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PHOTOGRAPHING THE LANDSCAPE OF REDLINING

SARA ZARR ON NOMADS OF THE NEW ECONOMY

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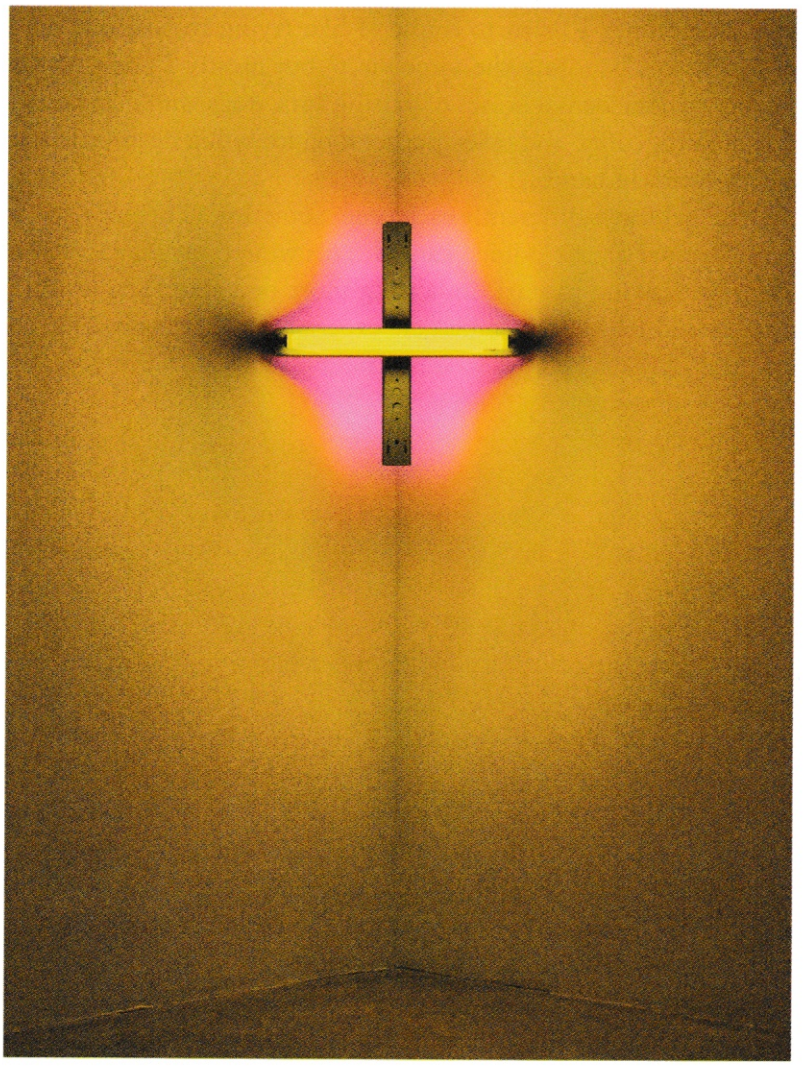

Flavin, Dan. **Untitled**, 1969. Fluorescent lights and metal fixtures. 5 x 25 x 5¾ inches.
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JAMES ELKINS

JONATHAN A. ANDERSON

The Strange Persistence of Religion in Contemporary Art

James Elkins is the E.C. Chadbourne Professor of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. After completing an MFA in painting in 1983, he switched disciplines and completed an MA and PhD in art history (1989), all at the University of Chicago. He is the author of twenty-six books and has edited another twenty-two, in addition to publishing numerous articles and essays. His writing is often aimed at illuminating various limitations, lacunae, conundrums, and blind spots in the disciplines of art history, theory, and criticism. As such, his work often displays a strong interest in putting art history into more generative (and also more critical) dialogue with other disciplines, including visual studies, the physical sciences, and religion. His widely influential books include The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing *(1996),* What Painting Is *(1999),* Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings *(2001),* Master Narratives and Their Discontents *(2005), and, most recently,* The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing: North Atlantic Art History and Its Alternatives *(2020). His book* On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art *(2004) is a key contribution to the growing study of religion in modern and contemporary art, along with* Re-enchantment *(2009), coedited with David Morgan as part of Routledge's seven-volume series the Art Seminar. He was interviewed by painter and* Image *editorial advisor Jonathan A. Anderson.*

