Christian Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century

Prospects and Perils

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Jonathan A. Anderson

The Rift between Religion and Contemporary Art

For a variety of reasons, Christianity — and "religion" more generally — did not fare very well in the course of twentieth-century art, neither in the making of it nor in the scholarly discourse about it. The textbooks of twentieth-century art history, theory, and criticism, as well as major museum collections, readily testify to the fact that the institutional "art world"[1] regards Christianity as having made negligible contributions to the fine arts during the twentieth century (which, unfortunately, is a judgment that is easy to agree with). But the reverse is also true: for the most part, the church has little regard for the canons of twentieth-century art as having made any significant contributions to the development and deepening of Christian thought. For most of the last century, the worlds of contemporary art theory and Christian theology developed into distinct cultural configurations that have been remarkably disengaged from each other — in fact, often to the point of mutual unintelligibility. By 1979, renowned art theorist Rosalind Krauss had gone so far as to refer to the relation between "the sacred" and "the secular" as one of "absolute rift."[2]

1. While the term "art world" is controversial because it presumes singularity, I agree with James Elkins that we need some such designation to refer to the networks and institutions that produce and support "whatever is exhibited in galleries in major cities, bought by museums of contemporary art, shown in biennales and the Documenta, and written about in periodicals such as *Artforum, October, Flash Art, Parkett,* or *Tema Celeste*" (James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* [New York: Routledge, 2004], p. 1).

2. Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (Spring 1979): 54.

The reasons for this rift are numerous and complex, tangled up in the sweeping narratives of Western secularization. In Krauss's account, modern artists found themselves "participating in a drama that extended well beyond the domain of art" into politics, philosophy, and especially science, which found itself increasingly (and with increasing success) doing "battle with God."[3] In this context, art was reconfigured and re-theorized as alternative to religion: "In the increasingly de-sacralized space of the nineteenth century, art had become the refuge for religious emotion; it became, as it has remained, a secular form of belief."[4] Up to this point, Krauss's formulation is essentially a restatement of Nietzsche's famous dictum: "Art raises its head where religions decline. It takes over a number of feelings and moods produced by religion, clasps them to its heart, and then becomes itself deeper, more soulful. . . . Feeling, forced out of the religious sphere by enlightenment, throws itself into art."[5] Krauss, however, identifies a further stage in this development, one in which points of contact have been gradually, though decisively, disabled: "Although this condition could be discussed openly in the late nineteenth century, it is something that is inadmissible in the twentieth, so that by now we find it indescribably embarrassing to mention *art* and *spirit* in the same sentence."[6]

This discursive "inadmissibility" forms a twentieth-century backdrop against which talk about "religion" in today's art discourse is notable — and notably problematic. Over the past two decades, artists and scholars *have* begun to use art and spirit in the same sentence again, and there has been much renewed interest in exploring the pressures and bearings that religion and contemporary art might exert on one another. We might even echo Sally Promey in asserting that there has, in fact, been a "return" of religion to the art discourse.[7] But it's a return that has been riddled with problems and confusions: Krauss's rift remains, and it stifles discussion with what James Elkins has called "a complex structure of refusals."[8]

In general, Christians are still learning how to work thoughtfully and creatively in this situation. In what follows, I will try to articulate the primary

3. Krauss, "Grids," p. 54.

4. Krauss, "Grids," p. 54.

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (1878), trans. Marion Faber with Stephen Lehmann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), §150, p. 105.

6. Krauss, "Grids," p. 54.

7. Sally M. Promey, "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art," *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (Sept 2003): 581-603.

8. James Elkins, "The Art Seminar," in *Re-Enchantment,* ed. James Elkins and David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 171.

contours and logic of these refusals, offer some assessments and suggestions for how we might think about the return of religion to the contemporary art discourse, and then offer some constructive thoughts about moving forward.

The Invisibility of Religion in Contemporary Art Criticism

In 2004, James Elkins, a prolific and well-known art historian at the Art Institute of Chicago, published his controversial book *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art,* in which he attempted to understand and diagnose the chronic gridlock between contemporary art discourse and devoted religious belief. Early in the book, he echoes Krauss in his articulation of the problem: "Contemporary art, I think, is as far from organized religion as Western art has ever been, and that may be its most singular achievement — or its cardinal failure, depending on your point of view. The separation has become entrenched."[9] From the outset, his stated task is irenic: he wants "to see if it is possible to adjust the existing discourses" enough to include religious content and religious points of view.[10] Ultimately, however, he reluctantly concludes that such an adjustment remains unlikely: art theory and "religion" are simply structurally incompatible in their current forms.[11]

So, what's his argument? As I read Elkins, the central problem in the art and religion discourse is not reducible to a modernist secularization theory, nor is it simply attributable to the deliberate ideological suppression of religious voices (though he admits this as a reality);[12] rather, it has much more to do with the structure of modern and contemporary visual *hermeneutics.* To distill his argument a great deal, the "strange place of religion in contemporary art" is that the trajectory of art theory and criticism for the last 150 years makes it impossible for religious content to be mediated with any kind of directness,

9. Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art,* p. 15.

10. Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art,* p. xi.

11. In his conclusion to *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art,* Elkins voices his objection to this state of affairs: "Religion is so much a part of life, so intimately entangled with everything we think and do, that it seems absurd it does not have a place in talk about contemporary art" (p. 115). And yet simply objecting is not enough; overcoming this absurdity requires discussions that are "very slow and careful" (p. 115). Despite the best efforts in this direction, he feels compelled to close his book on an unresolved chord: "It is impossible to talk sensibly about religion and at the same time address art in an informed and intelligent manner: but it is also irresponsible not to keep trying" (p. 116).

12. As he states elsewhere, "There *are* strong attempts at prohibition and exclusion in the academic discourse on art" ("The Art Seminar," p. 174).

clarity, or sincerity of expression, thus effectively precluding it from having any compelling presence in the *interpretation* of artworks. Thus, in Elkins's view the rift exists not in artistic production per se but in the academic writing about art.

