

“What’s the Use?”

A Faith-Motivated Artist Re-Considers Re-Enchantment

In response to the Re-Enchantment panel discussion, the second of two.

Matthew Ballou | April 18-23, 2007

All anybody ever does with anything is use it.

-Richard Rorty¹

The Question

The panel discussion on religion and contemporary art which took place on April 17, 2007 in the Ballroom of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago at 112 South Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago was both vivifying and, in a way, gratifying. Being an alumnus of the School, and having spent a good number of sleepless nights on the ninth floor of that very same building in various states of woe over the issues under consideration by this panel, I felt a personal interest in the proceedings.

When I asked my question of the panel after the first session, I had hoped to have something to add to the direction of the proceedings. Through the morning we had listened as the learned figures on the dais constructed, or rather recalled to mind, a variety of genealogies that tracked the course of religio-spiritual trends in art through time. This mapping gesture, while certainly valuable and necessary, is nothing new. We can all crack open our philosophy and art history texts and see them before us. The question on the minds of those in attendance was instead how we might disentangle the quandaries that beset not the *theory* of religio-spiritual or faith-motivated art, but the *practice* of this work and the subsequent public display of that practice. Practice, not theory, is where the conundrums present themselves in forms that make or break real expressions in the real world.

A slight restatement of my question to the panel reads thus: I’m very intrigued with how all of this (the genealogies, trajectories, and the critical analysis of those arenas) could fold into something philosopher Richard Rorty and his pragmatist colleagues deal with, that is, the idea of use.² What is the use of all this? When you compare what was going on at the Re-Enchantment panel discussion with the works of Mircea Eliade or Ananda Coomaraswamy (two of the 20th century’s foremost authorities on religious and socio-cultural ideas, particularly as they pertain to the arts), you find that the panel failed, in large part, to deal with real contexts of use as these philosophers did. I went on to claim that all art can be said to come down to the construction of relational conduits and the translation of the self through those conduits, and that theory and commentary and criticism set up the potential for this action to be allowed or disallowed. I wanted to see how all of these assertions – those of both the Re-Enchantment panel and my own – might enfold an idea of sensible use.

Obviously the very idea of use I am suggesting here is a reconstitution (perhaps even a bastardization) of the sort of socio-religious use of objects that Coomaraswamy and Eliade studied in the light of Rorty’s pragmatic use, which denies any sort of inherent essence to what is being used. That is, to Rorty, the use of any text (or artwork, or theory for that matter) is expressly found in its ability to bring about hopefulness in human potential.³ So there is a basic

polarization between these two kinds of use, and they would seem to repel each other. The use of religious objects and forms that Eliade and Coomaraswamy described have at their foundation an idea that the object translates an essential nature and allows for human participation (valorization, sanctification) in that nature. Rorty, seemingly on the other hand, contends that what is used finds meaning and value in its appliance to human potential rather than in any fundamental nature of the thing as such. But to combine these disparate elements allows for the combination of the secularized, de-mythologized philosophy of hope that Rorty advocates and the deeply primal realities that have been discovered in the human mind. My hope was to inspire the panel to entertain the idea of conflating both conceptions of use into a practice-oriented approach to works borne of faith-motivation.

Interpreting Faith-Works

In some ways the discussion of the interaction of religion and contemporary art simply comes down to a definition of the terms, and it did so again at the Re-Enchantment panel. Theorists, philosophers, and interpreters often need to use the broadest definitions in order to make their analysis seem valid in a wider epistemological framework. Panel member Boris Groys makes a good example of this approach when he states in his essay *Religion as Medium*, “In our post-Enlightenment culture, religion is generally understood to mean a collection of certain opinions.”⁴ This kind of distancing of language assures a one-size-fits-all understanding of the subject at hand.

To be sure, it seems axiomatic that a safe intellectual distance ought to be allowed between the observer and the observed, between the theoretician and subject of said theorizing. This is certainly the case in much of academic inquiry into the philosophy of religion. No one really expects a professor teaching students a survey of any particular religion to actually believe the doctrines of that religion. Similarly, we might count it strange if an anthropologist studying Mesoamerican beliefs suddenly proclaimed deep and abiding faith in Quetzalcoatl. We have come to associate objective understanding with a sterile remove, one in which truths may be culled apart from subjective vagaries. One might even suggest that the only objective statement on any topic is the one made by a totally outside observer. Yet we innately sense the folly of this, the limitations to the scope of this kind of inquiry. We recognize that often the best expressions of understanding come from those deeply embedded in that which they pursue. Art is no different. Consider then the idea that *faith is itself integral* to the construction and interpretation of faith-works.