Jonathan A. Anderson: Your book *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* addressed a peculiar feature of the academic art discourse that circulates through major art institutions and art schools—namely, a particularly strong embarrassment, speechlessness, and "structure of refusals" that generally surround the topic of

religion. That book was published in 2004, the same year I completed an MFA in visual art, and your articulation of that strangeness seemed to map pretty directly onto my experiences of graduate school. Indeed, it has remained an important point of reference for me as I have tried to continue thinking in and about that strange place. What convinced you to write that book *then*?

James Elkins: Experiences I was having with MFA students at the time. The waning of first-generation conceptual and performance art and the expansion of the art market in the two decades leading to that moment had provided a space for experimentation with cultural practices that did not fit the secularist, academic narratives that had been constructed from the 1960s to *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Hal Foster's influential 1983 anthology of essays on postmodern culture). And yet the faculty teaching those MFA students were a half-generation older and steeped in the values of postmodernism. Does that chronology fit your experience?

JA: I would probably extend the heyday of those narratives as running from *The Anti-Aesthetic* through the 1980s and '90s—exemplified especially in the numerous publications spiraling outward from the influential journal *October*, which was launched in 1976 and reached its apotheosis (or maybe culmination) in the publication of the massive *Art Since 1900* in 2004, the same year as your *Strange Place*. You've written about the importance of *October* in the construction of these narratives, so I'm probably repeating your own views here.

But this makes me wonder if this issue has less to do with a generation gap between faculty and students than with a gap between the way that space for experimentation functioned for artists and for scholars and critics. Your work has really helped me to see how religious contexts, concepts, and concerns have been important throughout the history of modern and contemporary art, but when artworks are run through contemporary critical procedures, these aspects get interpreted almost entirely in terms of power, sublimated desire, formal structure, semiotics, identity, and so on. And thus even though numerous artists over the past century—including many who played vital roles in those narratives you mentioned—have been significantly shaped by or engaged with religion, there have not been compelling, well-developed ways to *write* and *talk* about these aspects of their work. So these aspects appear thin, peripheral, or simply disappear altogether in the scholarship. That is the strangeness you describe so well. Is that an accurate summary?

JE: Yes. The sticking point for some academics here is that people who want to remove the normative story of modernism and postmodernism in order to reveal religious and spiritual meanings tend to think that "theory" or "academia" are artificially imposed on art by a relatively small number of art historians and curators. "Why do I have to learn theory?" my undergrad students always ask. The notion tends to be that

"theory" can be detached from practice, leaving practices intact. I think that's only true in individual cases. Underneath the formalist Rothko there's the religious Rothko.

But there is a deeper problem: The "academic" version provides so much of our sense of what matters in the last hundred years that removing it would leave art without history—by which I mean it would leave art as a bare chronicle of names, places, and works, without words to describe how they are related. Renaissance specialists used to wonder where Vasari got his idea for his art history, because before him there were only chronicles: lists of families and properties. Vasari's book is an art history because it accounts for the sequence of art through three "ages." It's the same thing with modern and contemporary art. There are many alternative narratives now—postcolonial histories, histories of overlooked countries and places, unfamiliar ethnicities, new centers of art production—but they borrow narrative forms and terms of positive and negative judgment from existing narratives.

That's why the secular, academic, theory-laden history of modern and postmodern art cannot simply be set aside.