In the book and in the various conferences and publications surrounding it, Elkins repeatedly identifies an asymmetry between the spheres of contemporary art-making and the spheres of contemporary art interpretation: "There are separate-but-equal kinds of art, but there are not really separate-but-equal kinds of writing on art. . . . Worlds of art, yes; worlds of art writing, no."[13] In fact, he contends that the most "powerful, well-articulated, convincing accounts of contemporary art" are produced by a "fairly small" academic world of art writing which has "produced the single viable account of what art in the last hundred and fifty years has been about."[14] Of course, he recognizes the flagrant elitism of this kind of claim, but he finds it an inescapable description of the circumstances: "It is an account on which everyone else depends. If you think you're writing freely on art, and that you're beholden to no one in particular, you are virtually certainly beholden to Greenberg, Adorno, Krauss, and not too many others."[15] And he continues to name names: "in North America and Anglophone countries in Western Europe, virtually all major, active art historians are deeply indebted to *October.*"[16]

As a shorthand reference for this world of elite art-writing, Elkins repeatedly points to the journal *October,* which he (probably correctly) considers to be the most influential academic journal devoted to contemporary art criticism and theory. Co-founded in 1976 by Rosalind Krauss (the pronouncer of "absolute rift"), *October* has been responsible for constructing and developing — perhaps more than any other single publication — the most formidable methodological machinery available in contemporary art theory over the past four decades.[17] As Matthew Milliner has quipped, "In the intellectual climate of the art world, it's always October."[18]

13. James Elkins, "James Elkins Responds," *Books & Culture* 15, no. 3 (May-June 2009): 25.

14. Elkins, "James Elkins Responds," pp. 24-25. This is of course a dramatic simplification for rhetorical purposes; he handles this claim with more subtlety elsewhere: see James Elkins, *Master Narratives and Their Discontents* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

15. Elkins, "James Elkins Responds," p. 25.

16. Elkins, "James Elkins Responds," p. 25.

17. This was indeed the intention from the beginning: "*October*'s structure and policy are predicated upon a dominant concern: the renewal and strengthening of critical discourse through intensive review of the methodological options now available" (Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, "About October," *October* 1 [Spring 1976]: 3).

18. Matthew Milliner, "A Tale of Two Art Worlds: October and Its Others," *The City* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 5.

So, what are these critical methods that have so persuasively dominated the world of art writing? In 2004 (the same year that Elkins's book was published), *October*'s four most renowned contributing editors — Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh — published their two-volume *Art Since 1900,*[19] which opens with four introductory chapters devoted to articulating the primary critical methods that have framed the modern and contemporary art discourse. Four methods are identified and articulated in these chapters:[20]

(1) *Psychoanalysis:* systematically exegeting the unconscious energies, forces, and effects at play in the making and viewing of an artwork, specifically regarding the operation and repression of desire, fear, trauma, abjection — either at the individual or the collective level
(2) [*Marxian*] *Social Art History:* attending to the social, political, and economic power-structures framing, supporting, and functioning within the production and reception of an art object — particularly "within the field of ideological production under the rise of industrial capitalism"[21]
(3) *Formalism and Structuralism:* seeking to clarify the material structure of an artwork, both in terms of its formal construction and the semiotic functions of its forms (i.e., analyzing "significations apart from their content"[22])
(4) *Poststructuralism and Deconstruction:* addressing the invisible presuppositions and "institutional frames" that structure how an image or form is designated, discussed, and valued within a social system — for the purpose of exposing and challenging these frames

There are, of course, numerous other configurations and mobilizations of these models — feminist criticism, postcolonial criticism, and so on — but the im-

19. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004).

20. These models are identified in the preface and in the titles of the introductory chapters, but it should be noted that all four authors comment in their chapters about the difficulty of concisely defining these theoretical models (and they generally avoid doing so), which have all become extremely complex and contested fields in themselves. The summaries given here are my own attempt at concision while allowing for a breadth of positions contained in each.

21. Foster et al., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism,* p. 22. Social art history isn't necessarily Marxian, though it generally functions as such in academic art theory, as it does for the *October* editors — for example, Foster simply refers to it as "Marxian social history" in the roundtable discussion at the end of volume two (p. 679).

22. Roland Barthes, quoted in Foster et al., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism,* p. 33.

plicit argument in *Art since 1900* is that these are the four primary threads from which "an increasingly complex weave of methodological eclecticism" is woven.[23]

Before returning to Elkins's argument, it's important to understand the ways these models work in art criticism, and why they have been such compelling devices in the construction of the canons of twentieth-century art history. In his introductory chapter, Buchloh contends that "all these models were initially formulated as attempts . . . to position the study of all types of cultural production (such as literature or the fine arts) on a more solidly scientific basis of method and insight" in order to "generate a verifiable understanding of the processes of aesthetic production and reception" and "anchor the 'meaning' of the work of art more solidly in the operations of either the conventions of language and/or the system of the unconscious."[24] In other words, the central task of these critical models is to engage the art object as a *cultural* artifact whose meanings are generated by and suspended within existing social, historical, and psychic systems that are *public* ("scientific" and "verifiable") rather than private, and materialist in the scope of their evidence base and explanatory appeal. This is a somewhat helpful explanation, but a more forthright genealogy of these methods might identify them as the mature children of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. These methods are the honed and developed "hermeneutics of suspicion."[25]

Central to each of these methods is a suspicion that artworks (and cultural activity in general) are operations of "ideology" — meanings in the service of power. Beneath and behind the surface appearance of any human activity, there is always a more basic (material) explanation — generally centered on either biology or social power — which these suspicious critical methods endeavor to unmask.

It's important to note that these critical methods weren't simply imposed upon modernist and contemporary art but arose along with it. A concrete example from the birth of modern art might help illustrate. Manet's famous

23. Foster et al., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, p. 22. Feminism, for example, plays prominently in Foster's chapter on psychoanalysis and Krauss's chapter on poststructuralism — and perhaps more than anything it simply is a form of social art history. As such, it isn't distinguished as a fifth critical model if it primarily implements and particularizes the other four methods (whereas it would be difficult to argue that it works the other way around).

24. Foster et al., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, p. 22.

25. See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 32-36.

Luncheon on the Grass (1863) — widely considered one of the most significant early progenitors of avant-garde art — is at first a baffling and scandalizing painting: a starkly lit, seated nude woman stares out at the viewer from a rural picnic in which two fully-dressed male dandies blithely converse with each other about the woman. The landscape recedes towards a second woman wading knee-deep in a river in the background, but the space recedes quite awkwardly: the light logic and perspective are contradictory and inconsistent at multiple points, making it feel more like a collage of disparate scenes than a contiguous space. It's obvious from several passages in this painting (and from Manet's career as a whole) that Manet is a perfectly competent technician, but he has allowed so much incongruity into this work that it hardly hangs together as a whole. Efforts to make sense of the painting's subject matter, or even to admire its artistic construction, are stubbornly unproductive and frustrating — and all the more so given its large, self-aggrandizing scale. This is, by traditional standards, simply a failed painting; and it was rejected as such by the Salon jury of 1863.

However, everything begins to shift once we recognize that the painting's consistent effect is to draw unexpected attention to the *conventions* of representational painting itself: here we have a landscape painting, a nude, a still life, even a bather, all mashed into a large pictorial scale generally reserved only for the prestige and grand pronouncements of history painting. Manet has mingled all the normative devices of the French academy together such that the whole assembly collapses into a bizarre, conspicuously self-reflexive image. The painting sharply points to itself and to its own interpretive "frame" — the historical and social contexts in which it is situated and in which it will be understood. Thus, what is primarily on view here is not a lewd rural picnic (the subject matter seen "through" the medium) but the medium of painting itself and the social systems invisibly operating "around" or "beneath" or "behind" it to make it intelligible and grant it value.