The fact is that most discussion of religion in art mistakes the intimate realities and motivations of faith for what can be construed as religious activity. These two are markedly different worlds between which critical dialogue often fails to distinguish. The faith-world that motivates any given individual may not necessarily conform to the structure of religious devotion to which our accepted definitions of religion have been connected. Furthermore, there is little evidence that any average religious or faith experience can be identified, qualified, or contained within the accepted notions of the religious. I submit that it is almost impossible for a socio-cultural philosopher (in the field of religion or any other) to get proper perspective on the work of an artist of faith from outside of that faith. Indeed, Christianity posits that the very substance of spiritual believing is inaccessible to one who does not have faith: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able

to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”⁵ There can be no doubt that many of the world’s systems of faith are circumscribed in this fashion.

And so we are presented with what seems to be an impossible situation. The philosopher wants to approach the interaction of religious devotion and art practice. Yet their wall of seeming-objectivity suspends the range of their insight. Certain actions, motivations, connections, and trajectories with the faith field remain beyond their conceptual discernment (Groys would say it is “hidden to the opinions of mortals.”⁶). They do not even know this. Yet we accept that they are able to investigate a whole array of socio-cultural conditions and issues that permeate and pass through the faith-integrated system. But they cannot know the interactions within the system, nor can they conceive of how the wider continuum of thought and structure of reality actually seem when looking from within. Thus critical analysis is an *incomplete engagement with the work of the faith-world* and often imposes rather than explores, enforces rather than engages. The action of the analysis (descriptive, critical, or otherwise) is to impart its perspective onto the work, imbuing the work with its own content and thus altering the work’s initial alignment into something associated with its own.

Yet just as the philosopher cannot, from without, develop any architecture of analysis that properly and truly addresses the understandings within the religious sphere, *neither can the artist of faith present information from within that meets the validating requirements of the wider discussion*. This is the fundamental problem with the transmissions that flow between the outer world of intellectual inquiry and the inner world of faith.

Furthermore, our naturalistic empiricism has wrought an exclusion of the former mythic concerns. This is not to say these concerns are gone, rather, it is to recognize the play of modern and postmodern understandings of the world that have rendered a kind of determinism to how our intellectual pursuits may engage with any proposed extra-empirical phenomena of reality. Faith is outside of empirical proofs – its extent and condition cannot be delineated. Its present, real-time impact on the artworld of objects and ideas cannot be assessed. Therefore it has been quarantined through what the panel identified as a “structure of refusals,” not in the sense that we keep faith locked away to itself, but instead that we lock off, gate-keep, and sequester arenas of potential approval from the faith-motivated work. Ananda Coomaraswamy knew the condition: “It is just insofar as we do now see only the things as they are in themselves, and only ourselves as we are in ourselves, that we have killed the metaphysical man and shut ourselves up in the dismal cave of functional and economic determinism.”⁷

Given this seemingly intractable situation, must we simply recognize the fundamental dislocation of discourse between that of faith and that of non-faith? Must we give ourselves over to the divorce between believing and that which proposes to describe belief? Further consideration is in order.

Proclamation as Proselytizing

In spite of the fact that we can neither properly inspect nor define the faith-motivated genesis of a work of art, it is reasonably certain that we know when we have seen one. Through a variety of referents and symbologies (art of the past, common visual forms, etc), as well as presence of affirmative or valorizing methods, presentations, or expressions, the comportment of the work in relation to wider religio-spiritual concerns may be sensed. The work is read by the presence of these phenomena. We know that this point is where the action of the viewer as receptive agent,

and the artworld as general arbiter, commences. Let us then consider the faith-motivated work from the perspective of its engagement with a wider context.

Among the more illuminating topics of discussion during the Re-Enchantment panel presentation was the issue of proclamation in works of faith. Thierry de Duve, an accomplished teacher and scholar, and clearly the elder statesman of the group, was particularly exercised on this point. Proclamation is a phenomenon de Duve sees as central to Christianity and to the expression of faith and which can be defined here as the will toward proselytizing. This proselytizing impulse is, to be sure, a large part of Christian faith, so given his stated opinions on the religion (which included “There are many reasons for prohibiting Christian iconography”⁸) it is understandable that it gives de Duve some consternation.