JA: Yes, I agree with you. The notion of simply setting aside these histories and theories is neither possible nor desirable—they have been immensely valuable and insightful. For me, the question is whether the existing histories have significantly underinterpreted or poorly interpreted the importance of religion in modern and contemporary art. To whatever extent they have, this warrants a careful rereading of these histories, adding to them, expanding them, and in some cases reworking them—much as postcolonial historians have expanded and reworked modernist art history, for example. The results of such rereading might be modest in many instances but fundamental in others, perhaps even generating different narratives of what matters within the existing histories—it still mostly remains to be seen. At any rate, it seems such rereading can only proceed by making itself highly accountable to the existing evidence and highly attentive to the ways the best existing narratives and theories work. Would that way of putting things still be a sticking point?

JE: It could be for those historians who believe that the modernist project was essentially non- or anti-religious, or that the postmodern project has been essentially about politics.

JA: From your point of view, what would a persuasive rereading of religion in contemporary art look like? What does the scholarship on this topic need to demonstrate?

JE: Well, let's start with a book that I think raises this issue quite well: Tom Crow's *No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art* (2017). His examples—Colin McCahon, Mark Rothko, Robert Smithson, James Turrell, and Sister Mary Corita Kent—are all presented as committed both to "theological" issues and to central tenets of modernism, including complexity, awareness of the medium, and responsiveness to

precedents. The book is a way of saying: Look, there isn't a problem here, because these artists are both theologically interesting and engaged with the central values of modern and postmodern art.

Yet exceptions do not prove the rule. The overwhelming majority of work that presents itself as religious does not engage modern and postmodern values like ambiguity, the avant-garde, or the desire to present a compelling step forward for historically minded art. And conversely, a lot of modern and postmodern art is predicated on ignoring religion, tacitly devaluing it, or actively critiquing it.

JA: That's a helpful place to start. I think Crow is making a more ambitious claim. He opens his book by saying that the refusal of theology in the writing of modernist history has created "a blind spot obscuring full apprehension of past art in the West." And he closes it by arguing that his five case studies identify "a gap that cannot be filled, an obscurity that cannot be illuminated, until the reigning interdiction of theology is lifted." This signals that he sees these artists not as exceptions to the rule but as examples of some sort of larger historical pattern. In other words, it's not just that this handful of artists managed to be theologically interesting despite the depth of their engagement with the values of modern and postmodern art, but that the central values of modern and contemporary art *are themselves* theologically interesting or are inwoven with significant theological concepts and concerns. In Crow's book, these concerns specifically have to do with anti-idolatrous thinking, but several other theological threads might be identified as well—perhaps even among those artists who are ignoring, devaluing, or critiquing religion.

But I assume that this is precisely the thing you think the scholarship of religion in contemporary art still needs to demonstrate. It needs to show how this kind of theological analysis helpfully illuminates a more comprehensive *history* of modern and contemporary art. What do you think of this more ambitious reading of Crow's argument? Do you see potential in his project being expanded into a broader historical account?

JE: Yes, it's a more ambitious claim, but his book is absolutely not the way to start it. There are two problems. The first is that the values that interest Crow—affiliation with an avant-garde, historical awareness of modernism and postmodernism, difficulty, challenge, complexity, and ambiguity—limit his inquiry to a handful of artists. A "full apprehension of past art in the West" involves locating what he calls theological interests in art that would be of no interest to him.

The second problem is that those values are themselves implicated in secularist modernism and postmodernism, so any fuller or wider discovery of "theology" would have to find a different sense of history. What to do with art that is primarily religious in intent and content and has only intermittent, distant, simplified, or belated contact with the historical avant-gardes? Crow's strategy wouldn't work for Warner Sallman or Arnold Friberg.

Crow has rightly pointed to much larger issues, and I think he imagines his case studies as the beginning of a larger enterprise. But I think they're the end of the road for academic art history, which can only look out past the fence posts of fine art to the country beyond.