One can see how paintings like this one (and the entire modernist project that would follow from it) focused extraordinary and unfamiliar pressures on interpreters of the work. Viewers who attempt to engage works like Manet's *Luncheon* through a traditional pictorial hermeneutic (passing through the medium to contemplate well-organized subject matter) are going to find themselves not only missing the point but, in fact, coming under its critique: *they* are the dandies staring at and disinterestedly discussing "the nude" who stares back at them from within the painted object. For many artists and critics, paintings like this cast doubts over the assumptions that governed traditional interpretive methods — doubts that would steadily swell over subsequent de-

cades and would become compounded by the proliferation of mechanically reproduced photography. The early twentieth-century avant-garde extended Manet's strategies by increasingly foregrounding the materiality of the artistic medium and the conventions that governed the viewing of art objects. Indeed, in Robert Storr's words, the defining characteristic of such work is that it takes itself as its primary subject: "Before modernist art is about anything else — an image, a symbol, the communication of an experience — it is about the logic and structure of the thing that carries meaning, and about how that thing came into being."[26]

And thus we see why the alternative critical methods eventually outlined in *Art since 1900* (and hammered out in the pages of *October*) would develop and flourish: they are all means for rigorously interpreting an artwork from an "askance" point of view that self-consciously places both the work and our response to it under scrutiny.[27] These models operate on an intensely suspicious hermeneutic that deprioritizes artistic intentions, subject matter, and pictorial composition in exchange for the conspicuous disclosure of the *cultural situatedness* of the art object and the ideological systems at play behind and beneath "the processes of aesthetic production and reception."

Two observations need to be made here. First, it's important to note the ways these four models each (in their own ways) make claims on *all possible artworks* by virtue of the fact that artworks function in human culture in ways that are necessarily psychological, social, political, linguistic, and so on. None of these models will provide an exhaustive account of any given art object, or even the most important account, but they do each claim to account for at least one dimension of any possible art object. The psychoanalytic critic, for example, presupposes that the systems of the unconscious are operative in all human endeavors (art not least among them), and, accordingly, any artwork can legitimately be placed on an interpretive horizon — or is always already on this horizon — in which the orienting questions and points of reference are oriented toward understanding the role of unconscious systems in the production and reception of artworks. Similarly, the Marxist exegetes the axes of social and economic power running through

26. Robert Storr, *Modern Art despite Modernism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000), p. 28.

27. In fact, Johanne Lamoureux argues that "there has been no theory of avant-garde without a critical project. All discourses on the avant-garde acknowledge the central role of criticality, even if they do not agree on the object or target of that criticality" (Lamoureux, "Avant-garde: A Historiography of a Critical Concept," in *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones [Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006], p. 207).

a work; the structuralist examines art objects as intrinsically formal and semiotic; the poststructuralist interrogates the power relations necessarily involved in signification; and so on.

Second — and here we're able to return to Elkins's thesis — one can see how these models would have precisely the effect of precluding serious religious thought from communicating with any kind of directness, clarity, or specificity. Not only is organized religion too much a part of the very social orders that the avant-garde was constructed to interrogate, but more profoundly — and I take this to be the central point of Elkins's book — religious content is unable to survive the suspicious interpretive operations of avant-garde theory and criticism. Subjecting, for example, a pictorial religious allegory to a psychoanalytic or Marxist or deconstructive reading will produce extremely disorienting effects for the devout allegorizer as the image is reappraised as an endless play of sublimated desire, social hierarchies, and institutional power. And such readings simply can't be counteracted with an appeal to an artist's (religious) intentions, because intentions, after all, are precisely what these critical models hold under suspicion. An artwork conceived as a "vehicle" for religious meaning will find itself interpretively derailed and destabilized before the vehicle even gets going — or, more commonly, it will simply be ignored as unworthy of serious engagement. And, interestingly, this dynamic doesn't only preclude religious subject matter: Elkins rightly devotes a chapter to articulating why art that has an *anti-religious* message to deliver is disqualified by the same principle.[28] Religious and anti-religious art alike — and really any work with a "message" to deliver — simply misunderstands and is ill-suited for the contemporary art discourse.

Elkins thus considers whether there might be more sophisticated, nondidactic ways for religious meaning to survive and operate in the context of contemporary art theory and criticism — though ultimately he remains ambivalent about all available options. He notes, for example, how often modern and postmodern art discourses construe aporias and failures in representation in terms of sublimity, a kind of sacredness that outstrips human capacities to cognitively and linguistically contain it. As such, he suggests that the "postmodern sublime has a history of functioning as a placeholder for otherwise unacceptable discourse about religion,"[29] in the sense that it provides "an opportunity for writers in the largely secular culture of the art world to speak

28. Elkins, "Brian's Story Explained: Art That Is Critical of Religion," *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, pp. 65-75.

29. Elkins, "The Art Seminar," p. 165.

about concepts that used to be studied only by theologians."[30] More specifically, he situates these concepts in relation to the traditions of apophatic or "negative" theology, in which the ineffable Otherness of God is approached by way of negation and cancellation: speech about God that occurs most profoundly in the failure of speech.[31]

However, the problem in all of this, as he sees it, is that artworks and art writing that function in this way never really connote "religious" meaning with any kind of clarity or specificity. In reference to a work by Bill Viola, for instance, Elkins asks, "What, exactly, is religious about recordings of the ambient noise of cathedrals? It is a question no one quite knows how to answer."[32] And thus, in the face of this ambiguity, the most persuasive critical writing proceeds through the prevailing default methods without ever really confronting a work's "religious" questions with any great degree of specificity.

So, for Elkins, it is still unclear how religious content might be able to survive the critical operations of the *October* fourfold with any kind of theological particularity. Religiously oriented art seems to find itself in a double bind: either it speaks directly, at the risk of disqualification from the rubric of contemporary criticism, or it operates indirectly (self-critically) and risks self-negation. Thus Elkins concludes that "committed, engaged, ambitious, informed art does not mix with dedicated, serious, thoughtful, heartfelt religion. Wherever the two meet, one wrecks the other . . . either the art is loose and unambitious, or the religion is one-dimensional and unpersuasive."[33] And thus, as he remarks elsewhere, "The moral would be: find a source of doubt, become an unbeliever, and then come back and make art!"[34]

Religion might very well be reappearing in contemporary artworks in compelling and serious ways, but until there are rigorous critical methods for accounting for it, this reappearance will remain problematized — or simply functionally invisible. The problem is not simply a lack of religiously potent artworks but the lack of compelling, well-informed *interpretations* of artworks that are able to engage the theological significance of the work. Elkins thus believes that "the exclusion [of religion from contemporary art] is an effect of

30. Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art,* p. 96.

31. Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art,* pp. 82-113, especially p. 107. For a helpful study of negative theology, see Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); see particularly page 20 for a definition similar to the one given here.

32. Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art,* p. 93.

33. Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art,* p. 115.

34. Elkins, "The Art Seminar," p. 162.

discourse," which will change only with "changes in the sum total of people who give us our best accounts of art."[35] And with that he leaves the rift open but re-marked as a space that religious critics should regard as working space.

The Return of Religion

So, what might it mean for religion to be "returning" to this discourse, which it appears to be doing? What does it look like for "religion" to provide questions, concerns, and points of reference for a critical engagement with contemporary art, and to do so within or in proximity to the prevailing critical models?

In the scholarly world, the most significant return of religion to contemporary art has been through the fields of religious studies and visual culture studies, which have over the past two decades begun to analyze the formative power of "material religion" or "religious visual culture" in the structure and direction of twentieth-century art. Scholars such as Sally Promey, David Morgan, S. Brent Plate, and others have shown that the available constructions of social art history have been truncated by their exclusion of religion from the study of art in a society deeply shaped by religious beliefs, histories, and institutions. Thus, in Promey's words, the aim of the return of religion in visual studies is "to recuperate a closer approximation to the historical whole, to include within scholarly purview the full range of practices that make images work."[36] This adjustment to the discourse of art history and criticism is not necessarily an adjustment to the critical methods employed; rather, it is an adjustment to the boundaries of what is allowed into the critic's interpretive evidence base and fields of reference.

Essentially, visual culture scholarship argues that religion must be accounted for in any sufficiently "thick" interpretation of the social significance of art. Inherited from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, the notion of a "thick description" of any given cultural object or phenomenon requires that one attend to and attempt to unpack the densely "stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures" in which the object or phenomenon has been "produced, perceived, and interpreted."[37] The production and reception of an artwork, for example, is always situated within (and thus meaningful in relation to) multiple social and

35. Elkins, "James Elkins Responds," p. 24.

36. Promey, "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art," p. 589. See also Sally M. Promey, "Situating Visual Culture," in *A Companion to American Cultural History,* ed. Karen Halttunen (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 279-94.

37. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 6-10.

historical contexts, and our understanding of the work thus becomes increasingly "thick" as we carefully consider it in relation to these multiple contexts. This includes seeing the artwork as an object (or event) that is always already enwoven into systems of formal composition, language, personal and collective histories, various academic and popular canons, psychological affect, economics, politics, institutional power, societal norms, and so on. The rather modest contention of visual culture scholars is that religion has played, and continues to play, a formative role in the ways that objects and images are meaningful in this society; accordingly, any adequately *thick* interpretation of our artworks must also account for religious frames of reference.

This scholarship has been extremely valuable, offering persuasive rereadings of a variety of images and objects, ranging from religious kitsch to the canons of "high art." However, we must also note its limited scope: the questions that have animated these studies are organized almost entirely along historical, sociological, and ethnographic lines. In other words, the particular practices and theological commitments of the religions in question are taken seriously as sociocultural forces, but they generally aren't taken up as practices or beliefs that one would want to hold as a scholar interpreting an artwork.[38] A consistent "methodological naturalism" is protocol in this field, by which interpretation proceeds "with the detachment of the observer rather than the attachment of the adherent."[39] To borrow a metaphor from C. S. Lewis, visual culture scholars have begun carefully "looking at" the streams of religious thought running through twentieth-century visual culture, but they rarely consider it a viable option to really be "looking along" them.[40]

In many ways, this limitation has been productive. Religion certainly *is* a material, historical social phenomenon, always concretely embedded in the same "piled-up structures of inference and implication"[41] within which artistic artifacts are produced, perceived, and interpreted. And ushering religion

38. As David Morgan says, "There are scholars and writers who will make the journey [into the 'spiritual' content of an artwork] as scholars, not believers, but they study something not strictly defined as 'art' — the history of images, visual culture, religious artifacts, the ethnography of visual practice" (*Re-Enchantment,* ed. James Elkins and David Morgan, p. 18; cf. p. 168).

39. Gordon Graham, *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Art versus Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 53. And for him this detachment has had huge consequences: "Though firmly focused on religion because of a belief in its human significance, the science of religion also contributed importantly to disenchantment of the world."

40. C. S. Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed," originally published in *The Coventry Evening Telegraph* (17 July 1945); reprinted in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 212-15.

41. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* p. 7.

back into visual studies in this way enables us to see both religion and art as thick practices that can be (or already are) situated along several of the same interpretive horizons — thus permitting interpretive moves in one to have potential "inference and implication" for the other.

However, we must also question whether there isn't still a remarkable interpretive thinness here, a reductive handling of religion that collapses its potential significance for art criticism. After all, the inclusion of religion into visual cultural criticism doesn't necessarily move us beyond or outside those interpretive axes already heavily theorized in the *October* models; it merely adjusts the range of social phenomena allowed into their interpretive field of vision. And it's precisely for this reason that Harry Philbrick can declare, "When religion is broached, it is within some other critical context: heaven as a sociological construct; Mary as a gender symbol; Jewishness as a cultural condition."[42]

And this perhaps brings us closer to the heart of the matter: it's not *religion* per se that is disallowed in the art discourse — it is *theology*. The "strange place of religion in contemporary art" is that religion appears viable for critical engagement only when stripped of theological depth. Visual culture has helpfully brought religion back into critical purview but has mainly done so by simply placing religion on (and confining it to) the interpretive axes of social art history. As a consequence, this development has relatively little impact on Elkins's thesis, simply requiring that his terms are reformulated a bit: When we speak about religion having no interpretive voice in contemporary criticism, what we are really referring to is the absence of a substantive *theological* voice in contemporary criticism. Religion has indeed reappeared throughout contemporary art, but there are not really any functional theological categories operating in contemporary art criticism with which to interpret its content in a theological register — or at least not with any rigor or rhetorical power.

A broader umbrella under which the discussion of religion and contemporary art has begun to operate — and one that may allow theological perspectives into the interpretative process — is the discourse of "re-enchantment." This phrase serves to loosely incorporate several threads of thought that challenge the finality of Max Weber's famous thesis about the "disenchantment" of the world via the forces of modernization.[43] There is much to like about

42. Harry Philbrick, "Creating Faith," in Christian Eckart et al., *Faith: The Impact of Judeo-Christian Religion on Art at the Millennium* (Ridgefield, Conn.: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), p. 15.