To better understand this idea of proclamation, look at de Duve’s reasoning:

“I think that the reason why it [religion in art] is troubling is that it is in the nature of aesthetic judgment to be addressed at random, to whomever, that is, it is a universal address that is implied in an aesthetic judgment that is not a voluntary thing. And then there is also a public address in an act of faith. So far as I know, from my contact with the Christian religion, *faith has to be proclaimed*. One *does* proclaim one’s faith. That is what an act of faith means. So the act of faith *is* public. It *has* to be public. Now I come to the reason I think we all have problems with overt religious iconography where the issue of the faith – the whole belief system – of the artist seems at stake, is that the aesthetic judgment I am supposed to *do* approves of the work on the basis of my response to this universal call that the work contains. And actually the work is sort of telling us, ‘do you approve of me?’ But then if the work also contains an act of faith in the religion – not in the aesthetics of the painting or work of art, but in the religious content of it – then I am bound to approve of the religious content by the same token as the [aesthetic]. It [the religious aspect] becomes sort of conflated in my own aesthetic judgment and this profoundly disturbs me.”⁹

So, according to de Duve, the primary issue at stake is the integrity of the viewer/interpreter. That is, the nature of aesthetic judgments conspires to force the viewer to approve of a work of faith in spite of the fact that the viewer may actually hold none of the claims made by that faith as imbedded in any artwork motivated by that faith. By way of an example, de Duve brings up famed video artist Bill Viola:

“Bill Viola [...] is always calling you on approving his religious experience; you have to bathe in the same baptismal water as him. That is enough to make me say ‘EEE [Cringing sound]!!’ It is just religiosity. I have nothing against religion; I have everything against religiosity.”¹⁰

Continuing, he addresses the work of Andres Serrano, specifically the iconic *Piss Christ* of 1989.

“I hate the work because I recognize the Christian, one who wanted to convert me from the very first time I saw these images. Some people think that the *Piss Christ* is just blasphemy. No, it’s *disguised* as blasphemy.”¹¹

Here we can note a subtle assertion: artists of faith (or even those artists who choose to affirmatively and earnestly utilize faith-conceptions) should not put forth an expression that compels the viewer into agreement with an antithetical faith-world. We may conclude then that it is up to the constructor of the work to curtail its extent. So self-censorship is the fundamental condition of the artist of faith and is a pressure he or she is confronted with at the onset of each work. Is this what we truly want?

But de Duve doesn't feel this way about all religious art, no. He was quick to stress an exception:

“Unless, of course, I look at a work of art that belongs to a period where I do sense that it is imminent in the aesthetic experience of the work that the collective approval [by the society] of this individual expression of faith in the work of art is somehow sensible, somehow perceptible, by me.”

“For example, I go to Venice and I look at a Bellini painting and it's so obvious that Bellini must have been a deeply religious person to make the Madonna the way he painted the Madonna. It doesn't disturb me at all. When I listen to Bach it's clear that it is a most spiritual music – you have to be of profound religious belief to be able to write a Bach cantata. And our aesthetic pleasure has to do with that faith. I recognize the faith that I can hear coming straight out the heart of Bach when I listen to the records. And I can also understand that this faith resonates so much in me who am not a true believer, because Bach was embedded in a society where they could collectively enjoy the music because they were all sharing the same faith. In the case of a contemporary artist who would try to do that – and it's not the artist's fault, it's not my fault, it's just that we don't live in a society that is united by a collective, shared belief. And therefore every utterance, every expression of religious affect, sounds fake - inevitably.”¹²

He suggests that the kind of religious work that is both temporally displaced from the contemporary world and meant to speak universally in its original time, “never takes me hostage. That is, my aesthetic judgment is somehow mysteriously separated from the judgment of approval of the faith.”¹³ Artwork that attempts to move beyond these bounds becomes untenable ostensibly because of the *extent of its inherent claim of jurisdiction*. As de Duve suggests, “The minute you think there is a proof, then religiosity – which I call superstition – takes over and I feel that I have to go out, have to get away.”¹⁴

When de Duve suggests that his aesthetic judgment is “mysteriously separated from the judgment of approval of the faith” in older religious works (created for reception by a community of shared faith), what he is indicating is that he is able to feel a comfort in the distance afforded by time and space. This is a comfort of the self, when it considers itself separated from any sense of compunction. On the other hand, the contemporary faith-motivated work, if we accept de Duve's analysis, speaks universally and asks for approval of both its content and form. In doing so, it attempts to constrain the viewer into acceptance of its message. Its proclamation is, in effect, meant to proselytize the viewer, because it contains the truth claims and attendant exclusivity that define the faith-world. In its proclamation resides a call to the self of the viewer to become articulated to the faith-world that inspired the work.