JA: Your point about the limited scope of what Crow has in mind by "art in the West" is well taken. But what if we provisionally accept these limits and confine our inquiry to the artists who are already central to the historical avant-garde, setting aside (at least for now) artists like Sallman, Friberg, and others whose work is overtly religious in intent and primarily seen in religious communities? Within those limits, wouldn't we still be able to expand Crow's line of inquiry—or something like it—to include many artists whose works have important religious points of reference and theological intelligence, even if these works are not "religious"? Couldn't similar books, for example, be written to also include extended case studies on Natalia Goncharova, Hugo Ball, Kazimir Malevich, Emily Carr, Romare Bearden, Andy Warhol, Ed Ruscha, Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin, Paul Thek, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Anselm Kiefer, Cornelia Parker, Marlene Dumas, Ann Hamilton, Mark Wallinger, Francis Alÿs, Theaster Gates, Kris Martin, Danh Vo, Arthur Jafa, Andrea Büttner, and so on? I think we could easily double or triple that list. In other words, what if the different sense of history you refer to can be found precisely within the underinterpreted aspects of secularist modernism and postmodernism?

JE: Jonathan, you're a formidable debater. I have to agree: the list could be multiplied. So here's what concerns me. After a while, theological or religious accounts of many of these artists would become counterintuitive: either they wouldn't match the artists' public or private intentions, or they wouldn't connect to the existing art-historical accounts that have provided the reasons for valuing the artists.

JA: I entirely sympathize with this concern. Theological or religious accounts of modern and contemporary art have a tendency to become reductive or to impose (sometimes a bit violently) a predetermined outcome upon artists and artworks—or, as you point out, to simply ignore the histories and theories of modernism that have been so vital. So perhaps we can agree on some ground rules: (1) any such reading must be highly accountable to all available evidence regarding the work and the contexts of the work (including whatever we can discern about artists' intentions); (2) it must be intellectually honest, even if perhaps adventurous, in following that evidence wherever it might lead (including away from whatever the scholar's beliefs might be); and (3) it must convincingly demonstrate its connection and contribution to the best existing art-historical accounts. How does that sound? And if we do accept those ground rules, do you think we should, at least in theory, still preserve room for *counterintuitive* readings? Once artworks get out into the world, they almost

always do things that exceed the artists' intentions and preexisting accounts, and some of this excess might involve contexts, questions, and concerns in which religion or theology have significant bearing.

JE: Definitely, sure. Jonathan, I'd love to learn a little from your own research. Would you like to pick an artist from your list? Either someone who didn't publicly (or privately) describe their work as religious, or someone who has been valued in art history for reasons unconnected to their religious interests?

JA: A concrete example is a good idea. I have been thinking and writing fairly extensively about several of those artists, who are all complicated and fascinating examples. But perhaps it would be most interesting to choose an artist whose relations to religion I'm only beginning to think about—and we could think about it together. What about Dan Flavin? I know you've given some consideration to the problems and possibilities of talking about religion in relation to his work. He repeatedly resisted any association of his work with transcendence, but the case is clearly more complicated than that. What are some of the puzzle pieces we would need to have on the table regarding Flavin?

JE: I'd like to see how exact we can get. The *icons* (1961–64) are explicitly modeled on Russian, Byzantine, and other medieval icons. Flavin said, "My icons differ from a Byzantine Christ held in majesty; they are dumb—anonymous and inglorious. They are as mute and [un]distinguished as the run of our architecture. My icons do not raise up the blessed savior in elaborate cathedrals. They are constructed concentrations celebrating barren rooms. They bring a limited light." Here it's important to pay attention to the words: they celebrate not "Christ held in majesty" but "barren rooms." They do bring light, but it is "limited" and "inglorious." They are "anonymous," presumably because they have no holy figures.