43. Weber borrows the phrase from Schiller and further theorizes it: "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment

the various kinds of scholarship associated with re-enchantment — it has, for example, helpfully critiqued the extent to which the *October* models have often assumed and relied upon a closed, disenchanted (deeply modernist) materialism. The difficulty of the re-enchantment dialogue, however, is a high level of theoretical generality and/or vague privatized spiritualism[44] that quickly dissolves conversation into confusion.[45] The term has, in fact, become so spacious and pliable as to accommodate contradictory usage from scholars as diametrically opposed as T. J. Clark and Suzi Gablik.[46]

The openness of this designation might serve to make space for the general readmission of "spirituality" or "transcendence" into the interpretive categories of contemporary art, but as art critic Joseph Masheck warns, these terms might be entirely too vague to really be constructive: "In the realm of sophisticated artistic commitment we may sometimes really want (need!) something more authentically religious — which probably entails more specifically religious — than the 'spiritually' one-size-fits-all."[47] Indeed, it seems that criticism interested in re-enchantment doesn't attain any particular interpretive grip on actual artworks until it gets religiously specific — or, more to the point, *theologically* specific: rooted in (and thus accountable to) a particular theological framework, grammar, and history.

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of the world,'" in which we have come to believe that "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" (Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills [New York: Oxford University Press, 1946], pp. 155, 139).

44. The various lines of thought about "spirituality" and "re-enchantment" in contemporary art have often been routed through Suzi Gablik's *The Re-Enchantment of Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1991): "Re-Enchantment, as I understand it, means stepping beyond the modern traditions of mechanism, positivism, empiricism, rationalism, materialism, secularism, and scientism — the whole objectifying consciousness of the Enlightenment — in a way that allows for a return of soul" (p. 11). Gablik argues that this "return of soul" necessitates a "connective, participatory aesthetics," requiring "new myths" and "new forms emphasizing our essential interconnectedness rather than our separateness" (p. 9).

45. In 2007, James Elkins and David Morgan chaired a conference/publication in Routledge's "Art Seminar" series on the problem of religion and contemporary art, to which they assigned the multivalent title *Re-Enchantment* (New York: Routledge, 2009). The volume is lively and illuminating; but in the end, Morgan rightly summarizes it as "a noisy, meandering, unintegrated conversation that does not easily admit of resolution" but rather "disarray, even cacophony, which sometimes makes the conversation all but impossible" (p. 19).

46. James Elkins makes a similar point in *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, p. 82, and in *Re-Enchantment*, p. 111.

47. Joseph Masheck, review of *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* by James Elkins, *Art & Christianity* 44 (October 2005): 13.

The Theological Axis

But this question remains: Should theology really be counted within the "stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures" necessary for adequately thick interpretations of contemporary artworks? How and in what cases should theology be accorded a place in art criticism?

Fundamental to anything properly called theology is the question of the relations of human persons, societies, and materiality itself to the presence or absence of God (or gods) — this is perhaps *the* theological question. And once this question is asked, it opens a theological horizon of meaning along which any facet of the world might be examined. Aquinas seems to have had something like this in mind when he defined theology as "a unified science in which all things are treated under the aspect of God."[48]

But we should note that in its barest form this interpretive horizon is kept open simply by the *question* of God's relationship to the world, not necessarily by affirmative answers to that question. In other words, we might take the term "theology" in its minimal sense to refer to that effort of interpretation that occurs wherever any given cultural entity is questioned in relation to any given understanding of God. In this sense, Mark C. Taylor's efforts to think about art through a postmodern "a/theology"[49] or Thierry de Duve's fascinating (and profoundly agnostic) meditation on the unending deferment of resurrection in Manet's *Christ with Angels*[50] are examples of theological interpretation within contemporary art criticism, albeit in forms oriented around divine "absence." My theology is structured differently than Taylor's or de Duve's, but we are each acknowledging the extent to which particular artworks are always already begging questions of world-in-relation-to-God and thus operating against some kind of theological horizon.

And it is the acknowledgment of this "some kind" of horizon that provides grounds for believing that the neglect of such questions in some sense diminishes the interpretive thickness of the art discourse. Such questions *are* live concerns throughout the art world, even if they are rarely critically engaged with much patience or rigor *as* the theological questions that they really are. In

48. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.1.7.

49. See, for instance, Mark C. Taylor, *Refiguring the Spiritual: Beuys, Barney, Turrell, Goldsworthy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); *After God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

50. Thierry de Duve, *Look: 100 Years of Contemporary Art,* trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts/Ludion, 2001), chap. 1.

this light, a critic who risks treating contemporary artworks "under the aspect of God" might do so for the sake of thickening the accounts of what is going on in the arts today. And the success of this enterprise would then rest on (1) its ability to open artworks into compelling and warranted interpretations that would otherwise be inaccessible, and (2) the capacity of these interpretations to in some way enrich the accounts of how an artwork is meaningful within a given cultural context. Thus, the premise for "theological art criticism" — if that's what it might be called — is that artworks are in some way already theologically meaningful and that our criticism thus benefits from — and is thicker because of — attending to this meaning.

But under what conditions might this actually be the case? There are three distinct situations that come to mind in which theologically oriented criticism may be more or less desirable, listed in order of increasing precariousness: (1) contemporary artwork that is making overt religious references in its form, subject matter, or title (whether the artist is personally religious or not); (2) artwork of any subject matter made by a person of religious faith; and (3) artwork specifically dealing with subjects of interest to a theological tradition (e.g., the human condition, the problem of suffering, and so on).

Artworks That Make Overt Religious References

Within this category I don't see that it makes much difference whether an artist is personally religious or not. If the work specifically draws from or alludes to subject matter that historically has been theologically charged, then the work has already placed itself on some kind of theological horizon and should be interpreted as such. Here's one example: in a 1999 exhibition, Los Angeles-based artist Tim Hawkinson exhibited (among other works) a room-sized sculptural installation entitled *Pentecost.* After reading many reviews of the exhibition, art critic John O'Brien noticed that in everything written about this work there was never more than a sparse half-sentence explanation given of the biblical reference — usually something along the lines of "named for the Bible story in which the 12 apostles 'spoke in tongues' "[51] — and the theological significance of the New Testament text to which it refers was ignored almost entirely.[52]

Regarding this kind of critical refusal, Elkins makes the obvious point:

51. Jeffrey Kastner, "Tim Hawkinson: Ace Gallery," *Sculpture* 18 (July/August 1999): 70.
52. John O'Brien, "The New Zeitgeist," *ArtScene* (May 2005).

"It does seem awkward to be unable to speak about the religious meaning of works that clearly have to do with religion."[53] Yes, indeed; but it's not only "awkward" — it's poor criticism. To be sure, Hawkinson's handling of this biblical subject is highly unconventional[54] and thus critically demanding, but it is also a deeply substantive handling and one that will simply be missed if there are no critics willing (or able) to consider the theological content of the biblical Pentecost in their considerations of Hawkinson's *Pentecost.*

And indeed, there are numerous major artists working today who have made artworks explicitly referencing religious subject matter — Francis Alÿs, El Anatsui, Robert Gober, Ann Hamilton, Damien Hirst, Anish Kapoor, Anselm Kiefer, Wolfgang Laib, Kris Martin, Sherin Neshat, Cornelia Parker, Kiki Smith, and Bill Viola, to name only a handful — and the absence of theologically informed criticism with regards to these theologically informed artworks has (quite obviously) resulted in truncated understandings of these works. Or, put the other way around, in cases where artists are engaging theological material (from whatever perspective or agenda and with whatever results), we should expect that the inclusion of theological reflection in the discourse would provide better — thicker — interpretations.