And here is where the crux of the situation presents itself: the idea of the nature of the self as autonomous and inviolable. This is a far broader issue than can be tackled in this text, but simply bringing it up may help to clarify the conditions under which both approval and refusal function,

since the access (or lack thereof) of religious-based work to the artworld mainstream is really what we are talking about overall. Simply put, the work of art that has the *least potential for transgressing the self-conceived autonomy of the viewer* is one most able to gain approval. The work that functions more as a sign than as a symbol is far closer to approval, since the sign tends to present itself to the autonomous self for review, whereas the symbol announces itself as avatar of a broader, even universal, conception which bears with it a kind of jurisdiction over the self.

When de Duve states, “the best religious art is done by non-believers,” he explains that this is so “because of exteriority, because as a non-believer you can share everything at a human level. As a non-believer you can sort of trust it at a distance where the other’s freedom is respected.”¹⁵ What he is saying here is only religious-themed works that live up to the postmodern tolerance dogma can even begin the process of approval. Why? Because of the fact that they present no perspective violating the domain of the self as sole authority.

This is merely the displacement of one kind of sacred center for another. In the past we had the rites, rituals, and liturgies of religions to delineate the arena of the sacred – outside of the self. Since the Enlightenment the center of belief, and thus the arbitrate matrix for the definition of truth, was shifted from God or some panoply of divine figures and forces to the self.

But what does this all mean for the faith-motivated artist?

Sublimation, Subterfuge, and Systems of Refusal

James Elkins, the moderator of the panel discussion, summed up the implications of de Duve’s reasoning by asking him, “so this is a very pessimistic message for artists here who feel themselves to be religious and want to create religious artwork?”¹⁶ When de Duve nodded in the affirmative, Elkins turned to the audience and suggested that believers “find a source of doubt.”¹⁷

Is this the best answer contemporary art theory can present to artists who function from within faith? But Elkins continued, suggesting that there is in fact, “a discursive field in which you can allow yourself to address religious issues in some twentieth century art (we assume he means twenty-first century here) and at the same time be acceptable to the academy.” This was presented to us a realm of open potential, yet there are qualifications present even in the suggestion: there is “some twentieth century art” in which you “can allow yourself” the possibility of addressing religious issues in an “acceptable” manner. Even the idea of a “discursive field” suggests that it is somehow adjacent, other, and aside from the main line of art theory and consideration.

Panelist Taylor Worley attempted to bring a gleam of hope amid the dark implications when he stated,

“I think you (de Duve) are right, the issue is proclamation. And if we want to use the notion of smuggling – I don’t know if it’s always with malicious intentions – but religious artists use the mode of personal narrative most often to bring in these religious elements. But the *successful* artists are the ones that can maintain this hierarchy at work where the aesthetic contribution, the pushing, the questions of artists’ practice remain the primary goal of the work, and the personal narrative – with a sense of self-critique, and sense of self-irony – remains a secondary option. [...] And for artists that are interested in bringing in religious elements, they must also bring with it the notion of respect and

freedom for the other, that it's a space of equality..."¹⁸ Here de Duve interrupted with, "Or use blasphemy as camouflage."

Thus the idea that loopholes, such as smuggling, camouflage, self-critique, doubt, irony, and blasphemy (among others), exist that religio-spiritual artists might use to gain access to broader approval was brought into consideration. Initially raised by School of the Art Institute Professor Frank Piatak, this idea that "the artworld is comprised of systems of refusal,"¹⁹ particularly in regard to religious and spiritual conceptions, became a focal point of the panel discussion. Piatak queried:

"What's possible; what's allowed in? What's disallowed? [...] We have religious and mythic structures that we don't really care to recognize within our structures all the time, and I think our exclusions are mixed into our contemporary mythologies of art criticism."²⁰

The full enumeration of these systems of refusal and exclusion is not feasible in this context; Elkins conjectured that he might find "fifty or sixty" upon consideration of all that had been discussed during the session. In large part, however, the discussion hinged not so much on the mechanics of the artworld's exclusions or refusals, but rather on the means by which faith-motivated artists gain access to the artworld in spite of its gate keeping. Most of the day was spent discussing what artists of religio-spiritual conviction should leave out, deny, curtail, and reconsider in their work and approach. There is probably a host of ways to consider these issues, but they might most simply be understood under the terms of sublimation and subterfuge.

