

HOLY CRISIS. ON THE PROBLEM THAT ESPOUSES MODERN ART TO MODERN SPIRITUALITY

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ABSTRACT. Visual art owes its modernity from the crisis it fell into in the midst of the nineteenth century. Courbet's call for realism questioned the foundation of the art of his time. The incapacity of the series of '-isms' that followed to answer Courbet's call, pointed to a crisis not only in art, but in the then emerging non-artistic visual culture in general. In fact, Courbet's call questioned the image paradigm that was in force since the Renaissance: the one of 'representation'. The crisis of art laid bare the crisis of the representation paradigm. Modern art's complex relation to religion and spirituality must be understood in the context of this paradigm crisis. Although generally anti-religious, modern art often keeps on being fascinated by religion, spirituality, and mysticism. The 'religious', the 'holy', the 'sanctity' modern art is inclined to, is linked to the crisis it originates from. Does this reference to the religious and the spiritual, then, constitute the answer to that crisis? I defend the thesis that it rather affirms this very crisis. If there is something 'holy' in art, it is not the answer to which it makes people long, but it is art's inherent crisis itself. If art has a 'holy' mission, it is to keep that crisis on the agenda of modernity.

KEYWORDS: Modern art, spirituality, realism, modernity, crisis

Art raises its head where the religions relax their hold.
(Nietzsche 1996: 150)

An artist cannot endure reality.
(Nietzsche 1967: 308)

What we are celebrating is both buffoonery and a requiem mass.
(Ball 1996: 56)

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Like a Magic Bishop

In the spring of 1916, in the backroom of a pub in Zürich, Hugo Ball and his fellows¹ organized *Cabaret Voltaire*. It turned out to be the first platform of one of the most influential artistic avant-gardes of the twentieth century: Dada. The term is Ball's, and refers to a stopgap common to a lot of languages, meaning something like 'nonsense', 'rubbish', 'baloney'. For this is what, in the eyes of Dadaists, art is and has to be: 'tra-la-la', 'nonsense', 'rubbish', 'nothing', 'dada'.

This art is what the world in 1916 deserves, Dada shouted. What other art would match a civilization plunging into the biggest outburst of collective madness ever? From the Yser in Belgium to the frontiers of Switzerland, from the shores of the Baltic to those of the Black Sea, modern civilization has created lines of trenches and muddy wastelands where, day after day, its younger generation was sent into death. Stranded in neutral Switzerland, deserters, intellectuals and artists had started to react to that collective rage. Within the art milieu, the Dada-group was the most explicit one. In such a world, so Ball and his fellows claimed, fine arts have lost any sense and if there is a mission left for art, it can only be that of self-destruction. It is the only way to be in line with contemporary reality. Only such gesture takes seriously the morbid Nothing in which reality is drowning. Someone has to show the Nothing reality is busy with, and if necessary, art has to accomplish that task.² Dada is the name for that 'zero degree of art'. No word is left that fits with what it says, no image that shows what it shows. The only 'realistic' word or image is the one showing precisely *this*—a word or image unequivocally showing or telling *nothing*.

Hugo Ball understood this very well when, in this same year 1916, on the evening of June 23, for the first time he performed his new kind of poetry: 'poems without words or sound poems', poetry radically meaning nothing (Ball 1996: 90). The performance was so intense that, on a certain moment, Ball lost control and did not know how to stop. In his diary, on that date, we read:

1 Members of the group include: Hugo Ball (1886-1927), his wife Emmy Hennings (1885-1948), Marcel Janco (1895-1984), Tristan Tzara (1886-1963), and Richard Huelsenbeck (1892-1974); see Chipp 1984: 366 ff.