Artworks Made by Artists of Religious Faith

The example of Tim Hawkinson is of further use to us in this category in that Hawkinson professes a specifically Christian faith.[55] (He is one of the relatively few internationally acclaimed artists working today who does.) This creates something of a dilemma in the criticism done about his work: to what extent

53. Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art,* p. 22.

54. Hawkinson's *Pentecost* is a sprawling tree form constructed of air ducting and commonplace home-building materials. This "tree of life" is hollow, filled with air (or breath/wind), which conducts the rhythmic sounds of twelve humanoid figures, each drumming on the tree with a different mechanized body part. Though the rhythm of each individual is unremarkable, the collective sound of all twelve striking their respective branches creates complex rhythms that fill the tree and the gallery with a percussive glossolalia — a startling image of the Pentecost event.

55. Hawkinson is generally reluctant to discuss *how* his faith shapes his work (preferring to allow interpretations to remain open on multiple levels), but he has frankly said that his faith *does* shape his work: "I am a Christian, and I strive for a closeness with God and to find God in my life. I don't want to be dogmatic about it. I guess it just has a presence in my work because it's — you know, it's part of me" (*All Things Considered,* "Profile: Tim Hawkinson's Art with Moving Parts," National Public Radio [Washington, D.C.: 16 August 2005]).

does a thick understanding of his entire oeuvre — beyond works like *Pentecost* which have overt religious references — make demands on our abilities to encounter it in theological terms?

We need to be wary of placing unjustifiable weight on artistic intention (the artist's voice simply cannot preside with any final authority over the "piled-up structures of inference and implication" in which the work is produced, perceived, and interpreted as meaningful); but we also need to be wary of dismissing the artist entirely. Curator Howard Fox offers one example of attempts to actively restrain Hawkinson's work from theological specificity: "Though he frequently makes reference to Christian themes, his art is not sectarian or denominational. It is a secular expression of spirituality . . . his art openly courts a consideration of metaphysical and spiritual issues that might apply to almost any system of beliefs, and that especially resonate with basic tenets of Christianity."[56] While I understand the impulse to make Hawkinson's work amenable to any viewer who might be open to "spiritual issues" (whatever that might mean), this approach runs the risk of significantly evacuating the work. We do not make similar efforts to de-specify the political themes of artists like Hans Haacke or Kara Walker, for instance, such that their work "might apply to almost any system of [political] beliefs." Indeed, attempting to treat their work in this way would (rather viciously) compromise its conceptual integrity to such an extent that there would be nothing much left to work with. Interpretive thickness demands that we allow artistic intention some limited voice to prompt critical lines of questioning — which in Hawkinson's case necessitates theological questioning.

Artworks Dealing with Subjects or Concepts That Are Theologically Significant

To stick with Hawkinson as an example, his work *Humongolous* (1995) is a careful meditation on phenomenological method and the constraints of self-understanding — and as such it addresses itself to large-scale questions of human being-in-the-world. In Hawkinson's case (and not only his), these are ultimately theological questions, inevitably begging the question of God. But if a critic were to unpack the theological significance of Hawkinson's phenomenology, then wouldn't it immediately open into dialogue with other major artists working on similar problems today? Consider Marina Abramović, Janine

56. Howard N. Fox, "Speaking in Tongues: The Art of Tim Hawkinson," in *Tim Hawkinson*, ed. Lawrence Rinder (New York: Whitney/LACMA, 2005), p. 31.

Antoni, Mireille Astore, Wafaa Bilal, Douglas Gordon, Terrence Koh, Bruce Nauman, Gabriel Orozco, Marc Quinn, Do-Ho Suh, and endlessly so on. Are similar theological questions alive in all of these, regardless of the presence or absence of overt theological concerns in the mind of these artists?

Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer would argue *yes:* "What is at stake both in cultural texts and in the process of their interpretation is the meaningful and the good, both of which are matters of universal human concern. All interpreters of culture work with some idea, however tacit, of what is or is not conducive to human flourishing" — and they are thus inevitably assuming and projecting some sort of "proposal about what it is to be human."[57] For Vanhoozer, any such proposal implies some kind of theological structure, which flings open the suggestion that artworks are in some way always already making tacit theological claims, whether intentionally or not. He wouldn't argue that identification of these claims would in any way exhaust the meaning of the work, or even provide the most important explanation of the work; he would argue only that "our understanding of what is happening in culture remains relatively thin to the extent that we fail to describe things at the theological level."[58] If this is indeed the case, then it seems impossible to pre-emptively close any artwork to theological questioning.

We must readily admit that the "visibility" of any axis of meaning is largely contingent upon an interpreter's commitment to the viability of particular frames of reference, and over the course of the past century the theological axis has become largely invisible and unviable in the writing of art history, theory, and criticism. And in the process theological art criticism has become and remains anemic and underdeveloped with regard to contemporary art, which makes it difficult to argue for its critical relevance. For now, we might simply allow for the modest possibility that the "human concerns" of contemporary art might also be theological concerns — and that entertaining this possibility might have some sort of beneficial thickening effect on the broader discourse. And, if we grant this, then the only responsibility that falls on non-religious critics is to be hospitable;[59] the far greater responsibility is for religious critics *to do better criticism.*

57. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology?: How and Why Christians Should Read Culture," in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends,* ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 40, 48.

58. Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology?," p. 47.

59. Elkins offers a striking example of this posture of hospitality. Though he does not locate himself within a particular religious tradition, he consistently engages artists and critics of faith in gracious and winsome ways — both in writing and in conversation.

Theological Art Criticism

It is at this point that we need to make some clarifications. First, I am not arguing for a theological interpretation of art *at the expense* of other interpretive levels. We must recognize that theological interpretations are extremely prone to being thin and reductive — perhaps more so than other models, and usually with more tragic results. Instead, what is being maintained here is that a properly thick understanding of art must at some level be open to theological reflection as one of its potentially significant dimensions. We want to avoid the tendency for theological commitments to pulverize artworks into an unacceptable thinness, but we also want to avoid the thinness that results from precluding those commitments altogether.

If this could be done, theological criticism would operate analogously to (and in conjunction with) the existing *October* models: it could not rightly claim an exhaustive interpretation or totalizing perspective but would instead aim at sensitively and creatively opening up what is already going on in an artwork from a theological frame of reference. And, given the scope of theological significance, this should be a truly collaborative endeavor with existing critical models that at the same time respects the integrity of these models. All the deliverances of Marxist or feminist critical methods, for instance, should be of great interest and support to the theological critic for whom the social, political, and economic power structures implicit in the production and reception of artworks are riddled with massive theological concerns. Theologies of social justice, human personhood, and so on are all at stake in contemporary art — and they are as such often in concert with (and certainly in relation to) the prevailing concerns of Marxist or feminist or deconstructive criticism. In short, working in a theological critical register should not lead one away from a common critical discourse or into soliloquys on utterly foreign or arcane topics; rather, the entire purpose of theological criticism is to deeply engage the primary issues, artifacts, and dynamics in contemporary art and art-writing but to do so out of theologically formed sensitivities and frames of reference.