Sublimation includes any action that occludes, deflects, or redefines faith-motivated content within the work. Types of sublimation include the heavy use of personal narratives, broader meta-narratives, or indirect intellectual referents. This may also include feeling compelled to leave out specific references that might polarize viewers. These are all forms of preemptive hiding, knowing self-critique; the artist knows certain content is proscribed, or feels that it is not appropriate, and thus constructs a variety of labyrinthine concepts through which to filter the faith-motivated content.

Subterfuge, on the other hand, could be defined as an articulation of visual tropes to throw off the direct reading of religio-spiritual references within the work. It is more about the modalities of presentation through which artists utilize common religious iconography or analogous imagery. Here concepts such as blasphemy or irony are used, where religious imagery is presented in a seemingly disgraced or displaced form. As such, subterfuge is also a kind of sublimation, though one that deals more with the formal practice than with the background content.

Both of these options present difficulties to the artist of faith. Coomaraswamy recognized that the content of the work of a faith-motivated artist "cannot be a matter of indifference."²¹ The deeply felt musings of any artist are often tremendously strong compulsions. Changing them or shifting them can feel like a kind of apostasy, and an unwilling one at that. It is incredibly disheartening to sense an environment of disqualification surrounding one's work.

But this is not to say that these activities of sublimation and subterfuge are always or necessarily negative. Works that are nuanced, coded, and visually and theoretically complex are rewarding both to create and view. But the panel was able to see that this approach to art is easily shifted into a sort of barrier, as it helps to keep at a distance certain kinds of content by which

individuals may not want to be confronted. A number of questions come up here: how and why does this shift happen? What should faith-motivated artists do about it – are sublimation and subterfuge simply a given? How can contemporary art theory define and respond to the systems of refusal within which these shifts take effect?

As to the source or location of the systems of refusal, few firm suggestions were offered. Elkins questioned rhetorically, “Would the refusal be made by artworld pedagogy – criticism, art history, and so on – these would be the source of the refusal?”²² This aligns with de Duve’s more specific and primary conception, which considered refusal or acceptance stemming from the conditions under which judgments of taste take place.

The early assertions made by de Duve focused the discussion of sublimation and subterfuge around two implied necessities. First, the notion of constraining the proclamative action of faith-works was reinforced. This procedure of exclusion was undertaken simultaneously with the second necessity: the need to advocate for tolerance. The panelists actively worked to present a broadminded, charitable stance to the artists in attendance. Only de Duve remained truly unequivocal, connecting all methodologies of subterfuge and camouflage with the same proselytizing evangelism he finds in most contemporary religio-spiritual expressions. The discussion of all of these methods for surreptitiously conveying religio-spiritual content into the artworld seemed to frustrate him: “To what extremes must we go to be able to make a religious-aesthetic possible?”²³ This, of course, is what artists of religious faith have been asking for decades. Ostensibly we must conceal or seemingly deny our faith to gain access and approval. If the proclamative action of a work of faith is the sort of underhanded arm-twisting de Duve considers it to be, what then is the concerted ideological bent of the artworld?

Several of the panelists, notably taking a turn toward practice, found reasons for artists of faith to submit to the constraints of sublimation. This was, in part, an attempt to place a positive spin on the nature of the exclusion. Many of the issues discussed had seemed to leave artists of faith with little hope of an easy route to inclusion and approval, or even the free and open expression of their beliefs. Beyond this, many of the methods of sublimation mentioned seemed to carry a negative connotation (for example, narrative – both personal and mythic – was at times mentioned with something akin to mockery). Several of the panelists tried to propose methods of sublimation as opportunities for open discourse. Each in their turn advocated watering down the specifically religious in favor of a more universalized, generalized expression for works of faith. Groys and Taylor Worley suggested that the faith-motivated artist should simply submit to the reconfiguration of the presuppositions of their faith and find relevance for their work via the critique of the general artworld:

