



Who's Afraid of Religion?

Köken Ergun in conversation with Omar Kholeif



Köken Ergun, Ashura, 2012, video, courtesy of the artist

Omar Kholeif: I want to begin by talking about religion in your work. You've mentioned before that you think that this is a taboo subject in contemporary art. Why do you think this is the case when nothing else seems to be off limits?

Köken Ergun: There is a very complicated relationship between contemporary art and religion and I don't think it is being discussed enough. Once, Boris Groys came out and

said contemporary art is godless. And only recently did Kaelen Wilson-Goldie write this challenging text about contemporary art's timidity when it comes to religion.

On my part, well, first of all, it is not a taboo. But I think religion seems to be a subject that is rather absent and naturally avoided in contemporary art. I tend to look for the reasons for this in the personality of people who make or shape contemporary art. Since I started working in this field, my personal feelings and observations have been that people who are working in what we call 'contemporary art' are dominantly living secular lifestyles. Religion is absent in their lives, so it is probably natural that it is not that present in the vocabulary of actors in the field. On the contrary, one can argue another perspective: that it is present but rather one sided. We do see quite a few works of art that display a clear opposition to religious structures and phenomena, but do we see works that embrace religion or systems of belief?

Why do you think that is?

I think there is a serious disconnect between the world of contemporary art and that which we might deem to be sacred. It might be because contemporary art provenance coincides with the rise of secularism in the western world. It may be because it came about at a time when humanity almost destroyed itself in two world wars, neither of which was directly related to religion. Or is it because contemporary art – as a critical sphere – has always been reactionary to the social orders that have predominantly operated around religion?

It seems that you are building up to the idea of artistic subjectivity.

Aren't artists known to be more inclined to emotional and spiritual things? If so, what makes religion and spirituality so different in the eyes of contemporary art and its artists? Why is it acceptable in particular social circles to say, 'I am spiritual', but not to say, 'I am religious'? Is it because of the excess baggage religion has accumulated in the past centuries, in that it evolved from pure belief into a massive juggernaut of power structures? Should this stop us from negotiating with anything religious at all? Don't we then betray the criticality of contemporary art, which is perhaps its most genuine character, if we relegate everything religious or everyone religious? It makes me sad to witness prejudice against religion and especially religious people within these circles.

Could you give us some examples of this prejudice?

For example, in Turkey and the wider Middle East where a majority of the public are not leading secular lifestyles, their artists and especially institutions of contemporary art choose to emphasize their secular nature. They do not programme exhibitions or events that could open different perspectives to such a prevailing issue in their society. Aren't they accordingly excluding a big social group in their society? Do these institutions or actors fear stigmatization for being religious? Why do they develop such an allergy to religion or religious subjects? I think this attitude could be deemed an allergy. For example, try using the words inshallah in a catalogue text or during an installation/ institutional meeting in this geography. I do, and I often get sarcastic reactions. Sometimes it is the curators who give this type of reaction, sometimes directors and other institutional workers, sometimes artists. Occasionally the question follows with an unbelieving but sympathetic smile: 'Are you religious?'. This kind of allergic attitude to anything religious feeds from and also contributes to prejudice.

There is like an invisible wall that holds religion, religious topics or the so-called religious artists outside the control zones of contemporary art institutions in this region. Is it because of their directors or their funders? What about their audience? Are they not responsible for this polarization at all? A few months ago, at an opening of an Istanbul art institution, founded and directed by a woman wearing a headscarf, I was introduced to a guest who was not an artist herself. While we were greeting each other, the (headscarved) director passed by and the guest whispered loudly to me: 'I hate these things!', implying her. I told her she was the director, but it didn't seem to make any effect on her.

To what extent do you feel religion is an institution, and how do you view religion's historical relationship with art?

Well, first of all I believe that religion preceded culture. Also, it had aesthetic importance. It always brought with it a certain kind of visual culture. Historically, the relationship of art and religion has always been a productive one, not counterproductive. They still mingle. We see it in Indonesia, in Muslim Java, where religious rituals – once attributed to pre-Islamic traditions and then appropriated according to Islam – gracefully blend with local puppet theatre. We see it in East Africa, where tribes continue to develop their own music and set of movements for rituals attributed to different deities, even if most are now practicing monotheist religions introduced to them by the occupying west or Arabs. The people of Bali believe that if God gave them a talent, such as a good voice, skilful hands or a good

physique, they must use and display their talents as a thanksgiving to God. They do not see it as art only. It also continues to be this way in the west, in some forms of art, but those forms of art are not considered to be in the same league with contemporary arts. We are to blame for this polarization. It seems like the Enlightenment has corrupted us.

