation. But in this case this is not emancipation from religion; it is the liberation of the image of rules that prescribes how it should be created and circulated. Although there could not be a unified model of the way contemporary artists quote religious motifs, many of them problematise issues such as the public status of images, their veracity and image-making as a practice. All of these are issues that pertain to the distinction between different regimes of images. They convey a desire for emancipation, for opening up the issue of the image again, and not in terms of art and its institutional infrastructures, but of its plural life and public significance of images.