“Universalization through the self-criticism should not be seen only as a movement of camouflage. I would also see this blaspheming, self-critical attitude not as a means of deceit or seducing of the unbeliever. It is also a very authentic way of opening through the self-criticism, [which] creates a situation of openness and dialogue and a kind of universalizing model of their own belief which is presupposing, as we know, always a kind of rigid identity.”²⁴

“They (religious artists) have a particular opportunity to come to the critical discourse of contemporary art and ask questions and have their own practices evaluated and analyzed. If they are concerned about being relevant in contemporary society and being able to

respond to a whole host of diverse perspective and opinions, then they aren't going to want to pass up that opportunity.”²⁵

David Morgan tried to couch the obfuscation in terms of hope and potential:

“In post-Kierkegaardian Christianity, doubt and paradox are not signs – at least in the world of belief – of the slow or rapid ebbing and death of the religion but in fact are its renewal, its real survival in the modern world. You can't just believe [...] anymore, you must enfold any act of search with self-criticism and severe doubt, and risk, genuinely risk, giving up. I'm trying to think of artists who take that seriously. The great deal of religious art was *made for a community*. There is a lot of ecclesial art being produced; some of it is good, some of it is not. But I don't want to get into a question of taste. I would rather ask everybody here: are there people out there producing work that could satisfy the criteria of gallery art: that is serious, hard-hitting, interesting, but also engaged in some of these practices of self-criticism and doubt that seem genuine and not Sunday-Schoolish?”²⁶

But is this not just the continued assertion of a kind of self-editorializing, and is this not what artists of faith have become resigned to already? Should artists change, or should the milieu change? Why is religio-spiritual content subject to the evaluation of theory and not the other way around? The problem with this arrangement is that theory denigrates practice by the expression of its critique. That is, the form of its existence is a questioning of praxis, hence the eternal strain inherent in the attempt to bridge the theory of a phenomena and the actuality of it. Any analysis of a particular practice, rather than reifying it, particularizes it in a hierarchical structure where the *analysis plays the dominant roll of overseeing other*. Thus by virtue of its own critical action, the theory of a discrete application becomes the arbiter of the value of that system. This is where the fundamental power of critique comes into existence. A theory of religious or faith-motivated art, then, must be a kind of violence exacted upon that art, for in its attempt to quantify, qualify, name, and place the systems and functions of that art, the theorizing acts as a systolic element that compresses the potentiality of anything it has defined. This is perhaps the fatal flaw of the Re-Enchantment panel: that their words could not seem to traverse the gulf between the disqualifying otherness of critique and the gut-wrenching, heart-felt arena of making artworks. They could not connect with the practice of making contemporary religio-spiritual art in any full measure; most of their time was spent describing it.

But we continue on, shifting gears slightly.

Kajri Jain, an expert on popular Indian religious art, suggested that the issues surrounding religion and contemporary art are really a matter of the tension between the public and private manners of religious expression in the Western tradition. She suggests this is “because of (the West's) attempt to privatize the sacred. So any public expression of religious affect is deeply uncomfortable, taboo, and embarrassing.” Jain contends that the reason that “religion doesn't sit so well with art” is that “it's out there” in the public realm and it is not supposed to be. “It should be private. [...] If you have to declare faith you are already in doubt.”²⁷ So the growing inappropriate nature of public expressions of faith only serves to confound the making of the faith-motivated work further, by tying its very form and content to a social disapproval. This trend stems from the fact in a postmodern culture that “the obligation to justify one's beliefs arises only when one's habits of action interfere with the fulfillment of others' needs. Insofar as

one is engaged in a private project, that obligation lapses.”²⁸ In the artworld context one’s “habits of action” correspond to the creation of artworks while “other’s needs” involve the need to retain the self as autonomous and self-justified. The conclusion is obvious: keep it to yourself. This is just another form of sublimation.

