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Religion & Spirituality

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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. Blessed too are 'visionary' or 'outsider' artists, patronized for their obsessive cosmologies and prophecies. (Many people, if they're being honest, just read these as symptoms of mental illness.) If you've followed the regular paths of art-school ordination, then 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, excepting a fashionably affected, Evelyn Waugh-esque pose of dandified religiosity, contemporary artists who openly declare affiliation to established Judaeo-Christian or Islamic religions are usually regarded with the kind of suspicion reserved for Mormon polygamists and celebrity Scientologists. (Damien Hirst only gets away with using religious themes because he converts them straight into hard cash.)

There are many reasons why the art world is wary of religion. Partly, it's a question of history. For most of the 20th century, art aligned itself with progressive, rational secularism and radical subjectivity; the ideas that have fed into art come from modern philosophy, liberal or radical politics, sociology and pop culture rather than theology. It's also a question of finance: the money that funds art doesn't come from churches or religious orders like it did hundreds of years ago. And then there's ethics. Religion is broadly seen by many progressive thinkers to be a cause of intolerance and war (even though the two chief forces of tyranny in the 20th century, Nazism and Communism, were both secular ideologies). The early 21st century

has been characterized by a dangerous return to faith-based political conviction, be it radical Islam or neo-conservative fundamentalist Christianity, neither of which has much sympathy for cutting-edge art or ideas. Also, religious organizations aren't, of course, exactly known for their forward-thinking attitudes to women or sexuality; the moral teachings of many religious denominations can be at odds with the ways artists want to live their lives. By contrast, the art world is seen to be an open-minded and tolerant community in which to work. (Open-minded, that is, until someone tells you casually that they regularly attend mass.)

I wouldn't be the first person to detect a cognitive dissonance here. Art is a faith-based system that, to paraphrase philosopher Simon Critchley, combines 'an uneasy godlessness with a religious memory'. Religious conviction is taken to be a sign of intellectual weakness, and yet meaning in art is itself often a question of belief. Sol LeWitt wasn't joking when he wrote, in his 'Sentences on Conceptual Art' (1967): 'Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists.' Art involves a conceptual investment in objects and images just as any religion invests significance in its icons and the ritual use of objects. If you tell me your abstract painting is 'about' space, or that your lumpy fluorescent pink sculpture 'refers' to Søren Kierkegaard, then – to a degree – I have to entertain that belief too. Even if I then argue that it might not express what you think it expresses, I can't prove that you do not invest those works with the belief of your intentions. Whilst the sectarian artistic differences that used to split friendships back in the days of high Modernism might have diffused, we still rely on artists, curators and critics to act as interpreters of contingent meaning, aesthetic creeds or art world 'ethics', just as rabbis, imams and priests do. People go to galleries on Sundays rather than churches. Appeals to the immaterial are buried deep within the everyday language of art too: words such as 'spiritual', 'transcendent', 'meditative', and 'sublime' frequently occur in exhibition reviews, press releases and gallery guides. Even if this fuzzy language is lazily unspecific, it's not exactly speaking to the rationalist or atheist within us.

Nowhere was this cognitive dissonance clearer than earlier this year, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York staged 'The Artist is Present', a large-scale retrospective of work by Marina Abramović. The exhibition was a major success, drawing thousands of visitors, many of whom queued for hours to participate in her latest durational performance (also called *The Artist is Present*) in which, every day for three months, Abramović sat on a chair in MoMA's huge atrium. Visitors could come and sit opposite her, one at a time, to gaze into her face. Much was made in the press of people weeping during the experience. I can't help thinking of flagellants and various extreme penitent Catholic orders when I see some of Abramović's durational work; its register is solemn, its demonstrative gravitas a form of control – the laity coming to bask in front of the artist, a 'conduit' to some higher metaphysical plane. The artist's work can, of course, be discussed in safely art-historical terms of the body and performance. But the emotional hysteria whipped up around 'The Artist is Present' seemed little different to that experienced at pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes: salvation being sought in ritual, place and objects. Not that I would have thought it any better if Abramović had openly declared it to be religious, but the exhibition made me wonder why it's OK for artists to be 'spiritual' in some vague, New Agey sort of way, but not 'religious' – as if being 'spiritual' is somehow free of ideological baggage, or more to the point, not as capable of exerting control over people as organized religions are.

Why does the search for some kind of spiritual fulfilment in secular art persist? Is the idea that art has nothing to do with faith or religion just a lie we tell ourselves to hide the fact we crave something to believe in? Is it because the subjectivity of art provides the perfect ideological supplement to capitalism? Does God prefer Modernist abstraction or Italian Renaissance painting? Is there an afterlife with a gift shop that sells Mark Rothko postcards?

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Believe it or Not

Religion versus spirituality in contemporary art
by Dan Fox