2 Under the date of April 14, 1916, in Ball's *Flight Out of Time*, we read: 'Our cabaret is a gesture. Every word that is spoken and sung here says at least one thing: that this humiliating age has not succeeded winning our respect. What would be respectable and impressive about it? Its cannons? Our big drum drowns them. Its idealism? That has long been a laughingstock, in its popular and its academic edition. The grandiose slaughters and cannibalistic exploits? Our spontaneous foolishness and our enthusiasm for illusion will destroy them' (Ball 1996: 61).

But how was I to get to the end? ... I began to chant my vowel consequences in a church style like a recitative, and tried not only to look serious but to force myself to be serious. For a moment, it was as if there was a pale, bewildered face in my cubist mask, that half-frightened, half-curious face of a ten-year-old boy, trembling and hanging avidly on the priest's words in the requiems and high masses in his home parish. Then the lights went out, as I had ordered, and bathed in sweat, I was carried down off the stage like a magic bishop (Ball 1996: 71).

It is not certain if we can fully take Ball at his words. His diary, entitled *Die Flucht auf der Zeit* (*Flight out of Time*), was published only in 1927 and might, to a smaller or larger degree, have been re-written. Already in 1916, though initiator of the *Cabaret* and 'author' of the term, he had distanced himself from Dada and turned his interest, first to politics and then to religion, more precisely to Christianity, which he had left in his early youth.³ His re-discovery of that religion was strongly supported by his wife (and co-initiator of Dada), Emmy Hennings who, too, re-embraced Christianity. Reading *Die Flucht auf der Zeit*, one cannot avoid the impression that a lot has been adapted to Ball's later situation. Even the title is Christian, literally translating the famous volume of one of the Church Fathers, Ambrosius: *De fuga saeculi* (Ambroise de Milan 2015).

Still, what he writes about the experience of June 23, 1916 may be close to the real facts. Those facts are not religious as such, but have been lived as if they were. What are these facts? His performance reduced language to its brutal materiality, performed poetry as an apotheosis of nonsense. These facts, Ball lived them linked to some 'church style' and to incomprehensible phenomena he, as a child, had adored in liturgical ceremonies and which had him made hung on every word of the priest. Reciting the zero degree of language, he had felt a 'magic bishop'—maybe not during the performance itself, but certainly at the end when he was 'carried off the stage'. His 'no' to religion had persisted in the distance he, as Dadaist, took from any kind of 'sense', but on the very moment of his performance turned into its opposite. In the affirmation of a radical nonsensicality, he seemed to rediscover the religion he once had renounced.

Anyway, and without pretending to say the last word on Ball's unexpected reaction, it is not inappropriate to qualify this scene as iconic for modern visual art in general. Over and again, art obtained its modernity by breaking with its traditional past—with the artistic tradition as well as with cultural and religious ones. And at the same time, examples abound that

3 Already in the Autumn of 1921, he started to write intensively on early Christianity (Ball 2011).

show how art, in the very moment it rejected its traditions, brought them back via some back door.

This goes especially for religious traditions. This is not to say that modern art still intends to put itself at the service of existing religious institutions and their practices—although this happens, and not only minor artists illustrate that. But it is a general observation that modern art, despite—and often even *in*—its anti-religious claim, turns to religious and spiritual concepts to describe what happens to it. And as frequently some artist's work evolves in that direction and finally ends up celebrating the non-representable—a celebration which, on a formal level, is often difficult to distinguish from a negative theological discourse.

Ball's Dadaistic performance of June 23, 1916 can be considered as emblematic in this. What does it mean that art, staging its modernity by an anti-religious position, at the same time turns to the religious? What does this imply for art? And for religion? What, then, is still religion? And what is art? Do we, modern people, know what art is? And what religion is?