In spite of the clear and overt discussion of the conditions of approval and various methodologies of religio-spiritual artists to overcome the innate artworld constraints placed upon their expressions, Gregg Bordowitz, a filmmaker and writer of some note, was unconvinced:

“Why do we construct this fantasy to elicit an argument that does not exist? Postmodernism, Derrida, Lyotard; all the Continental importation of theory was deeply theological, and the basis of art criticism in the ’80’s and ’90’s was deeply engaged with discussions surrounding theological sources. So I don’t know where we get this ban. I don’t see this ban. I do see an anxiety in relation to the current political regime [...] but I don’t see prohibition or discipline being applied in the artworld.”²⁹

He insisted that he did not perceive any “disciplinary barrier that is preventing some kind of iconography,” and that, “as an artist I do not experience the proscription and prohibition that we are talking about.”³⁰ But the issue has never been in the signs or ideographic representations of religion. It is not the iconography that is prohibited or refused. The mere usage of recognizable religious forms has never been taken as indicative of faith, nor does the idea that “theory was deeply theological” and “deeply engaged with discussions surrounding theological sources”³¹ assume any state of actual belief. The question has always revolved around the notion of faith-motivation that manifests itself as a proclamation within the work, the implications of that manifestation, and – fundamentally – *whether the artist of faith has the right to said manifestation*.³² It is belief that is at the core of the debate. There is no reason to expect a non-believer who uses religious referents would sense any proscription – the nature of their use of the religious signs would manifest somewhere between active contempt and ambivalent skepticism, and this is why irony and doubt (among other digressive qualifiers) have always been the dominant modes of modern religio-spiritual expressions in the context of potential acceptability. *Acceptability is located in the appearance of a denial of the implications of the faith-world*. The artist who uses religio-spiritual forms is that much closer to approval if they suggest a kind of displacement from real belief in the faith-world from which their references derive.

So work with religious underpinnings or inspiration can only hope redeem itself to the wider culture by becoming “serious, hard-hitting, [...] engaged in self-criticism,”³³ or by remaining entirely private. Here we see the subtle interplay of disqualification. I am under no illusions regarding the overall tack of the notion of these qualifications. You can present an idea as long as the idea is *challenged or negated by the condition of its expression*. This sort of equation leaves less up to the viewer than some artists might hope and renders impact into milquetoast. If the expression is tidy (i.e. a taboo idea is vaunted and then immediately negated by appearance of blasphemy, doubt, etc.) - the viewer has no need to contend with the work as a proposition in the world. What then is the point of making the work? Perhaps this kind of even-handedness should be required of all artists. What we are seeing here is nothing less than *a concerted effort to require all faith-motivated works to disqualify, squelch, or otherwise suspend their translational, transformative, and – yes – proclamative activity in the realm of view*.

We then find ourselves at yet another impossibly convoluted situation: we artists of faith must constrain our work to the potentially infinite values of any theoretical viewer as well as the less-

than-sympathetic structure of contemporary art criticism. Apart from strategies of sublimation, the works of faith-motivated artists are essentially consigned to the pariah realms of propaganda and kitsch – outer darkness, indeed. Sounds like fun.

Conclusions

Gregg Bordowitz, toward the end of the discussion, was forceful in his hopeful statement that the job of art is to “return the (viewer) strange to him or her self.” He zealously proclaimed:

“I am somehow energetically invested in creating a space in which my encounter with something is not guaranteed, where I am forced upon myself, both at the level of pleasure and danger, to confront myself as weird to myself. I find that enormously valuable. [...] I am still deeply invested in protecting this one area of practice where there are no guarantees, where I confront myself as strange, and where my sociality is also not presumed. That it’s not about sharing a common taste, but that in fact the object presents itself as uniquely novel to me and [...] I am radically thrust upon my uniqueness.”³⁴

In this, he is advocating for the idea of art as a transformative phenomenon that, through its various permutations and categories, retains the ability to act as not only as a mirror, but also a kind of transfiguration of the self. Here de Duve presents himself as something of a foil to Bordowitz. He does not want to be transformed or “returned” to himself “strange” through his interaction with a work as Bordowitz does. He wants the comfortable remove of the aesthete, for whom everything is of his own determination. This is understandable.

If we accept Bordowitz’s estimation of art as transformative to the self, why should we be concerned with the appropriateness of the faith-art? Why must faith-motivated artists contend with an abstract idea of qualification in addition to all other concerns? One might claim that faith, at its deepest root, is the agent of transformation within the believer. Why then cannot faith become a partner to art? Is it not already a willing partner? Is the end of the naming and classifying function of our theory to understand and embrace or really just an underlying fear of transformation?

