

The Return of Religion and Other Myths: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art edited by Maria Hlavajova, Sven Lütticken and Jill Winder. Pages: 214. Utrecht and Rotterdam: BAK and post editions, 2009. ISBN: 978-94-6083-007-5.

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The publication of the critical reader *The Return of Religion and Other Myths: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art* was the third installment of a three-part project organized by BAK, basis voor actuele kunst. Consisting of an exhibition entitled *The Art of Iconoclasm* (2008) that was curated by Sven Lütticken, and a series of lectures *On Post-Secularism* (2009), which were organized in conjunction with Utrecht University, the multi-faceted project explored the return of religion within the public domain, artistic discourses and contemporary politics. Each facet of the project sought to come to terms with the public debate concerning religion from the standpoint of art and artistic practice.

The critical reader, the third in BAK's Critical Reader Series, brought together a series of texts by artists, art historians and theorists, scholars of religion and sociologists in "an attempt to think religion with and through art." Such a project appears, at least on the surface, as a somewhat anachronistic endeavor, as it is often assumed within critical and academic discourse that the process of secularization is the logical counterpart to those societal changes begun in the mid-nineteenth century such as industrialization, democratization and nation building. Indeed, due to art historians' ambivalence toward the role and influence of religion within

modern and contemporary art, the religious has been figured as an Other to artistic modernity.

However, in recent years this situation has begun to change and the reader projects itself into a cultural landscape that is now increasingly engaging with the sacred—both thematically and ideologically—as the means to disrupt the dominant world-view that religion is antithetical to modern subjectivity.¹ Furthermore, as the editors state in their introduction, the contemporary western condition is better understood through what Jürgen Habermas defines as a “post-secular society.” That is, despite the certainty with which secularists declare the inevitable death of religion through a globally expanding and accelerated modernization, religion is far from disappearing from the popular consciousness: in fact, it is more apposite, as both Habermas and the editors acknowledge, to speak of a “resurgence of religion.”² Habermas brackets this so-called resurgence in direct relation to geopolitical phenomena; the editors expand upon this framework to draw relevance for the cultural sphere outlining the role played by the mass media and the circulation of particular images such as the infamous Danish cartoons, headscarf and Twin Towers.

¹ The last few years have seen a profusion of conferences, exhibitions, texts and journal issues dedicated to exploring the interface between European and American modernism, the historical avant-gardes, contemporary art practice and religion. To cite just a few examples: *Traces of the Sacred* (2008) exhibition held at the Pompidou in Paris which looked at the history of the religious impulse in twentieth century art; the 2008 exhibition *God and Goods: Spirituality and Mass Confusion* held in Milan’s Main Centre for Contemporary Art which traced the intersections between religion and consumerism; Issue three of *Rebus* (2009), a journal of art history and theory based at the University of Essex, in which articles were brought together on the theme of religion and spirituality in art; the conference *Sacred Modernities: Rethinking Modernity in a Post-Secular Age* in 2009 held at Oxford Brookes University and the December issue in 2010 of *Frieze* dedicated to art and spirituality.

² Jürgen Habermas, “Notes on a post-secular society,” *Sign and Sight* (2008): accessed October 18, 2011, URL: <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1714.html>. Habermas argues in this article that this so-called resurgence of religion is rooted in missionary expansion, fundamentalist radicalization and the potential for violence inherent in many of the world religions.

Having outlined the circumstances of a return of religion in the contemporary cultural landscape, the question is raised as to what the editors actually mean when they argue that this resurgence is a “constitutive myth of our current condition.” The editors depart from the colloquial use of myth—which is essentially synonymous with fiction—and appropriate the Egyptologist and cultural historian Jan Assman’s definition of historical myth, which argues that history becomes myth when it is “woven into the fabric of the present.” So what are some of the different ways that religion, one of the grandest of historical narratives in the global context, is entwined with our contemporary condition?

It is principally the ontology of the image (understood in its broadest possible sense) that underpins the different contributions and it is, for the most part, a successful approach; for not only has the polemic of the image always existed, but also, considering the image-saturated world that we live in, it remains a topical subject. Moving beyond the iconographic, where discussions concerning art and religion are often dominated by the magnifying glass of the detective, the editors and contributors engage with religious philosophy, theology and history as an operational principle to interpret the controversies that surround the image in a world apparently demarcated by its adversary—religion.