Anyway, since modernity, both 'art' and 'religion' have lost their matter of course, their self-evidence. Both terms stand for phenomena in relation to which, to say the least, modernity has a problematic relation. Many, in the name of modernity, contest even their right to exist. The 'death of God' is widely known as defining modernity, and a long tradition of enlightened criticism declares religion forfeit. The 'death of art' is as much a typically modern claim. Art is a 'Vergangenes', Hegel said when, in one of his famous 1819 lessons on esthetics, he was talking about the fine arts of his time (Hegel 1970: 23). And when, in 1920, Georg Grosz and John Heartfield, entirely in line with Dada, publicly demonstrated against art, one could not misunderstand the writing on their board, reading 'Die Kunst ist tot' ('Art is dead').

To understand what is at stake in the religious reflex of the originally anti-religious modern art, first some insight is required in what is at stake in modern art itself. In what follows, I develop the thesis that modern art owes its emergence from a crisis. The 'religious', the 'holy', the 'sanctity' today's art is inclined to, are linked to that very crisis. Does this reference to the religious and the spiritual, then, constitute the answer to that crisis? I defend that it rather affirms that very crisis. If there is something 'holy' in art, it is not the *answer* to which it makes people long, but it is art's inherent *crisis* itself. If art has a 'holy' mission, it is to keep that crisis on the agenda of modernity.

Modern Art & Crisis

The furious pathos with which, between 1916 and the early 1920s, Dada bashed all existing cultural and artistic traditions is neither unique nor orig-

inal. During the century to come, modern art would regularly retake the same pathos, and Dada itself repeated the numerous breaking moments that preceded it. It is difficult to fix a 'first' breaking moment, since each of them claim that title. But one of the earliest and most decisive moments in the becoming modern of visual art must be linked to the French nineteenth century painter Gustave Courbet. His call for 'realism' clearly expresses the crisis out of which modern art emerged. Taken in its radicality, this request called down a verdict upon the then existing art. Art must be realistic or disappear, Courbet stated. This is to say, it has to give up its comfortable label of 'fine arts'. Art must not be defined as what is 'fine' or 'beautiful'. Art's core mission is to be realistic, without any compromise. It has to be judged according to what degree it expresses concrete reality.

Courbet's *Atelier du peintre* (1855) is programmatic in this. It is, so to say, a self-portrait both of the painter and of the art of painting as such. It shows Courbet at work in his studio, with in there the classical attributes, including the nude model. However, the model is out of function. It is not her the artist is painting, nor anything else in his studio. What he paints is a nature scene. Courbet makes a statement: art must leave the studio and go into nature, into concrete reality. And, vice versa, it is concrete reality that must enter his studio. This is what we see happening on the canvas. On the right, we recognize avant-garde activists and intellectuals like, among others, Baudelaire and Proudhon: public figures who each in their own way, collaborate at developing a new time. On the left, we see 'ordinary' people who, in that emerging new time, have become its victims and whose social fight the new art has to support. Which is, besides art's realism, another task of modern art, so Courbet's *Atelier* wants to make clear. This is what at least the young boy on the foreground seems to have understood, subtly inviting the spectator to identify with him. Contrary to Courbet's critics and the entire bourgeois society, the little boy looks approvingly and full of admiration to the painter and his new art.⁴

Art is realistic or is not: this message speaks out of any detail of Courbet's master piece. It summarizes his entire artistic engagement until then. Remember the complete title of Courbet's painting: *Atelier du peintre—Allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique* (The studio of the painter—Real allegory defining a seven year period in my artistic life).

Courbet's 'realism' gives full expression to the crisis out of which modern visual art has emerged. His entire oeuvre is a call for realism in art. It is,

4 Courbet himself explains extensively his *Atelier du peintre* in a letter to Champfleury at the end of 1854 (Courbet 1992: 131-133, see also Barbe 2005: 495-514).

however, *nothing more than a call*. Courbet's art itself is not realistic. In a way, the full title of *L'atelier* makes it clear already: it is an 'allegory'. The fact that the 'allegory' defines itself as 'real', does not prevent it from being an allegory. An allegory, by definition, speaks words that tell something else than they literally say. Put differently: Courbet's painting is a pamphlet and nothing more. It *calls for* realism, but *is itself* not realism. It does not make real what its own call demands.