Ms. Jain suggested, “We are not consigned to this morass of faith and doubt that Christianity has set up for us.”³⁵ I would contend rather that it is not Christianity that has set up the present situation, but rather the tension between the contemporary notions of the autonomy of the self and the dogma of tolerance. Elkins was certainly onto a fundamental concern of any future consideration of these issues when he threw out the possibility that “one of the unresolved differences here is how much the question of central narratives, concerns, and the values of discourse about modernism and postmodernism inform all subsequent encounters with objects.”³⁶ Indeed, Elkins believes that art (specifically postmodern painting) is “suffused with a lingering nostalgia for a time when religion could be named.”³⁷ This play between prohibition and earnest yearning is exactly the arena within which this discussion takes place.

What then *is* the use? What is the use of attempting to define an arena of religio-spiritual concern in contemporary art? What is the use of artists of faith engaging with the wider artworld, and vice versa? Simply put, the use is transformation. The use is a radical reconsideration of who and what we are, and of what our interrelations within the world consist. The use is recognizing the kind of “living and articulated unity”³⁸ of which Eliade wrote.

The use of the panel discussion was in its implications; both in the extent it helped to define the conditions under which contemporary art and religion have been operating, as well as the way it showed that the systems of refusal are not absolute. So while in many ways the Re-Enchantment discussion only reiterated the binary nature of the problem facing the interaction of religious faith and contemporary art, its very existence evinced potential solutions. The tension between the public expression of religious affect and the private reality of faith-motivation were at full cry, yet the sense that the current systems of refusal may be challenged was in the air. This is what made it such a hopeful and invigorating event for me, as a faith-motivated painter; it let me know that not all of the avenues are blocked. As Elkins suggests, “there are signs that the secularization theory of modernism might be losing its grip.”³⁹ Not all critics and theorists are closed off from the discussion. Even many of those who, like de Duve, have very definite and exclusionary opinions, are still willing to enter a realm of dialogue and relation. When we refuse to consign ourselves to disagreement, the sum of our interactions will be a benefit to all involved. Though we may find more questions than answers in our discussions, I believe that is a better situation than the simple delineations of known quantities. Mystery is a good thing. It entralls the artist of faith and, I expect, challenges those who are not of faith to discover a transformative mystery as well.

¹ Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and Social Hope*, page 134.

² Rorty’s idea of use can be seen quickly in his debate with Umberto Eco in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, Cambridge University Press, 1992. More involved conceptions can be gleaned from his *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin Books, 1999.

³ See Rorty’s *A World Without Substances or Essences*.

⁴ Groys, Boris. *Religion as Medium*.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 2:14, The Bible. English Standard Version.

⁶ Groys, Boris. *Religion as Medium*.

⁷ Coomaraswamy, Ananda. *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, page 33.

⁸ de Duve, Thierry. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

⁹ de Duve, Thierry. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

¹⁰ de Duve, Thierry. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

¹¹ de Duve. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

¹² de Duve, Thierry. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

¹³ de Duve, Thierry. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

¹⁴ de Duve, Thierry. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

¹⁵ de Duve, Thierry. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

¹⁶ Elkins, James. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

¹⁷ Elkins, James. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

¹⁸ Worley, Taylor. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

¹⁹ Piatek, Frank. Comment attributed to Piatek by James Elkins during the Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

²⁰ Piatek, Frank. Comment in Re-enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

²¹ Coomaraswamy, Ananda. *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, page 46.

²² Elkins, James. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

²³ de Duve, Thierry. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

²⁴ Groys, Boris, Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

²⁵ Worley, Taylor. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.

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- ²⁶ Morgan, David. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.
- ²⁷ Jain, Kajri, Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.
- ²⁸ Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and Social Hope*, page 149.
- ²⁹ Bordowitz, Gregg. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.
- ³⁰ Bordowitz, Gregg. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.
- ³¹ Bordowitz, Gregg. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.
- ³² Rorty mentions his qualification for having the right to one's religious beliefs in his essay *Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance*, in *Philosophy and Social Hope*.
- ³³ Morgan, David. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.
- ³⁴ Bordowitz, Gregg. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.
- ³⁵ Jain, Kajri, Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.
- ³⁶ Elkins, James. Comment in Re-Enchantment Panel Discussion. April 17, 2007.
- ³⁷ Elkins, James, *Pictures and Tears*. Page 214.
- ³⁸ Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and The Profane*. Page 94.
- ³⁹ Elkins, James. *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*. Page 23.