Second, such criticism further compares to the *October* models in that it engages art objects with some level of suspicion. As with the workings of language or social power or the unconscious, the theological significance of an artwork is not restricted by authorial intention — in fact, the conscious intent of the artist might very well be contradicted or subverted by the theological implications of what she has made. As such, theological criticism might be interested in explanations (and critiques) that operate beneath or behind the face value of a work. This doesn't imply an unhinged "free play" of meaning

— criticism must always be derived from and accountable to evidence in the work itself — but it does imply that artworks are too densely (theologically) meaningful to be exhausted by the artist's own account.

Of course, opening the art discourse to theological methods of criticism will be an extremely noisy, untidy affair. On the one hand, there are many for whom the question of God is precisely the question that twentieth-century art did well to abandon; and on the other hand, once the question is posed, discussion immediately cascades into particular theological claims that are often divisive, abstruse, even unintelligible. And, further, because of the weakness of theological thinking about art for the past century, there are huge gaps to fill in order for such thinking to be both artistically and theologically rigorous.

Ultimately, however, such problems are intrinsic to all criticism. All art criticism is idiosyncratic, biased, and debatable — and is usually attempting to span across massive disciplinary divides (this is certainly true of the *October* models). Baudelaire believed that "to justify its existence, criticism should be partial, passionate, and political, that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view, but a point of view that opens up the widest horizons."[60] As far as I'm concerned, that well articulates the goal of theologically oriented criticism: to engage artworks within a particular frame of reference for the sake of opening up the widest and thickest interpretive horizons.

Some Notes on Method

Christian art historians and critics have begun to invest significant labor in writing about contemporary art over the past several years, and the quality of the work is getting better. But there continue to be many problems with the project of theological art criticism. One problem is the massive scale and range of interdisciplinary study necessary for such a project. To be proficient and well-informed in art history, theory, and criticism on the one hand and contemporary theology on the other is a massive task indeed, especially given the historical rift by which these disciplinary subcultures have developed their own languages, conceptual models, canonical texts, and histories quite independently from each other. Each of these fields has become increasingly specialized, and skillful interdisciplinary work between them threatens to be prohibitively demanding.

60. Charles Baudelaire, "What Good Is Criticism?" in *The Salon of 1846*, ed. David Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 44.

A second (perhaps more difficult) network of problems inhabits the ways we think about the nature of this interdisciplinary work. Not surprisingly, most of the writing on theology and the arts tends to prioritize the theological side of the relationship — to the extent that it really functions as theological aesthetics or theology of art more than as art criticism. Much of this work has been valuable, but the majority of it resides in worlds of academic theology and often doesn't adequately account for and make sense of contemporary art theory — and as such it rarely has much purchase in the interpretive categories of contemporary art criticism.

Dan Siedell rightly complains that Christian commentaries on the arts "rarely address modern art on its own terms, within its own framework of critical evaluation," but instead approach the work with "a rigidly stable 'Christian perspective' that is then merely applied to art."[61] This might have some virtues, but, stated bluntly, such approaches simply "do not produce art criticism,"[62] because they do not respect the integrity of the artworks or their position in the existing discourse. In some cases, this can be attributed to a deficient or outdated visual hermeneutic. (Some Christian critics default to a fairly traditional pictorial hermeneutic that is ill-equipped to read contemporary art.) But in most cases, the problem is that the interpretive agenda is so theologically overdetermined that it flattens artworks into shapes more conducive to the critical apparatus. At one extreme, we have examples of a combative critical posture that heavy-handedly reads almost the entirety of twentieth-century art as fearfully nihilistic. At the other extreme (and perhaps more common today), we see the tendency to uncritically read contemporary art as confirming (one's own) theological truths at nearly every turn. In arguing for the re-inclusion of theology to the discourse, we must be careful not to simply trade one reductionism for another.

Instead, good theological criticism starts from the rather modest claim that artworks inevitably have some sort of theological significance and can be scrutinized as such. Timothy Gorringe expresses it this way: "To read secular art theologically is to insist on questioning, on the dimension of depth, to resist premature attempts at the closure of meaning. It is to situate art within such a tradition of questioning and reflection."[63] And this questioning can't possibly be unidirectional: it can properly proceed only through a hermeneutic circling in which artworks and our interpretive frameworks mutually challenge and

61. Daniel A. Siedell, *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 13-14.

62. Siedell, *God in the Gallery,* p. 14.

63. T. J. Gorringe, *Earthly Visions: Theology and the Challenges of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 192.

shape one another. Theological thinking can indeed thicken our engagements with contemporary art by way of the questions, concerns, and concepts it brings to interpretive investigation, but this thickness is possible only as these are attuned to the artwork itself and to the disciplinary frameworks of contemporary art.[64] And, ultimately, the criteria for judging the success of such criticism *as criticism* is the extent to which it has weight and consequence within the existing art discourse.

So at this point we might try to make some adjustments. I want to identify "theological art criticism" as criticism that is (1) primarily concerned with providing careful, thick interpretations of contemporary artworks in ways that (2) compellingly account for and resonate within the existing contemporary art discourse, in the very act of (3) bringing theological questions, concerns, and positions to bear in its strivings to understand the work. Let me offer a few words about each component of this definition.

Careful, Receptive Prioritization of the Artwork Itself

Good criticism is rooted in the desire to genuinely encounter and more deeply understand an artwork. In proper criticism, said C. S. Lewis, "we seek an enlargement of our being."[65] And for such enlargement to be possible,

> We must not let loose our own subjectivity upon the pictures and make them its vehicles. We must begin by laying aside as completely as we can all our own preconceptions, interests, and associations. We must make room for Botticelli's Mars and Venus, or Cimabue's Crucifixion, by emptying out our own. . . . The first demand any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. (There is no good asking yourself first whether the work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out.)[66]

Such criticism demands risk, and it flourishes in open encounters in which we are committed to potentially ever-thickening meaning. "We must, and should,

64. Perhaps what is in view here is something analogous to the "creative mutual interaction" worked out by Robert John Russell in his interdisciplinary work in theology and science. See his *Cosmology: From Alpha to Omega* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), pp. 1-32.

65. C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1961; 13th printing: 2009), p. 137.

66. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism,* pp. 18-19.

remain uncertain," Lewis says. "Always, there may be something in it that we can't see. . . . The question could always without absurdity be re-opened."[67] The kind of theological criticism really worth doing is one thoroughly persuaded of the dense meaningfulness of human life and human art, which demand and reward sensitive and scrupulous searching.