So, Courbet's call for realism in fact only expresses art's *crisis*. *As such*, his painting is not realistic. Its content may match the concrete reality of his lifetime, in the way he paints, in his artistic technique, however, there is almost no difference with the then classical standards. Courbet leaves the gesture of painting as such untouched. This only changed with impressionism. There, painting leaves behind the realm of premeditated composition and instructive message. Instead, painting limits itself to mere 'registration'. The painter paints what he observes, nothing more, nothing less. '*Un oeil, une main*', 'an eye, a hand', thus Edouard Manet: art must register what stimulates the retina; everything it does more than that, betrays its real mission, which is realism.

Yet, soon the art of painting discovers that it must not limit itself to passive registration and, more important, to the boundaries of 'representation', whatever realistic that may be. Must visual art not go beyond what it registers? Must it not seek for the elementary construction which is at the base of the reality it represents? Must the 'realism' required in art not be situated precisely there? Such, Paul Cézanne must have thought when, over and again, he painted apples, still lifes, or the Montagne Sainte-Victoire—which is what, only a few years later, inspired Picasso and Braque to come up with cubism.

But why turning the art of painting only into a quest for the elementary construction-format of reality? Is art itself not reality, a constructive, creative one? Is its realism not a matter of construing reality, proceeding from an elementary form (such as a black square or circle, a monochrome white surface, etc)? Thus, the path chosen by Malevich and the many kinds of constructivism after him. It is not a mere coincidence that Malevich described his abstract, 'suprematic' works as 'painted realism'⁵

And yet, does art not have to stick to representation? Not to make concrete reality visible, but to show that visible reality itself has become a veil, that it is not made out of real stuff but of images, and that, in a world where images replace reality, it is urgent to show precisely that, i. e. to show that

5 See the essay of Malevich 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The new Painterly Realism' (Bolt 1976: 116-134).

everything has become image and that real reality is exactly what escapes what we see. Art is, in that sense, rather than simply representation, a knife cutting into representations and showing people the result of that dissection. This is the path surrealism has taken. This kind of ‘-ism’ is not intending to drive away from reality and embrace the non-reality of dreams, as is often said. On the contrary, what surrealism tries to do is to show reality as it is: only, this is not what it looks like in our daily observation; what we observe is a web of ‘bourgeois’ images behind which real reality (i. e. ‘le surréel’, the ‘surreal’, the superlative of ‘real’) is hidden for reasons that are highly ‘bourgeois’.

In 1916, Dada reduced art to its ‘zero degree’. On that base, each of the later answers to the realism-crisis have chosen a specific way to reinvent visual art. Dada repeated Courbet’s question, this time in a world full of horror and war from which art wants to disconnect itself as radically as possible. Dada forces art to refocus on its own critical gesture, and consequently on the crisis discerned in art. This is Dada’s realism. But where else can that realism be located than in the gesture that holds existing reality at distance? And where, then, in that taking distance, do we find ‘real reality’?

None of the ‘-isms’ was able to provide a decisive answer to that question. It indicates how abysmal that question is. What does it precisely mean that art does no longer match reality? Did premodern art match reality? This is at least what Courbet supposed when he claimed that art has lost its realism and had to regain it. Let us therefore focus briefly on that art he considers to be no longer found applicable to his time: the ‘classical’ art, which has its origin in the Renaissance.

Renaissance Art & Realism

In what sense is Renaissance art realistic? Is it realistic at all? Does it not show a realm full of antique gods, satyrs, nymphs as well as Christian saints and martyrs, scenes from hell and heaven, et cetera? Is the world we meet there not one of dream and fantasy? This is at least the way we, moderns, look at it. People of that time, however, did not share our gaze. To them, such scenes revealed the ground of reality—a ground which was in the hands of the Christian God. This is not to say that God represented on a canvas is self-evident for Christianity. It has *become* so. Before the Renaissance, such was not the case. Before, Christian art was more (but only a little bit more) in line with the Bible’s ban on images—a ban that prohibited not only images of God, but of humans as well and even of living beings in general (Exodus 20:4; Duteronomy 5:8-10).

