

Summaries of doctoral dissertations

Art without churches. Religious aspects of Dutch autonomous art between 1945 and 1990, with special attention to the eighties*

Joost de Wal

Art without churches is a research project into religious aspects of Dutch autonomous art between 1945 and 1990. In Holland this is the first research project of its kind. Its emphasis lies with the period of 1980-1990; since the end of the sixties there has been little interest in the field of Dutch art and religion. For this period (the eighties) a study was done of the ICN collection – a collection put together by the State –, which gives a general impression of contemporary Dutch art.

The study endeavours to give an overall view of Dutch postwar autonomous art with its religious aspects, to paint a background picture of how this art came into existence and to analyse the works of art themselves.

Backgrounds and method

Chapter 1 focuses on several theoretical questions concerning the arts in relation to religion, theology and the church. The twentieth century has seen some major changes in western Christian culture. Many areas of life have moved away from the influences of the church, and religion and man has increasingly become more autonomous and emancipated. This secularization process led to new and predominantly protestant theologies after World War II (Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer). With them man and his doubts and criticisms are the central issues and they look for the central elements of the Christian faith in relation to modern man and his perception of the world around him.

The relation, too, between the arts and the church (the Roman Catholic church in particular) has been subject to change: the artist became more autonomous and the authority of the church waned. Moreover, the concept of religion has broadened. Artists express their personal experiences and develop their own iconography, they show an interest in religious beliefs other than their own Christian faith, so omnipresent in our western civilization.

In postwar German and American studies of modern art and religion these changes have broadened the scope of religious understanding. In the sixties art historians such as Anton Henze and Jane Dillenberger take a closer look at the secularization aspects in Christian art. They do not match the artist's work to confessionalism or to its historic tradition, instead they look for the depiction of Christian themes in the widest sense.

In the eighties the general concept of religion is even more broadened by German art historians such as Wieland Schmied, and by both Catholic and Protestant theologians such as Horst Schwebel, Günter Rombold and Friedhelm Mennekes. They incorporate religious criticisms into the arts and show an interest in non-Christian expressions of religion. In the eighties there is a remarkable growing of interest in theories that

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embrace the arts into religion. In this respect the theologian Paul Tillich was of great influence here; in the fifties he developed an all-encompassing theory of art which embraced the profane arts and existential themes.

Studies such as the German and American ones were not published in Holland. The subject was treated however in many articles in Dutch Christian magazines between the end of World War II and the late sixties. Catholic periodicals such as *Katholieke Bonnvblad* and *Het Gildeboek* initially fought a 'battle of directions'. Some authors stuck to a rigid traditionalistic concept of religion, based on strict Roman rules, laid out for religious art (sometimes leading to harsh judgments of contemporary Christian art); others, however, were more open to renewal and modernization. In the late fifties and early sixties the articles took a more neutral approach.

Protestant magazines (*Wending. Maandblad voor evangelie en cultuur, en Mededelingen van de Prof. dr G. van der Leeuw-Stichting*) showed a broader and more subtle understanding of religion. In the sixties this led to the idea that all art is an expression of religion because it affiliates man with the eternal; but at the same time it was felt that art was religious only then when the artist had had religious training. The reformed art historian H.R. Rookmaaker, who in his studies in the seventies came with neo calvinistic options for the rechristening of the arts and society, belongs to this category.

At the end of the sixties all these magazines lost their interest in the arts and religion, some even ceased to exist: *Kunst en religie*, known as *Het Gildeboek* before that, was discontinued in 1963.

On the basis of these findings the further parameters of this research are set. The traditional and all encompassing approaches are neglected: they leave out the influence of other non-Christian religions or they presume that all art is an expression of Christian revelation. 'Religion' is now depicted as the reality of a different, higher or infinite being with whom man seeks to affiliate. This includes other forms of religion: Judaism, Eastern religions, religions of illiterate peoples and esotheria. Moreover *religious aspects* are important here: traces of religion in which the religious background of the artist or his traditional iconography are not necessarily viable.

The 1945-1980 period

Chapter 2 deals with autonomous art with religious aspects in the years after World War II until the eighties. This art was selected through the hierarchic method. Religious imagery is predominant here, sometimes supported by the title. In unclear cases (new or unknown iconography, abstract art) the religious intent was looked for in the artist's commentary. Works of art without a clearcut religious imagery and/or religious intent have not been taken into account.

To select the works of art with religious intent exhibition catalogues were consulted first and foremost. Between 1945 and the late sixties it was possible to visit an exhibition of Dutch Christian art somewhere almost each year. Initially mostly liturgical art was exhibited, but during the fifties the number of autonomous religious works steadily increased. The exhibition *One Hundred Years of Religious Art in Holland. 1853-1953* of 1953, and the 1964 exhibition *Bible and Today's Art* serve as examples.

Abroad our country was often represented with profound artwork: in this respect *Arts Sacra* (Leuven 1958) and the biennales for Christian art held in Salzburg from 1958 till 1968 stand out. At such exhibitions artists who stayed close to the traditional figurative art of the church were to be found next to recognized avantgardists such as Wessel Couzijn, Carel Kneulman and Carel Visser, who must have found inspiration in the

new Christian art from France and Germany, which was exhibited widely in Holland in the fifties and sixties.