As such, theological criticism must avoid its tendency to strong-arm artworks, "bending"[68] them toward Christian affirmations in ways that don't satisfyingly account for the works themselves. Such approaches generally have to bracket out (or simply disregard) much of the density and complexity of the works themselves, thus closing down and shrinking both the thickness of the works and our sensitivities to them.

Deeper Engagements with the Contemporary Art Discourse

If theological art criticism is going to be a live contributor to contemporary art criticism, then it must first and foremost be *contemporary art criticism.* This means that its primary discursive community is the art world, not the seminary: it must be primarily intelligible within (and structuring its arguments in) the grammar, logic, and concerns of contemporary art. To this end, we need more insightful, more rigorous understandings and critiques of twentieth-century and twenty-first-century art history, theory, and criticism. Elkins is quite right to suggest that serious thinking about art today must account for, and can be situated only in relation to, the established art narratives hammered out over the past decades. And thus, in Matthew Milliner's words, "Only serious historical and critical reflection can move us towards that possibility that Elkins tantalized us with: 'a change in the sum total of people who give us our best account of art.' "[69] In this, Milliner advises that the posture with which we

67. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism,* p. 137.

68. Siedell would be the first to decry heavy-handed "Christian art criticism" (and does so throughout *God in the Gallery*), but he also repeatedly refers to his own criticism as "bending" artworks toward Christ (e.g., p. 13). The possible virtue in thinking of criticism in this way is that it might subtly employ the Augustinian/Lutheran notion of sin as a disfiguring/curving of creatures away from God; and thus it could be argued that Siedell's bending is a "bending-back" — a re-aligning. However, that's a fairly subtle association; this muscular language more immediately connotes manipulation of artworks rather than a close reading of them. I prefer the language of reading along interpretive axes or horizons: we need not "bend" as much as more carefully attend to what is already in the work.

69. Milliner, "A Tale of Two Art Worlds," p. 17.

delve into this reflection not be defensive or combative but oriented toward genuine contribution:

> Instead of a rag-tag peasant uprising to take over the *October* Kingdom, Christians involved in the arts need to emerge from exile and become serious, independent landowners. The increasingly favorable place of religion in academia invites just such an emergence. [But] our inexhaustible aquifer of theological aesthetics means little without the up-to-date scholarly equipment that enables it to irrigate dry, barren historical land. Fruitful landowning would mean that instead of seeking the validation of *October,* we could offer them needed nourishment instead by generating what David Morgan calls the "produce of intellectual labor."[70]

Milliner, for his part, directly and helpfully engages *October,* carefully locating points of commonness as well as "the destabilizing theological touchpoints within *October,*" which are "a permanent part of the journal's history that Christians should feel willing to engage."[71] He reads *October* as laced with theological claims and norms throughout, which Christians should (winsomely and generously) unpack and critically develop. This demands wisdom, patience, and dexterity — and some attentively suspicious re-reading of the contemporary art canons.

Doing Theology in Other Registers

Serious theological art criticism will be serious interdisciplinary scholarship, seeking theological understanding within other disciplines and critical methods. And that's an awfully tall order, not least because it is theologically demanding. Navigating the possibilities and pitfalls of theological discourse simultaneously with those of contemporary art is extremely difficult, and the strain of this task often causes religious criticism to default to strategies of

70. Milliner, "A Tale of Two Art Worlds," p. 17.

71. Milliner, "A Tale of Two Art Worlds," p. 17. Milliner identifies at least four of these "touchpoints" in *October:* (1) it offers a *necessary critique* of modern art/theory, (2) it offers unforeseen *epistemological possibilities* in its "epistemology of the miraculous" (his argument here remains unclear), (3) it sometimes delivers — unknowingly and in spite of itself — *concepts consistent with Christian theological norms* (e.g., Steinberg's fully sexualized yet chaste Christ), and (4) it often implicitly relies on and overlaps with *traditional Christian sources* (e.g., Fried's quotation of Jonathan Edwards).

collating superficial similarities between points of doctrine and contemporary artworks. It is an unfortunate commonplace, for example, to see the Incarnation thinned out to the point where one might generically christen almost any artistic action "an incarnational approach which embodies the immaterial in the material" (to borrow a line from one Christian critic). Similar maneuvers routinely deflate (in order to collate) the Resurrection, the Eucharist, and so on. This strategy is understandable, given the relative lack of serious theological thinking about contemporary art, but it makes for fairly unsatisfying interpretation.

Instead, the kind of theological rigor we are after here is that which takes shape precisely within the cultural-historical particularity of what is going on in the arts today. Christian critics need to have clarity and professional seriousness about the extent to which their theological thinking must be alive in today's conversations, precisely inside the interpretive pressures and problems that frame today's art discourse. This demands theological understanding that is both deeper and also more agile and *improvisational.*

On this point, Kevin Vanhoozer has been helpful in articulating the practice of theology in terms of "creative fidelity." He believes that "the ultimate goal of theology is to foster creative understanding — the ability to improvise what to say and do as disciples of Jesus Christ in ways that are at once faithful yet fitting to their subject matter and setting."[72] In that sense, theology that is lived *in* a contemporary art museum will necessarily be "spontaneous" and highly responsive in the way that it makes sense of *this* artwork in light of *this* history/context. But this is not to imply carelessness or whim; as Vanhoozer points out, "Spontaneity instead describes the state of an actor's readiness: one's preparedness to fit in and contribute to whatever starts to happen. Such readiness, far from being a native reflex, is actually the result of years of disciplined preparation."[73] To improvise extremely well in any given discipline — consider the best examples from music, sports, debate, comedy, and so on — is possible only through deep immersion into the practices, models, and histories of that discipline.

In my estimation, the project of theological art criticism can successfully function only when it has a strong sense of its own improvisational character. It must be deeply apprenticed to the disciplines of both theology and contemporary art, but it must do so in full recognition that the real work to be done is

72. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 32.

73. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine,* p. 338.

unscripted and will necessitate extremely creative solutions. This recognition is important, because (1) it reframes questions of method into more holistic questions of scholarly *posture* (posture determines one's "field of vision" and potential "range of motion"), and (2) it helps clarify that the preparation and apprenticeship necessary here are a matter not only of theoretical knowledge but of performative *skill* (there are pedagogical implications here). Contemporary art criticism is by definition an ongoing, ever-evolving conversation, eager for whatever future contributions that can freshly address, account for, and challenge its disciplinary traditions within our historical context. The task of Christian critics will be to more fully enter that conversation and to improvise compelling understandings of and contributions to it.

The value of an essay such as this — and a volume such as this — is to set aside time for reflection about what it is we're trying to do, and in what context. For better or worse, however, this essay limits itself to theory; what we desperately need today are excellent examples of theologically rich art criticism.