And yes, religion was probably the first institution.

Do you see a difference between how religion has played a role in creative practices, or in art history, in Turkey and the wider Middle East and the western world? How do you see these two institutions colliding today – the notion of organized religion, and the contemporary art world in its global incarnation as a network of art fairs, biennials, galleries and foundations?

The Enlightenment was a game changer in the relationship of arts and religion. It forced art and religion into a divorce. Today, western culture – which contemporary art is a child of – is clearly dominated by the ideas of the Enlightenment and so the divorce has its strongest effects here. Some view the Enlightenment as a religion itself. If that's the case, one could argue that the new religion did not want the old ones to survive. But they all do, unfortunately. As I said, contemporary art can treat other forms of art in a patronizing way. In this way, it resembles both the Enlightenment and religion.

The cultural revolutions of the new nation states that occurred in our region following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire were all pivoted by a social elite that was trained in the west. Therefore, a rather late appropriation of western modernism happened here. We are still experiencing the side effects of this. Since this elite still holds key positions in the art world, whatever happened in the west after the Enlightenment – in terms of art and religion – also happened here. So contemporary art and religion are colliding today both in the so-called East and West.

Is art a religion in itself, in that it tends to operate as an institution and through institutions?

Contemporary art is institutionalizing at a fast and worrying pace, but this should not mean that it is a religion. I think for something to be considered a religion, what is more important than being or having an institution is how essential it is to have an unconditional belief in something abstract or something not easily explained or proven. In fact, in any

given religion there is not a pressing need to define the supreme being or order, rather it is taken for granted. In this sense, science can never be a religion for example, because it is doing exactly the opposite. But art is closer to religion in that sense. This is why the pairing of art and religion seems to me more interesting than the pairing of art and science. You could say that some forms of art are religion-like, in that it has a set of rituals and devoted followers, such as opera or club music ('God is a DJ'). But in general, art is something that developed in close contact with religion, but it is not a religion on its own. Specifically, contemporary art is unique in this way, because its distance from religion characterizes it.

What kind of place does religion have in the discussion around future arts institutions, infrastructures and audiences, particularly in the MENA?

It could be dealt with like any other topic. And I wish it would develop naturally and organically, because if the state, or let's say ruling governments, starts to insert religion into this sphere, I think it would be very problematic. For example, here in Turkey the current AKP government has already hinted at something called 'conservative arts' indicating – perhaps – stronger state support for projects or institutions that produce art that would please their voters. But the nature of this plan (if it really is a plan) is absolutely unclear and if it involves state control over this delicate topic, then it posits immense dangers. The region is still prone to modern dictatorships, be it through a person who was democratically elected or through lineage, and if they try to dictate their way (whatever way it would be) into culture it would only be harmful to artistic production and reception, and by this I mean the audience.

On the other hand, I have been observing that most institutions in the Arab world tend to support more Arab artists. For example, Iranian or Turkish artists are not so much included in that circle. This gives a picture to the outside that Arab art institutions are primarily endorsing Sunni Arab art, which is a pity. The issue is really not about me, but I have experienced it first hand: when a curator in Dubai – where the state is the main funder of art institutions – wanted to show my work *Ashura* (2012), which deals with a Shiite religious ritual, it was problematic for her to programme it because anything related to Iran would be potentially seen as unfavourable. Again, when she wanted to show my work about the beauty pageants of Filipino guest workers in Israel (*Binibining Promised Land*, 2009–10), the fact that it took place in Israel was a problem. That is an example for you of the state being too involved in terms of religious or cultural sensitivity.

Do you know of alternative examples in (contemporary) art where religion is acceptable?

There are, but I think they are coming more from the artists than the institutions. And interestingly, artists whose religiously or spiritually informed works are exhibited in and acknowledged by major institutions are often ones who have already been accepted by the art world: Bill Viola, Huang Yong Ping, and so on. I will never forget when I first saw Wael Shawky's 2005 work *The Cave* in which he was almost prophetically reciting verses of the Qur'an inside a supermarket in Amsterdam. It was pretty strong and while many people were laughing at it at that year's Istanbul Biennial, I took it quite seriously. I wondered if this work would find wider audiences. Luckily it did, but when I read texts about the work I realized only few writers actually commented on its factual importance in terms of Islam. Most read it as a sarcastic work, but years later in Berlin, when Wael told me that he had become a devout Muslim, I smiled. It was obvious. He was not joking in *The Cave*.

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