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Summary

Dis-Continuities: Religious Motifs in Contemporary Art

This thesis examines the relationship between contemporary art and religion. During the past two decades, both curators and artists have shown a distinct interest in religion, and its different traditions, manifestations in public life, gestures and images. Many artists refer to religious motifs, themes and images to produce works that do not qualify as religious. The artworks discussed in this thesis refer to, and are in dialogue with, the visual legacy of the Christian tradition. Usually they are not displayed in a religious context, and are circulated within the institutional frame of display of the contemporary art world: museums, galleries and biennales. The majority of these works have a distinctly critical approach to religion. They pose a set of questions concerning important moments in the transforming relationships between religion and art as well as questions related to the very regime of identification of art.

Chapter One deals with several central issues with regard to understanding the role of religious motifs in contemporary art. Besides being a repetition of imagery from the past, religious motifs embedded in contemporary artworks become a means to problematise not only the way different periods in the history of art are delimited, but larger and seemingly more rigid distinctions as those between art and non-art images. Early religious images differ significantly from art images. The two types are regulated according to different sets of rules related to the conditions of their production, display, appreciation and the way images are invested with the status of being true or authentic instances of art or sacred images. Chapter One provides a discussion of the important motif of the image not made by an artist’s hand, or acheiropoietos, and its survival and transformation, including its traces in contemporary image-making practices.

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 regime of representation. 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 image, contemporary artists cite religious images in order to reflect on the very procedures that produce the public significance and status of images.

Chapter Two discusses the different ways contemporary artists re-use religious motifs and the effects of such citations. In the majority of cases their artworks function as a context to turn that religion into a topic, and an object of discussion. The critical potential of contemporary artworks that deal with religious themes lies some-
where apart from art’s rejection or mocking of religion, as blasphemy retains its proximity to the specifically religious power of images. The multifaceted relationship between contemporary art and religion is examined through a detailed discussion of twelve exhibitions organised between 1999 and 2010, which approach religion and religious art from a variety of perspectives. Many of the curators claim that they are emphatically not religious, nor trying to send a religious message. Including religion in the infrastructure of display associated with contemporary art creates a different visibility in the public space and asks questions concerning such visual practices as iconoclasm; the relationship between commercialism, mass media and religion, and the afterlife of religious art, among many others.

Chapter Three discusses the differences between art that reuses religious motifs, spiritually invested, and religious art proper. This is followed by a historical overview of the ways religious motifs are re-used by artists, commencing with the painting of Caspar David Friedrich and finishing with art produced in the 1990s. The overview outlines two tendencies: the association of positive expression of spirituality with abstract art, and the transformation of religious motifs and images into critically charged entities. Church art became an increasingly problematic category at the end of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, partly because the clergy objected to decorating churches with the unusual interpretation of religious iconography associated with modernist aesthetics. Considered from this perspective abstract art appeared as an acceptable alternative precisely as opposed to other images with unusual modernist interpretations. The absence of figurative images removes all controversies as to how religious subjects should be interpreted. In the majority of cases, when artists borrow religious iconography they are placing it in a context that is autonomous and secular. When detached from their initial contexts religious motifs cease to signify religious ideas or content, and acquire new meaning. Next to that, the critical mode of reference to religion, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, articulates a self-reflexive moment that problematises the status of images and the mechanisms of their circulation and display. What is criticised can vary from political circumstances of the day to more abstract concepts that concern the context in which images are produced and displayed.

Chapters Four through Seven focus on the work of four artists who produced works between 1990 and 2010, and who in their respective ways recycle religious motifs and iconography. These case studies complement the theoretical reflection and the general discussion in the first three chapters. Chapter Four focuses on several video installations by Bill Viola. Starting in the late 1990s, Viola created a series of video installations that refer to or even closely restage well-known religious paintings. His work makes an interesting case as it seeks to define the conditions of spiritual expe-
riences in the space of the contemporary museum or gallery. Memoria, 2000, or Un-
spoken: Silver and Gold, 2001, are video portraits of emotional states of anguish and
suffering projected on a veil or gold surface. Both installations cite the motif of Veron-
ica’s Veil and engage with the complex history of interpretation of the acheiropoietic
image by combining it with a theatrical replay of states of extreme emotional tension.
Next to being a means of reflecting on the human condition, Viola’s engagement with
religious art can be read as an attempt to comment on the history of the relatively
young medium of video, which has only existed for several decades and which is par-
ticularly suited to recycling other existing film footage or remediating other images.

Chapter Five discusses several installation works by Lawrence Malstaf that refer
to religious motifs more openly than those of Viola. Sandbible, 1999; Madonna, 2000;
and Shrink, 1995, use religious motifs as a means to problematise the status of the hu-
man body as a medium of images. These installations offer an intriguing contempo-
rary reinterpretation of the idea of the incarnation, which is still implicitly present in
our notions of what a medium is. By setting flexible surfaces in motion and by using
fluid elements such as light, sand and air, the three installations foreground the trans-
formability of the body. With Madonna, Malstaf reworks the figure of the Virgin Mary
to present a re-interpretation of the motif of Annunciation. Sandbible transforms the
Bible into a visual object, and alludes to Jesus writing in the sand. The work also com-
ments on the capacity of the medium to retain a trace, and the extent to which the
medium modifies the mediated content.

Chapter Six focuses on a painting by Victoria Reynolds: For the Carnal in Dante’s
Hell, 1999, which builds a complex texture of references to painting belonging to dis-
parate historical moments. The iconographical references are employed not as images
with representational value, but as presentational devices to foreground the infrastruc-
ture of the very procedures of showing. Reynolds interrogates the rich symbolism of
depicting flesh, its sacred and sacrificial meaning. She visually emphasises the frame in
order to take it out of its position of quasi-invisible object to show how frames produce
the identity of the objects they present. The picture plane, the title and the hyper-real-
istic manner of rendering the image play the role of presentational devices, and criti-
cally address the techniques of staging and of presenting an image to its viewer.

Chapter Seven focuses on several sculptures by Berlinde de Bruyckere: San S.,
2004; Hanne, 2003; and Jelle Luipaard, 2004. Recurring themes in de Bruyckere’s sculp-
tures are the fragility and mortality of the human body. Jelle Luipaard and Hanne in-
clude references to religious iconography, but the motifs are strongly modified. These
interrupted resemblances to religious art address not only the history of Christian art,
but also a set of deeper questions concerning the functioning of the image and its
presentation in different contexts. The figurative power of morbid, vulnerable figures
coexists with an interest in making visible the very operations of producing the sculptures. Jelle Luipaard critically addresses the violence in religious iconography because it displaces a central religious image (the crucifixion) we are used to seeing and repeats its violence in order to confront its viewer with its logic. In this way the work acquires a critical agency without being a scandalous image from a religious viewpoint. On the other hand, it addresses our desire to make images safe by deeming them as art.