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The Return of Religion...–The Art of Iconoclasm**The Art of Iconoclasm**

The news of God's death appears to have been premature. Religion is everywhere in contemporary politics and in the media; it has returned on the scene as a politicized media phenomenon creating controversies around righteous beliefs and their images. Religion is increasingly a matter of media controversy, of "image wars," rather than daily observance or sophisticated theology.

In a way, this development can be understood as consequential: monotheism was always deeply concerned with appearances, with images—after all, it was defined by the rejection of idols. In many religious teachings false gods, worshipped in the guise of "graven images," are defined in visual terms. In the Christian tradition, the Second Commandment dictates that of the true God no images must be made. Visibility is the realm of the false gods. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation further mitigated this ban on representing God, since in Jesus God had taken on the form of a mortal man; however, the representation of Christ remained potentially contentious, as various episodes of iconoclasm show. On the other hand, while Islam is exceedingly strict in its ban on images (*tasweer*) that may lead to the idolatrous "association" (*shirk*) of other deities with Allah, it also has a history of depictions of the Prophet, including a still-living tradition of popular images in Shiite Islam. As much as demagogues would like us to believe otherwise, no religion is monolithic, and nothing is more unstable and contested than the definition of idolatry.

With the rise of fundamentalist movements, many authors have come to see monotheism itself as pathological or evil. From the destruction of the Bamyán Buddhas and 9/11 to the murder of Theo van Gogh over the film *Submission*, the Danish cartoon riots and the "Muhammad the Bear" affair, it is Islam that is often singled out for attacks; others, however, blame monotheism as such. Renowned Egyptologist and scholar of religion Jan Assmann has sparked fierce debates with his assertion that the "Mosaic distinction between the true God and idols created a kind of intolerance and violence not known before." In the context of today's images, monotheism and the rejection of idols are often presented as inevitably leading to intolerance, iconoclasm, and violence. This grim portrayal is one of the dominant contemporary myths about religion.

Since Roman times, the "Greek" critique of mythic narratives and the "Jewish" critique of idolatrous images have become entwined in numerous ways. On the one hand, the Christian church adopted the philosophical critique of myths for their attacks on "idolatrous" religions; on the other hand, since the Enlightenment monotheism itself came to be criticized as being riddled with myths, as modern thinkers such as Feuerbach and Nietzsche appropriated monotheistic iconoclasm and Greek philosophy and turned it against religion itself. Originated in the wake of the Enlightenment, modern art was always a deconstruction of the rules of representation and of the images of Christian and other gods. There is not one single history of iconoclasm, but various interlinked and overlapping genealogies. While secularists create a radical distinction between "the secular West" on the one hand and religion (especially Islam) on the other, modern culture is profoundly indebted to religion; it sets free the secularizing impulse inherent in monotheism itself. The rejection of idolatry can be seen as a criticism of images that, while still dogmatic, was radicalized in modern thought and art.

In refusing to regard iconoclasm merely as a pathological phenomenon associated with the religious other, this exhibition offers a counter-myth of iconoclasm. If both the narrative of secularization and that of the return of religion can be characterized as myths, this does not mean that they are simply untrue; according to a contemporary understanding of the term, myths are not just imaginary stories, but narratives that give historical events a contemporary meaning and can thereby, to some extent, shape reality. Rather

than as “iconophobic” vandalism, iconoclasm at its most interesting can be seen as an attempt to redefine and re-imagine the image and to question what passes for visual culture—a culture whose images, including the images of religious confrontations that we are fed on a daily basis, may in fact be *insufficiently visual*. Do they not seem to be designed to obscure rather than reveal those processes that engender hatred and justify violence?

In seeking to go “beyond the image wars,” the 2002 exhibition *Iconoclasm. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art* at ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie) in Karlsruhe disparaged iconoclasm as such in favor of an “iconoclash” that amounts to a questioning and examination of images that suspends the urge to smash them. However, iconoclasm was always more than mere image-smashing, and amidst today’s spectacular battle over images it is crucial to reclaim iconoclasm—and religion—from its fundamentalist appropriators. As a criticism of images, the monotheistic discourse on idolatry also paved the way for modern critiques—of tradition, of religion itself, of the com-modity, and of capitalism. Regarding religious criticism and secular critique as being of the same ilk, *Iconoclasm* co-organizer sociologist Bruno Latour goes so far as to say that “suspicion has rendered us dumb.” Governments from Washington to Teheran must rejoice at such prose. The efficacy of critique in the face of terror and counter-terror is indeed doubtful, but rather than a disparagement of it as such, what is needed is a reexamination of our cultural and political deadlock, in which critique is either institutionalized and neutralized, or equated with dangerous political dissent and terrorism.