This is all part of the discourse of theology that has been traced by writers like Mark C. Taylor—you know that literature much better than I do. But then there's Donald Judd's review in *Arts Magazine* in 1964:

> There are several interesting aspects to the pieces: they are things themselves; they are awkward; they are put together bluntly; the materials are considered bluntly—the paint is flat and the lights come that way; the lights are strong and specific. There are also several important negative aspects: the blocks are not paintings; they have none of painting's scheme of something framed; they are not composed in the ordinary sense; they don't involve illusionistic space; they don't have modulated surfaces; they don't play with parts of the world.

That's two discourses, by the artist and a close friend, written, I think, in the same year. How do you write about that?

JA: I would begin by trying to understand the contexts of this work and these statements. First, Flavin's personal context is important, especially the fraught but important role of Roman Catholicism in his life leading up to the *icons*, which included four years at a preparatory seminary in Brooklyn, where he was trained in the Bible, Latin, and Thomistic theology. By the time he made his *icons* nine years later, he seems to have abandoned the Catholicism in which he was raised, but it still deeply shaped his thinking, and references to it appear repeatedly in his early work. Just prior to the *icons*, for example, he scrawled text from Psalm 22 on his drawing *to those who suffer in the Congo* (1961) and from Jeremiah on *many pastors have destroyed my vineyard* (1961). And arguably, some significant theological frameworks remain in play in ambiguous ways after the *icons*, including his interest in the metaphysical nominalism of Franciscan theologian William of Ockham—to whom Flavin dedicated one of his most important works, *the nominal three* (1963)—his cross forms of the late 1960s and early '70s, his installation in the now-defunct Masjid al-Farah Sufi mosque in SoHo (1980), his permanent installation in the former First Baptist Church in Bridgehampton, New York (1983), and his final work, the design for a permanent installation in the church of Santa Maria Annunciata in Chiesa Rossa, Milan (1996–97). (And here I'm drawing on work by Michael Govan and Adi Louria-Hayon.) None of this means that Flavin was a "religious artist" or that these are religious artworks, but it might mean that there are discernible, interesting religious points of reference here that are worth exploring further as we make sense of the *icons*.

Second, I would also want to look more closely at the *icons* themselves and how they function. In the lines immediately prior to those you quoted from Flavin's sketchbook, he writes:

> Last week in the Metropolitan, I saw a large icon from the school of Novgorod [a fifteenth-century Russian icon of Christ in glory]. I smiled when I recognized it. It had more than its painting. There was a physical feeling in the panel. Its recurving warp bore a history. The icon had that magical presiding presence which I have tried to realize in my own icons. But my icons differ from a Byzantine Christ held in majesty...

And then he continues with the portion you already quoted.

These sentences are riddled with ambiguities, but they clarify that he understood the dumbness, anonymity, and ingloriousness of his icons specifically in relation to the "history" of the Novgorod panel and to whatever capacity for "magical presiding presence" he saw in it. The monochrome colors of Flavin's eight *icons* are loosely derived from the Russian icon, and perhaps so too are the angles built into the corners of *icons VI*, *VII*, and *VIII*, which are reminiscent of the outer quadrangular nimbus in *Christ in Glory* where the symbols of the Gospel writers appear. As he set up these relations to the Novgorod icon and to the "presence" he "tried to realize" in his own works, he certainly understood his own *icons*, by comparison, as mute, limited, depleted. But it's

not clear to me that this depletion meant that these "icons" were simply detheologized or atheological—indeed, this depletion is potentially quite theologically interesting.

JE: Yes, exactly.

JA: Judd is right that the *icons* are deliberately awkward and blunt, but he's obviously wrong that "they don't play with parts of the world," if by that he meant that they are somehow entirely self-referential.

JE: Of course he could have meant "parts of the world" in a cosmic sense: named parts, like God, like heaven.

JA: In the sense that the icons perform a kind of unnaming of the "presiding presence" he was interested in?

JE: Yes, a dismantling, a search.

