Dis-continuities: The role of religious motifs in contemporary art
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Conclusion
Religion is an all-pervasive phenomenon; it is still present in many ways in the life of contemporary societies. Arguably, our secular condition is to some extent the outcome of the transformation of the religious institutions and their structural role in public life. In this sense, there is a continuity that cannot be disrupted and the return of religion as a topic within contemporary art is a part of this story. However, this return has little to do with a continuation of religion, or return of religion in its positive form. Numerous exhibitions that dealt with the relationship between religion and art were organised in past two decades. They demonstrated the power of religious images to continue their lives in a present day context, and the variety of questions they can pose – from pertaining to theology, to political issues, and those related to art, and the very practice of image-making.

Religious images still haunt our contemporary imagination and influence artists. When artists take to reusing religious motifs, in many cases they do it as a means to reflect on our desire to believe in images, on the history of seeing them, and on their double power – iconic and political. The group of images, objects and practices that we call art in the contemporary sense of the word is a relatively recent phenomenon, compared to the very long history of producing and circulating religious images, which only later became religious art. This was followed by a period of gradual waning of religious art, and then of religious themes within art. The twentieth century saw the detachment of spiritual expressions from organised religion and their reintegration within art. Religious iconography did not disappear, but changed its role within art. Artists gradually reused it, but in a very different way compared to those who chose or were commissioned to create art for religious purposes or with a religious function. This re-inscription of religious images and themes within art as a field of practice is related to a double moment observed and defined by Aby Warburg. Images survive through time but transform their meaning; they are means to claim identity belonging to a tradition, but also a means to claim discontinuity and difference from it.

The continued life of religious images and their modification by contemporary artists has at least two important effects. The recycled motif refers to an existing tradition and thus indicates continuity. Yet, the very same motif is used as 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. The image divested from its previous meaning and power becomes a tool to address issues that are central to the infrastructure of the present-day regime of representation: the rules that regulate the status of images and their public significance; the conditions of their production and authorship; and their connection to an origin or tradition, a context or author that guarantees their value.

Artists have always produced images, at times elevating them as “true” images of divine origin and erasing their authorship, and at times claiming their sovereign ges-
ture as authors. These are the two sides of the double motif of the image-origin. This is a motif of fiction that claims to be true and has a capacity to survive throughout time, as in the case of the acheiropoietic image, and later with photography that claims proximity to the “handless” making of an image, or in the case of the modernist claim of creation of absolutely novel image that postulates as its sole reference point the absolute authorship of the artist. 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. Authorship always involves two sides: one is never fully the origin of its creation, which always refers to, or is contaminated by, other images or texts; on the other hand, the author can never be fully erased as every image has a maker.

The motif of the acheiropoietic image can be understood as a visual one, as it is with the veil of Veronica. But it can also be understood on another level related to the conditions of making and presenting images. The very act of making visible the procedures of presentation of images and the process of making can be understood as a reference to the motif of the image that is not made by a human hand. It is in an extended sense that artists refer to it, consciously or not.

Artists differ in the way they reuse religious motifs, but two general strategies can be discerned. The first is used by such artists as Bill Viola who creates an image that offers a redemptive experience, articulating a spiritual moment for the viewer, drawing her in, but concealing its infrastructure or the traces that indicate its making. In contrast, the second strategy is used by artists who focus on making visible the very process of making their artworks. This usually invites the viewer to reflect critically on the status of images and their histories. The recycling of visual motifs highlights two things: the artifice of the work, and its contamination by other images – the fact that there is no origin, divine or artistic, only the shared fictions we look at as a community. Lawrence Malstaf, Victoria Reynolds and Berlinde de Bruyckere address, and bring to visibility in their own respective ways, the fact that images are always made by artists, and that their truth resides in their plasticity.

The complex relationship between art and religion in the present moment does not lend itself to an explanation within one single model. Art and religion interact in a variety of ways across different traditions and contexts. This study offers a reflection on several aspects of this relationship. It is one particular story. There are many possible.