Contrary to Islam, that has the ban on images not even in its holy book but nevertheless strictly forbids images, Christianity never fully obeyed its own biblical ban. After a few decades of public debate on it in eighth centu-

ry Eastern Christianity, a consensus grew that images of God and man were allowed, provided they were ‘realistic’ (Besançon 2000). This meant that they made the spectator look away from the daily world of finitude and sin and guided his gaze in the direction of the divine, for there was the locus of reality’s ground.

This paradigm is at the base of ‘iconic’ art. The image is supposed, so to say, to cleave the perishable world of everyday life. That gap allows a glimpse of the divine, true world. Formulated in the neo-platonic ‘grammar’ of that time: through the chaos of the corporeal world, the harmony and beauty of art gives us, mortals, an ‘image’ of the unimaginable and immortal divine of which our world is an emanation. Hence the sanctity of the image. Hence also the liturgical way in which it is approached and which we today still observe in the cult practices of Greek and Russian Orthodox Christianity.

The realism at work in Renaissance painting is of a different nature. It is the result of the ‘aesthetic revolution’ in early fourteenth century Italy. Influenced by the huge success of painters as Cimabue and Giotto, a process of redefining the image took place in Western Christianity. The background was a new reflection on the doctrine of incarnation. God had incarnated in man, He had emptied Himself and, in Christ, had gone the path of mortals like us, until death. During the highlight of scholasticism in the thirteenth century, Christian intellectuals started to interpret that idea as if even the smallest, most insignificant elements of our mortal reality could be seen as places where the immortal God was present. From *icon*, the paradigm of the image turned into *representation*. Instead of a some ‘stairway to heaven’, an image is now considered as a ‘window’, a window to the world around us. Things present besides the painted panel (i. e. the reality we daily observe), are put present again—‘re-presented’—on the panel. Contrary to the past, such images were no longer considered as being less concerned with God. The smallest detail of daily reality displayed on a canvas or panel could be read as an ode to the divine Creator.

The *Ghent Altarpiece*, the 1432 triptych by Jan and Hubert van Eyck, offers an image of reality down to the smallest detail. The sparkle of the rubies on a rug, the precise representation of a whole range of flowers and plants: it is *in there* that the saints, the just judges, the prophets, and the Lamb (symbol of God incarnate) appear. When the panels are closed, the masterpiece clearly reveals its paradigm. It is clear that it is a ‘window’, a window to reality. And in the center of that closed ‘window’, we see, right in the centre, an open window to the town outside as well as a ‘window’ to the interior of a room inside. Those two central window views are framed by the narrative explaining the ‘window’ paradigm. That narrative is the Annunciation: the angel announcing the Virgin that in her the Word has be-

come flesh, that the deity has incarnated into the mortal, that the infinite radically shares our finite world. Open the panel, so the triptych suggests, and you will see the natural in its supra-natural glory.

Just like Courbet's *Latelier* does four centuries later for the art of his time, the *Ghent Altarpiece* offers a programmatic self-portrait of painting as conceived in early Renaissance. Art is realistic because it shows everyday reality as anchored in reality's very ground. If reality is marked by 'creativity', because it is supported by the infinite creativity of its Creator, then both the artist and his art participate in that divine creativity. His art is, so to speak, the superlative of human creativity. The beauty of art works allows us to see the hand of the creational divine, which is the foundation of reality. In that sense, the new technique perfecting the 'window' paradigm of the image, the linear perspective, can be interpreted as the discovery, within the imaging plane, of the point in the infinite from where the finite scene on the canvas is constructed. It is via that point that the artist (as well as the spectator) is in contact with the point from where the One and Infinite God has created the whimsical and capricious reality in its mysterious unity.