JA: On that point, we would probably also want to consider the parenthetical subtitles that Flavin attached to these works, which include religious references—*the heart, the mystery, the blood of a martyr, via crucis*—as well as dedications to people who meant something to him, many of whom had met tragic deaths, including Louis Sullivan, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Flavin's own twin brother, David. There is plenty of irony, reduction, and maybe misdirection going on in these *icons*, but surely it's not only that.

JE: I think we're in agreement here, except perhaps that I'm not sure there's irony or misdirection: I see Catholic faith and even penitence in those words "limited," "inglorious," "anonymous." And possibly some pride in having brought the tradition forward, into a new language: but it's not Judd's language, which means it's not art history's.

JA: But if Catholic faith and tradition play some significant part in how Flavin's artworks function, then isn't sorting out how that works and what that means precisely the business of art history? Why would Judd's theory of art constrain what art history is capable of saying here?

JE: Sorry, I meant that Judd's theory is all art history is capable of saying in this case. The business of art history hasn't always been what it has actually done. My qualms are always about the interpretation of existing literature in art history, rather than the possibility that large parts of art history might change fundamentally and even unrecognizably.

JA: So those comments are descriptive, rather than prescriptive or proscriptive, of what art history is currently capable of saying? Is that the aim of most of your writing on this topic—to accurately describe rather than to prescribe these limits?

JE: Actually I'd be delighted if art history dissolved. Most calls for the end of the discipline have to do with acknowledging structural racism, accommodating popular culture, or paying proper attention to settler colonialism. I'm in favor of pursuing all three of those to the point where the discipline falls apart. But a fourth possibility is to take faith seriously.

JA: A recurring theme in your writing about the question of religion in contemporary art is that art historians already *are* and *have been* talking about theological concepts, but without using a theological vocabulary—in fact, sometimes while openly repudiating any such vocabulary. You refer, for instance, to theological concepts that are "camouflaged" or "smuggled" into the discourse of modernism under other terminologies. But you also note—especially in your essay "Iconoclasm and the Sublime" (2011)—that these cannot be openly analyzed *as* theological concepts in art history, because "when it is analyzed something in the writing is ruined." This is a fascinating and important argument. Can you say more about what you have in mind there?

JE: I had in mind readings that mine art history for concepts that are derived from theology, and use their excerpts to support religious readings. It wouldn't be difficult to find glimmers of theology in most contemporary historians—and I am not exempting even Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, Richard Shiff, Mignon Nixon, Donald Preziosi, Darby English, and dozens more—because we all inherit ideas from Christian Europe. We're full of "extinguished" possibilities, "occluded" epiphanies, "erased" representations, "limited" and "anonymous" signs, tropes of isolation, echoes of the uncanny, "refusals" of transcendence. But to propose those scattered metaphors as tokens of a theological discourse is to misread the intentions of the scholars.

JA: Do you see any instances here in which these glimmers and inherited ideas might amount to something more than scattered metaphors? Are there perhaps even ways in which these inheritances might operate with a kind of intelligence of their own that is not entirely managed by these scholars' intentions?

JE: The intelligence of several centuries of discourse "soaked" in theology, as Walter Benjamin said.

JA: That is such an evocative passage from Benjamin's *Arcades Project:* "My thinking is related to theology as blotting pad is related to ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain."

JE: Here's another metaphor for my qualms: mining art history for glimmers of theology is like what Heinrich Schliemann did at Troy: you can find the gold, but without the kind of careful excavation that archaeology has introduced, you lose the context and therefore the meaning.

JA: You're exactly right to have these qualms, and I'm grateful for your efforts to divert the study of religion in contemporary art from this kind of approach, insisting that it be much more careful and more honest.

I suppose I want to try to press the issue a bit further to see how theology might work within a careful excavation. I do see more going on here than scattered metaphors and vestigial inheritances—and if I have read your work correctly, you do too. I appreciate your mention of Walter Benjamin, because I was thinking about him here too. In the fragment immediately following the passage you mentioned, he argues that history (including art history?) hinges on "a form of remembrance" that is intrinsically theological, because it insists on a perpetual openness to the meaning of events, which thus "forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts."