This show is conceived as a three-dimensional essay in two parts, which stages a confrontation between various kinds of iconoclasm in order to chart the (im)possibilities of contemporary iconoclasm in art, theory, and cultural and political practice in general. These notes indicate some of the possible relations between the images and non-images in the show, without presuming to curtail their interplay.

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From Idol to Artwork (BAK)

While iconoclasm is often equated with the destruction of art, it has, more interestingly, produced art. This part of the exhibition reflects on this process and on its consequences. Iconoclastic erasures can even come to function as an integral part of an artwork. Furthermore, the critique of cult images as idols stimulates their recontextualization as art: after centuries of neglect, from the Renaissance onward Apollo finds a new home in the museum, as fallen idols are reborn as art. By questioning cult images and removing them from their sacred context, monotheism facilitated their eventual transformation into *objets d’art* with a secularized aura. Certain objects associated with monotheism—medieval Madonnas, Persian illuminations—even came to be regarded primarily as priceless works of art. In the museum, one could say that Christ, Buddha, and Muhammad exist on the same abstract plane (even if didactic wall texts or visitor guides may treat them differently). At the same time, some critics have argued that the work of art remains ever in the service of “cult value.” Marx’s concept of the commodity fetish was based in part on eighteenth-century writer Charles De Brosses’s notion of African fetishism, which in his view was a worship of random objects that constituted a “primitive” prelude to idolatry; as the commodity fetish par excellence, is the modern artwork not just a barely secularized idol? If we look to the recent history of modern art, iconoclastic attacks on Greek and Roman idols-turned-art and the critique of representation in general led—among other things—to abstract paintings that seem to obey a secular Second Commandment, banning representation not because of a religious dogma, but as a consequence of a critique of art and its conditions. Even if artists such as Piet Mondrian had long abandoned the faith in which they were raised by the time they made their mature work, this rejection of representation mirrors the old monotheistic condemnation of idolatry, which has become an integral part of modern critical thought. In the current context, however, abstraction often comes to be associated with Islam: think for example of last year, when Cologne’s Cardinal Meisner complained that Gerhard Richter’s new abstract stainedglass window for his cathedral would be better suited for a mosque, or how full-body veils are seen by some as symptomatic of Islam’s abstract rejection of western “visual culture.” But then, is the “spectacle” of our media-saturated society not itself abstract to the core, programmed as it is by digital codes? Just how visible is our “visual culture”?

Attacking the Spectacle (CM Studio)

The second part of the exhibition, *Attacking the Spectacle*, focuses on the political contestations of what philosophers Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have characterized as the “Empire” of global capitalism. Here again the religious and the secular are in dialogue with each other. Modern theory and activism contain secularized traces of the Christian attack on Roman

spectacles. For the early Christians, the Roman Empire was the paradigmatic idolatrous society. The early Christian rejection of spectacles remained a potent trope in western culture, ready to be reactivated, for instance by Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This "anti-spectacular" discourse was transformed and radicalized by modern theorists and artists; building on Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism for example, filmmaker and theorist Guy Debord attacked capitalism as a "society of the spectacle" whose images barely disguised that it is a system of exploitation and living death.

Such critics may be truer descendants of monotheistic thinking than current fundamentalist terrorists who seem to outdo each other in the *embrace* of today's spectacle of the media, and whose strategies are shaped by modern terrorism. Rather than resolutely rejecting the capitalist spectacle, fundamentalists transform it into a spectacle of their own, dominated by dualistic clashes between good and evil and effects-laden scenes, of which the images from 9/11 are the most famous example. How can we imagine forms of theory and practice that break the deadlock created by the war of images and counter-images, of terror and counterterror?

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