Outside Christian exhibitions Christian works of art are found in the art of several members of the postwar movements. To trace these, monographies, oeuvre catalogues and solo catalogues have been consulted. Christian themes are best represented in informal art and pop art, but are to be found in any major movement. In other words Christian art finds its representation in almost all modern styles, something which was rarely the case before World War II, when artists mostly worked in styles reminiscent of the late Middle Ages.

At the same time there is a shift from the traditional, illustrative art to the more existential or 'groping' art. Themes denoting suffering are predominant. At the end of the sixties there is a rather abrupt loss of interest in religious art in magazines and at exhibitions, despite that quite a few works of religious art were produced in the seventies. Loss of religious interest and secularization began to take its toll, and in the museal world religion became a sort of taboo. In the eighties however, there is a rekindling of interest in religious art.

It is typical for postwar art that other religions than Christianity left their marks. Such art was seldom seen at special exhibitions, so that for this research project monographies, oeuvre catalogues, magazine articles and published interviews were used. In the fifties and sixties Eastern religions, Zen buddhism in particular, were greatly in vogue. The artist Willem Hussem for example was very much inspired by the Zen art of calligraphy and found 'essence' and an access to higher levels of perception in elements such as emptiness and silence. Various groups of artists that formed around 1960, such as Zengroup Holland, Oekwa and Europe thought of Zen as a mystic passage through which the whole of humanity could find enlightenment, by means of art.

Judaism on the one hand and the esoteric religions such as theosophy on the other, are represented in autonomous art, all be it in a relatively limited way. Some artists chose themes from the Old Testament to portray the fate of the Jews of the Holocaust. The abstract art of the painter Eli Content must be explained in the vein of Jewish religion. An artist like Ad Dekkers appealed to theosophy to find an explanation for the great divine togetherness visualized by his art.

The eighties

Chapter 3 deals with the religious aspects of art in the eighties. These works of art were selected from the collection of the Instituut Collectie Nederland (ICN) in Rijswijk, Holland, formerly known as the Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst. Acquisition catalogues of the years 1984 through 1992 were used, supplemented by articles from papers and magazines, interviews, and artists and exhibitions catalogues.

The seventies are characterized by a – relative – decline in art with religious aspects, and by the absence of exhibitions and publications in this field. The eighties, however, do show a renewal of interest. Artists show a renewed interest in Christian lore and in the religions of other cultures, due to a return to figuration and a desire for more depth and meaning in art. This revival is not immediately picked up by art historians and theologians however, except for a few. This can be attributed to the rather restricted concept of the term religion that was common in those circles in the latter part of the sixties.

When ordered thematically, the works of art depicting Christ are predominant. Both young artists such as Reinoud van Vught, Marc Mulders and Peter Otto, and older artists like Dolf Henkes and Anton Heyboer were attracted to this theme. The way they expressed this theme differs very much for each individual. Often the figure of Christ serves as a mode to express issues about man and his world; he is seldom depicted as an answer from the faith. Typical for the eighties is the use of the image of Christ as a commercial 'empty' cliché. Rob Scholte's Kitsch-Christ e.g., painted in 1986 as the cover for the Christmas edition of the *Haagse Post*, is mainly a take-off on the western Christmas industry.

Beside a slight preference for the figure of Maria, Christian themes vary a great deal. Saints and devils are depicted and so are scenes of the Creation. Many Christian works of the past are used again, in which old iconography is replaced by new concepts. Artists freely combine various themes and make connections between tales from the Bible and issues of today. Subjects such as the beheading of John the Baptist by Marlene Dumas and the Exodus of the Jews by Felix Droese must be seen in the light of social abuse, in this case Apartheid in South Africa and the issue of refugees. At the same time works of art are found which must be seen in the light of mysticism and which are regarded by the artist as a way to *unio mystica*, mystical unification.

The diversity of the eighties is further found in the multi-presence of religious aspects. Artists with a Jewish background such as Joseph Semah and Eli Content are inspired by religious rituals and tales of Judaism. Their works can be seen as a personal commentary on Jewish religion and culture.

Eastern religions – Buddhism and Hinduism – are referred to in many different ways; they vary from the documentary depiction of Hindu festivities to the abstract image of Brahman. The effect of these themes is usually very western. They are not Buddhist or Hindu artists who express their religious beliefs in their works; for them these are attempts in which other religions can be experimented with. It is not uncommon for artists to refer to different religions; sometimes they combine various aspects of different cultures in one work of art.

The interest in religious art of illiterate cultures such as the Aborigines and the Inuit coincides with the religious status that 'art' objects have in these cultures. Some Dutch artists like Reinier Lucassen and Ulay & Abramovic take elements from these religions. In this way they express their desire for a new unity of life and art, for a reevaluation of the role of art in western civilization.

Lastly the frequent references to esoteria, alchemy in particular, are mostly the result of superficial resemblances and a need for mystification. If there is a desire for insight in another higher or infinite form, then the artists consider the artistic process *in itself* the way to such an insight.

Even more than before, art with religious aspects is marked by emancipation, wilfulness and individualism. Wondering and groping, but critical as well, the artist tries to find his way through the world of religion. The outcome of this quest is 'Art without churches'. (Translation: Leo Pennock)