JE: Thanks to some research my wife, Margaret MacNamidhe, has been doing, I now know one of Benjamin's sources here is Jules Michelet, who had an eschatological conception of French history. I gather not many people followed his equation of the French Revolution with the crucifixion, but the general ideas of redemption in history, and redemption *as* history, have been hugely influential.

JA: Fascinating! I would love to read whatever she publishes about that. And to add to it: Evidently Benjamin was also influenced by the ancient Christian notion of apocatastasis—the belief in universal salvation, in which God ultimately redeems all people, all creatures, and all history, without remainder. The idea was developed by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, and Benjamin encountered it in Adolf von Harnack's three-volume *History of Dogma* (1886), which he read all the way through at least twice. In fact, the renowned Benjamin scholar Michael W. Jennings argues (in the 2016 anthology *Walter Benjamin and Theology*) that this idea is vital to how Benjamin's "historical materialism" works.

JE: Fabulous!

JA: At any rate, I see something like what Benjamin describes going on in twentieth-century art history, where there are extensive theological contexts and all sorts of theological moves being made—for better and worse—but there has been so little granted to try to write it as such.

Perhaps I should back up and say this another way, referring back to the list of

historians you gave earlier. I agree with Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago when they write (in *Art Is Not What You Think It Is*) that the history of modernism is "ultimately grounded in the ontological framework of Christianity, the unthought ground of the modern idea of art as 'free' and 'secular,'" such that "we're not really talking about two different frameworks, secularism versus religion, but two forms of religious understanding intertwined with one another." But I also think they don't have a deep understanding of the theological ontology they're referring to there, so they keep reducing the entire issue to operations of social power.

I also agree with Rosalind Krauss in her essay "Grids" where she says that the potency and prevalence of the grid in the history of modernism resides precisely in its ability to conceal spiritual concerns within a presumably materialist discourse, which thus "allows a contradiction between the values of science and those of spiritualism to maintain themselves within the consciousness of modernism, or rather its unconscious, as something repressed." But she only compounds this repression by lumping a wide variety of theological ideas under the trivializing term "spiritualism" and then asserting (in what is essentially a point of faith) that materialism is the only legitimate historical basis for interpreting the grid—"there seems no other logical way to discuss it," even if "that is not the way that artists have ever discussed it." And we could continue on down your list of historians.

JE: Those are excellent readings!

JA: I'm entirely with you in resolutely wanting to avoid a Schliemann-style "mining" approach that isolates whatever it wants to find while obliterating context. But I also see a need to reread the role of religion and theology in the history of modernism precisely for the sake of recovering more of the context and therefore more of the meaning. How does that sit with you? Do you see that as possible within the kind of careful excavation in your metaphor?

JE: We're talking here about two projects: rereading art history to recover a wider context for religious meaning, and rereading it to recover a wider sense of the art-historical project. You are aiming at the first, which is the larger and more important one, but our examples have been mainly the second, which would be a tonic to the discipline.

JA: Yes. I'm very interested in both of those projects, but you're making a vital distinction.

JE: I wonder, by the way, if we could expand this kind of reading to an earlier generation: when I was in graduate school, it was widely noted that most art historians who specialized in European (and therefore ecclesiastical) architecture were Jewish—that would include Erwin Panofsky—and that their professional interests can be read

as a continuation, in a different language, of their own senses of faith. I'm thinking, for example, of *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (1951), which is full of a longing for something I wouldn't mind calling viable belief.

JA: I totally agree. I once heard an art historian say (only half joking) that modern art history was produced by mostly Jewish scholars using mostly Protestant theory to write about mostly Catholic artists. That's a complicated story to tell, though a necessary one. But your point about there being a longing for belief in play and at stake in this writing is important. And as you have rightly warned, the difficulty is to carefully attend to that aspect of the writing without ruining it—without "mining" it. If you were to continue this reading of that earlier generation, who else would you include?