Jan Assmann argues in his text ‘What’s Wrong with Images?’ that the iconoclastic gesture is the marker of modernization and rationality, locating Western intellectual history as a series of battles between the contradictory forces of iconism and iconoclasm; that is a culture of images versus a culture of words. Drawing on Sigmund Freud’s text on monotheism, Immanuel Kant’s theory of the

sublime and Goethe's opinions contained within 'Tame Invectives', Assmann warns that without the necessary vector of verbal reflection, images and "their magic claim" leads to an enslavement of the mind and cultural regression. Christina von Braun's contribution 'The Headscarf—An "Empty Signifier"' successfully deconstructs the simplistic polarities—which posit the unveiled, and hence liberated, female self of the West in contradistinction to the veiled, and therefore repressed, female Other of Islam—that have underpinned recent debates in Europe regarding the Islamic headscarf. Von Braun rightly questions an emancipatory politics that is so insistently tied to the disrobing of the female body. Maria Hlavajova's interview with Boris Groys frames the debate of a return of religion in terms of a post-communist condition and the loss of belief in "the secular promise of consumption." For Groys, contemporary art is intimately related to religion in its desire for participatory engagement and immortality.

Marc De Kesel's article 'The Image as Crime. On the Monotheistic Ban on Images and the "Criminal" Nature of Art' productively demonstrates that no monotheistic visual culture has entirely given in to the theological ban on images (even Islamic aesthetics). Indeed, as De Kesel argues, it's precisely the criminal nature of the image and its subsequent debates that have produced art. Addressing myth in the traditional sense of the word, Kenin Malik's contribution claims, "the return to religion is as illusory as was the death of God in the first place." For Malik, it is not religion as much as a sense of religiosity or faith that characterizes the supposed return; a response—secular in nature—to the dislocation of a post-Cold War world and our desire for "identity and belongingness" that underpins New Age

Religions, Fundamentalism and Atheism. Dieter Roelstraete in 'Great Transformations: On the Spiritual in Art, Again' argues that spirituality has become a dominant preoccupation of the art world tied to, what he terms, a "post-ironic cultural climate" that follows in the aftermath of 11 September 2001. The final contribution by Jorinde Seijdel traces the destruction of the De Naald (The Needle) monument in the Netherlands on Queens Day in terms of the contemporary obsession with, and tension between, iconoclasm and iconolatry; that is, the destruction of a monument and the subsequent profusion of images that circulated on video sharing websites such as YouTube.

For the most part the series of texts are well informed and researched. Bringing together a vast array of positions and views, and including a number of articles that are published in English for the first time, it provides an interesting survey of the issues that are suggested by the religious turn within the cultural sphere. Furthermore, it is to BAK's credit that the critical reader does not shy away from what has become a taboo for many in the academic and art worlds: the relationship between monotheistic religions and contemporary art. After all, as Dan Fox recently suggested with just a touch of irony, "a little dusting of Buddhism or Eastern philosophy is perfectly acceptable—what's good enough for Agnes Martin and The Beatles is good enough for art. But ... contemporary artists who declare affiliation to Judeo-Christian or Islamic religions are usually regarded with the kind of suspicion reserved for Mormon polygamists and celebrity Scientologists."³ BAK's reader successfully attests to the enduring presence of religious dogma in

³ Dan Fox, "Believe it or Not: Religion versus spirituality in contemporary art," *Frieze* 135 (2010): 15

contemporary culture (Arnoud Holleman's discussion of copyright and its relationship to the prohibition of the image in the Ten Commandments, for example) and highlights how an understanding of religious history, philosophy and theology can in fact shed light on our contemporary condition and cultural (image) production. But perhaps its greatest contribution to current debates regarding culture, religion and post-secular society are the discussions that address, either explicitly or even in passing, Islam and Christianity. Moving beyond the reductionist tendencies that so often predominate contemporary political attitudes, the different essays provide new frameworks for mutual understanding between the two religions.

However, as can often be the case with critical anthologies, there is a marked difference in the quality and relevance of the included texts. At times, some of the entries were so personal their relevance for the broader debate was questionable. Paul Chan's contribution, for example, is a rambling interior monologue marked by a complete lack of concrete and tenable examples so that the coordinates of his argument consistently elude the reader. Likewise, the strange inclusion of Maria Pask's 'Beautiful City Book List' (internet links relating to the subjects of religion and spirituality) does not seem to cohere with the more discursive model of the book. Some of the research and references seemed a little outmoded, relying on theory and scholarly positions that could have been better demonstrated by more contemporary sources (note, for example, Christina von Braun's reliance on Edward Said's *Orientalism*). Although the text includes a broad and accurate index, there is

no overarching bibliography for all the contributions, which would have been a useful element for a survey text such as this.

Ultimately BAK's critical reader is an interesting and valuable contribution to the art and religion debate that is only very recently starting to garner serious interest within both the museum and university. By providing more of a framework through which to approach questions than sustained historical and scholarly analysis, the text may prove frustrating for those seeking a more rigorous exploration of ideas. However, in a way, such an approach was beyond the scope of the project, and the reader is perhaps better viewed as a platform from which to explore new ideas; pointing to a shift in the commonly-held assumption that our modern world must be exclusively understood within a material, secular, and teleological framework.