During the Renaissance, the representation paradigm brought about an aesthetic explosion, which has since only increased in intensity. This kind of artistic zest continued to flourish until the first centuries of modernity. However, in spite of what the art of early modernity claimed itself, it lost connection with the religious and metaphysical ground it had before. And, as a result of this, its realism became problematic. Even where it continued to paint Biblical scenes, Madonna's and saints, and between artists such as Rubens, Rembrandt, El Greco or Zurbarán continued to deliver top-class religious masterpieces, art was no longer read in the realistic grammar as was the case in Van Eyck's century.

In the fifteenth century, art that was permeated by God could still be perceived as realistic: God still stood for the point from which the human being related to reality (including to himself). Art defining itself as representation found in Him the guarantee that its representations were based on real presence. In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, this guarantee corroded and finally disappeared in the slow process which the dictum 'the death of God' refers to. Art evolved to what the French called 'Beaux Arts': an art legitimized by beauty only—beauty which itself was no longer connected with—and grounded in—the reality the surrounding world was dealing with.

Modernity & Realism

It is Courbet who, in unmistakable terms, places this crisis on the agenda of his time: art has lost its sense of reality and therefore has lost its right to exist. It must be realist or disappear. Ever since, art has not succeeded in be-

coming realistic, but has acknowledged to be disconnected from reality, and has produced art on the base of that mere acknowledgment. Modern art is an art that questions its self-evidence, recognizes its fundamental crisis and creates art works proceeding from that very crisis. Positively or negatively, this characterizes the immense variety of ‘-isms’ that made up the modern art landscape after Courbet.

What, however, does it exactly mean that art is in crisis and has lost connection with reality? Is the latter not adequately enough portrayed by it? Does the representation it offers not meet the criteria of empirical observation? The problem is not there. Since the Renaissance, ‘representation’ has been the paradigm of the way art considers and produces images—and it has since only refined its skills in that. The problem, however, is that, precisely in the time of Courbet, art ceased to be the privileged ‘supplier’ of images and representations. The need for images—which had constantly increased in the centuries before—was less and less met by art. At Courbet’s time, it had already distinguished itself from other image suppliers by presenting itself as ‘Fine Arts’. But the rise of photography and of what we today call ‘media’ shook the image market thoroughly, including the Fine Arts.

If image is defined as representation, was it not obvious that painting is replaced by photography, which could do the job infinitely faster than the slow practice with brush, paint and canvas? So, is even Courbet’s ‘painted’ scream for realism not completely replaceable by photography and other media with which modern man portrays himself and his world? Do *they* not fulfill Courbet’s realism claim much more efficiently? Should art, including Courbet’s art, not indeed abolish itself?

What Courbet did not yet realize is that art could only meet the ‘realism’ it needed, if it radically redefined its practice and, consequently, completely reinvented itself. Even if this is not a sufficient condition, it is at least a necessary one. The impressionists had made a first attempt in this. They had changed the act of painting as such and thereby started a trend that continues until today: a continuous reinvention of the pictorial act of painting—or, more general, of presenting or performing. But the injunction to realism has never stopped to make its appearance: where is realism in that renewed act of painting or in whatever other act of art or expression? Where is realism situated in an artwork?

The various answers that we briefly evoked here—only a loose grasp from a whole range—make clear that modern art has not been able to answer those questions adequately. None of its ‘-isms’ has been able to do so. They all have continued to operate within the crisis laid open by those questions. It is the obsession with those questions that since haunts in the heart of modern art: what is the realism of representations if the whole of reality

functions only in its quality of being represented? Has then ‘representation’ become reality? And what, then, is reality? Art’s modernity coincides only with questioning the old, still prevailing paradigm of representation; it never succeeded in putting forward a successful alternative. Instead of being the breeding ground for a new visual paradigm, modern art kept stuck in being the experimental space where the old paradigm again and again was put into question. So far, modern art has not yet succeeded in transcending the sphere of critically questioning the old representation paradigm. Emerging from the crisis in which it was no longer able to be in line with the prevailing image paradigm, art’s modernity ended up in being an experimental platform keeping its own crisis on the agenda.