JE: A large number of writers—in different ways, Roberto Longhi, William Heckscher, Millard Meiss.

JA: I have always greatly appreciated the combination of invitation and caution in your writing about religion. You conclude *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* by writing that "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." And you note that in taking up this responsibility to keep trying, "the talk needs to be very slow and careful." I know some religious artists and scholars who responded defensively or felt further marginalized by this kind of conclusion, but your book always struck me as a remarkably generous and hospitable gesture toward religious thought and religious inquiry, seeking to more clearly and openly forge a more substantive discussion in the academic art world, where there really hadn't functionally been one—*while also* identifying the profound obstacles to this discussion and demanding that any attempt at a way forward really deal with these obstacles. I admire this approach, and I'm grateful for the space you have opened for this kind of study and the hospitality you have consistently shown to me and others who are trying to think seriously about this topic. What stands out to you or surprises you about the way that book—and your other writing about art and religion—has been received?

JE: Thank you, that means a lot to me. What surprised me at first was that it had no reception in the secular academic press: no reviews, next to no citations. I'm no longer surprised. I'm aware, now, which side is more open.

JA: The question of religion in contemporary art actually appears repeatedly in your writing. You address the topic directly in *Strange Place*, *Re-enchantment*, and in various essays, but it also shows up as an important thread running through books like *What Painting Is*, *Pictures and Tears*, and *Six Stories from the End of Representation*. How would you describe the place of religion in your own writing?

JE: It's a red thread, which weaves through everything but can't be disentangled. As it should be, and as it is for me personally as well.

JA: I think this is true for a lot of artists and scholars of art.

JE: Perhaps it's one of the few senses in which the phrase "Judeo-Christian civilization" actually names a specifiable structure of culture.

JA: Over the past couple years, I have had three fairly prominent artists, independently of each other, tell me that they are not really interested in religion or spirituality, but they are very interested in theology. What do you make of that?

JE: It's a euphemism. Same, I think, in Crow's book. Just as "stance" is a euphemism for "stand."

JA: I suppose I took these artists to be using "religion" as a euphemism for some set of established institutions and rituals that they experienced earlier in life, and I took "spirituality" to be referring to an essentially private, highly personal quest for deeper meaning, inner healing, cosmic connectedness, et cetera. What do you see "theology" as a euphemism for?

JE: As a euphemism for religion, faith, belief, and other direct indicators of commitments and ways of life that need to be securely contained within intellectually respectable boundaries of historically specifiable sense and properly archival reference.

JA: When "religion" gets written about in contemporary art, it often gets collapsed down to a series of anthropological or sociological categories, conducive to analyzing visual and material culture. And when "spirituality" gets written about, it often gets collapsed in the other direction, so that it feels historically and philosophically unmoored—a bit like Schliemann's excavations. But "theology" is a complex mode of dialogical reasoning that is, as you point out, historically extended, historically specifiable, and historically accountable. As such, do you see it as having more potential for critical art-historical study?

JE: Yes, except I wish Tom Crow hadn't taken the word!

JA: Ha, fair enough. I'm grateful to him for writing that book, but I do hope its strongest effect is to open space for more extensive research in this direction.

In recent years, your own writing has turned from academic art history to a multi-volume experimental novel, which you have been working on for the past decade or so. I'd love to hear more about that project.

JE: I want to thank you for being such a generous friend and colleague, and also for asking that question, but I'd rather not answer. The novel is an attempt to see what I am capable of doing beyond academia, which is, in the end, easy. I feel your own project has the same relation to writing on religion in art history: after a while, it can seem as if it simply needs to be more reflective.

JA: In the sense that what I'm trying to explore might require a new form of writing?

JE: And, of course, new readers.