Realism & Spirituality

It is a fact that many modern art is fascinated, if not by proper religion (since that term smells too much of dogma and institution), then by spirituality and mysticism. Likewise, many modern art theories read the representational condition of an image as a power to show what is beyond, a ‘reality’ at the other side of the image. This is for instance the way Isabelle Malz interprets the nature of an image, as we can read in the catalogue of the important exhibition she curated, *The Problem of God* (Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, September 26, 2015—January 24, 2016):

The power that can reside in images evidently also arises from their capacity to provide access to something that may be dead or elsewhere, to a mighty ruler, to religious content, to something invisible that has neither a body nor a countenance, or something imagined, dreamt. The power of the image is this: ‘il fait voir’. It opens our eyes, it reveals (Malz 2016: 311).

An image has the power to ‘faire voir’, ‘to show’, and what it shows, is what is absent, but nonetheless rendered present by way of representation. Malz is in line here with a wide spread idea in contemporary art theory. Remember for instance Charles Taylor’s account of art as ‘epiphany’, as explained in his *Sources of the Self*. A ‘work of art’, he writes, is:

the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral and spiritual significance; a manifestation, moreover, which also defines or completes something, even as it reveals (Taylor 1989: 419).

Art theories that embrace this idea, acknowledge that the absent reference of an image (as stressed by modern art) can be of religious, spiritual or mystical nature. That theory is implicitly or explicitly present in many specifically artistic ‘-isms’. So, despite the fact art owes its modernity to the realiza-

tion that traditional, originally religiously embedded art has finished, this does not prevent new art from still being fascinated by the spiritual and the religious and, in some cases, integrate it explicitly into art works. Artistic experiences such as Hugo Ball had during his Cabaret Voltaire performance on June 23, 1916, clearly point in that direction.

The individual artist can of course have its own private reasons, but being a widespread phenomenon in the milieus of modern art, the fascination for the spiritual must be linked to the core of modern art itself. It must be understood from the perspective of art's proper crisis—i. e. from the crisis of representation that it puts at the center of its artistic creativity.

In modern art's active deconstruction of the representation paradigm, reality as such sometimes happens to appear as what precisely escapes representation or image, and emerges as the non-representable, the unimaginable. This can be eminently the case in abstract art. That artistic procedure purifies representations until they end up to be mere elementary forms, and finally one form, showing on the level of content 'nothing' but, by doing so, revealing it is *but* representation. Precisely in that quality such representation suggests the non-representable, the unimaginable.

Translated as a representation representing the non-representable, it obviously tends towards religious art, certainly the one in conformity with monotheistic religion. Is the unimaginable not the 'aesthetic' hallmark par excellence for the One God? The 'unimaginable representation' is particularly well related to the monotheistic divine, precisely because it does not portray God—but instead portrays His non-depictable character (not). The abstract path taken by Mark Rothko's oeuvre in the late 1940s has been interpreted in that sense, and it is no coincidence that it has its 'endpoint' in the famous non-denominational Mark Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas.

In Rothko's oeuvre, however, the non-representable is not put forward as the object of religious devotion. The title of a recently discovered manuscript of his, *Artist's Reality*, makes a clear point: according to him, painting is about 'reality'. And being *modern*, his art shows the *problem* a representation has with reality. It shows representations representing nothing but their incapacity to render reality present.

The reason why modern art has nurtured a fascination for the religious and the spiritual must be understood in the light of the historical origin of the representation paradigm. As explained above, this must in its turn be understood in relation to the doctrine of incarnation. This doctrine made it possible to see reality's 'real', imperishable, divine ground in the 'unreal' perishable and mortal domain of everyday reality. God's incarnation had turned the most banal given into a manifestation of His glory. Nothing was without divine ground, and that ground was visible in every detail. Until

the dawn of modernity in the seventeenth century, every image implicitly demonstrated this and thus guaranteed its reality claim.

Modern man has declared himself free from this grounding instance which is God. He no longer understands himself on the base of a creative power that he and reality outside share. And even if he does so, even if he considers himself connected to the creative ground of the universe, he does so because he freely decides to do so. This is to say: howsoever he understands himself content-wise, formally he does so on the base of his freedom. Modern freedom implies a fundamental disconnectedness towards the reality by which we nevertheless live as humans. Modernity supposes a 'groundless' freedom: a freedom that detaches ourselves from what gives us ground. And that abysmal freedom is still there, even if modern fellows continue to act as if they were genuinely 'grounded' in reality.

Consequently, the representation by which modern man represents himself and his world, has lost connection to its ground and in this sense has become 'free'. Yet, at the same time, this freedom is used to hide or deny its abysmal condition. That denial belongs to the structural format of representation. This is why, in our modern world, representations act—and are perceived—as if they were themselves grounding reality. Hence, indeed, a visual culture, in which representations are about to replace reality. It is art, become modern, that has revealed this problem and put it in the center of our visual culture. Since Courbet, art forces modern representation to face its groundlessness, its disconnectedness from reality.

Yet, it is also in art that the nostalgic longing for a ground to our representation is kept alive. Having no alternative for the groundlessness of modern representation, art is a place where questioning 'representation' can turn into longing to reestablish the solid ground it has lost. This is the source of the fascination modern art cherishes for the religious and spiritual. That fascination betrays an attachment to the old paradigm—the paradigm of representation—and more specifically to the founding ground that this paradigm assumed before modernity. And this fascination also explains why modern art can be haunted by the temptation to get that grounding restored. It is a temptation to give the image its real basis back, to give the representation back its anchoring in reality—in this case by noticing, within in a world reduced to representations, the hand of its non-representable Creator.

It is important to realize that when modern art gives in to this *nostalgic desire*, it loses its modernity. To remain modern, it must retain its fascination for the spiritual only in order to effectively keep the problem field in which it operates problematic—to keep the problem, around which art is centered, as a main problem on the agenda of modernity.

Modern self-understanding is built on radical freedom—'radical' in the strongest sense of the word, for it has freed itself even from its ontological 'radix', i. e. its ground of being. It is a freedom that is not even bound to its own *being* or to any being of whatsoever. Modernity must be constantly reminded of the groundlessness of that freedom as that which it cannot help but find itself in conflict with. It coincides with the conflict it has with itself: this is the inherently tragic condition of modern freedom. And it can only secure that freedom by bringing this conflict into culture—by giving 'representation' to it in a thousand and one ways: representations of the inner tragic of the representational paradigm.

Of course, modernity is the result of an anti-traditional attitude, but it is itself impossible without tradition. To be viable, it undeniably needs a reference to the ways, in the past, people have dealt with the same problem. Modernity may not stop to remember where it comes from: not to find an alternative or a solution to its problem, but to keep, by referring to its tradition, its problem open.

And this is precisely what modern visual art has done, already for a century and a half. In that 'tradition' the image paradigm of representation is questioned, and the fact it has failed in generating an alternative, does not devalue it. On the contrary, with its own visual means, art has to keep open the problem on which modernity is based. This is essential for modernity: an identity that defines itself as free, needs, to be what it is, an never ending infinity of representations, in which it can mirror itself; but it needs as well an image showing the tragic, impossible condition of both that identity and its representation. The latter is the core mission of modern visual art.

If art must take its fascination for the religious seriously, it is because this helps to keep its own crisis and that of the modern image paradigm in general on the agenda of modernity.

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