

Locating Religion in Contemporary Art

1. Defining the context

This study focuses on religion in contemporary Western art, the context of which will be elaborated here. In a vernacular and adjectival sense 'contemporary' in 'contemporary art' refers to the art of now, of what is current. In a technical and conceptual sense, it builds on this everyday sense but adds a historical parameter, which includes art from the late twentieth century, typically from the 1960s onwards, that engages with the world intellectually and culturally through engagement with themes that resonates with the *zeitgeist*, such as identity and the relationship between the body and technology. Religion too is explored, not in terms of doctrinal belief, as seen in centuries of Western art through the depictions of the narratives of Christianity, but more in terms of its material practices, such as rituals, how it relates to identity, and the feelings and experiences that religion gives rise to.

In its concern with society and identity, contemporary art is a departure from modernist concerns and conveys a rejection of modern art's focus on purity, materialism and self-referentiality (Hopkins, 2018). It is also more expansive and extensive in its understanding of what constitutes an artwork and is not confined by either style or genre. Contemporary artwork is characterised by diversity in material and form, and includes installation art, performance art, conceptual art, and media in addition to more traditional forms of visual artworks, such as painting and sculpture. The Contemporary Art Society founded in 1910 in Britain was the first of a number of public contemporary art museums around the world that espouses the ethos of the contemporary. Typically, and generically named 'Museum of

Contemporary Art', these museums specialise in the collecting and exhibiting of contemporary art. The programme of international art shows and fairs, which is expanding geographical horizons as the contemporary art world becomes more global, has a bearing on the remit of the work.

Contemporary art work also makes more demands on the viewerⁱ who has larger role in interaction. This may involve having to walk around the art work, or even through it, as is often the case in installation work, and to allow the art work to unfold in time and space, as is also the case in performance art. More traditional art works, such as paintings and sculpture, may engage a viewer intellectually and even captivate them sensuously, but the mode(s) of interaction are often less involving. This points to the more complex and multifarious dynamic between the viewer, the contemporary art work and the space/context leading to the idea that 'participant' might be a more appropriate designation than 'viewer' in some descriptions to refer to the ways in which they become involved in the creative process itself. Contemporary religious art also brings about different modes of viewing, or 'transactions' as Graham Howes describes it, beyond the 'iconographic', 'didactic' or 'institutional' (2007, pp. 55-59).

The conceptual concerns of contemporary art and the forms the art takes also necessitates different methods of analysis and interpretation. It is not sufficient to deploy methods and approaches from art history, which typically sought to identify (an artwork) and describe its forms. Interpreting contemporary art requires an understanding of the context of the work, the forms of its production, consumption, and reception (see Hopkins, 2018).

Preoccupations of this kind form the basis of the methods of revisionary accounts of art

history. This constituted 'the new art history', which debunked many of the fixed assumptions inherent within the prevailing discipline, such as its patriarchy, and sought to underpin new approaches with critical theory (Harris, 2001).

This article discusses three prominent ways in which religion is explored in contemporary art: in socio-politics, in art that transgresses, and in the creation of spaces of contemplation, some of which may be 'religious'. Each of these ways have in common the exploration of religion primarily in terms of its lived experience and practices (within identity and the material world) rather than through religious belief or the institutions of religion. What follows is, first, a discussion of key texts in the field and contemporary themes including the expansive way of the way in which religion is conceived.

2. An overview of the field of study

The last two decades have seen important publications in the field written from different disciplinary backgrounds. One of the most preeminent scholars in this field is Diane Apostolos-Cappadona whose 2017 study *Religion and the Arts: History and Method* presents an overview of the core issues in the field, introducing key questions and perspectives. Her view is that religion and the arts is a discrete field of multidisciplinary scholarship and that the biggest challenges are the problems of definition, shared vocabularies and the lack of formal methodologies. One of the most valuable parts of her study is her outline of the intellectual history of traditions of art history, philosophy, and comparative religion, which sets the scene for the contemporary situation. She outlines the development of theological aesthetics of the 1970s (citing scholars such as John Dillenberger, David Brown and Frank Burch Brown) to the discourse of religious visual culture in the 1980s which adopted the

rubric of visual and material culture as the lens through which to study religion (citing scholars such as David Morgan and S. Brent Plate). S. Brent Plate's excellent essay *Reports of the Death of Religious Art Have Been Greatly Exaggerated* (2017) in *Los Angeles Review of Books* should also be singled out for attention. In addition to his discussion of some interesting studies in the field, he works through one of the main issues, which he argues is not the lack of religious art within the contemporary but rather the lack of writing about it. In his words, '[w]hile modern and contemporary artists have continued to embrace, or rail against, their spiritual inklings or their own religious pasts and presents, and while curators have responded by tapping into these sources, those *writing* about the arts – historians, critics and journalists – have kept their secular gaze narrowly focussed (<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/233865/>). Plate makes an important point which can be developed in the following way. In order for the field of contemporary art and religion to grow, a holistic approach needs to be taken whereby artists, curators, and writers (meant broadly) work together or at least generate dialogues. This needs to be borne in mind for future scholarship.

Other notable contributions to the field are Dawn Perlmutter's and Debra Koppman's *Reclaiming the Spiritual in Art: Contemporary Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (1999), Graham Howes' *The Art of the Sacred: An Introduction to the Aesthetics of Art and Belief* (2007), Jungu Yoon's *Spirituality in Contemporary Art: The Idea of the Numinous* (2010), Mark C. Taylor's *Refiguring the Spiritual: Beuys, Barney, Turrell, Goldsworthy* (2012), Aaron Rosen's *Art & Religion in the 21st Century* (2015), Michael D. Jackson's *The Work of Art: Rethinking the Elementary forms of Religious Life* (2016) and Leesa Fanning's *Encountering the Spiritual in Contemporary Art* (2018). They have in common the embrace of the diverse, diverse

understandings of art, religion, and approaches to the connections or dialogues between them. This involves moving beyond the focus on Christianity, which dominated Western art up until modernism, to look at other religious traditions, taking a cross-disciplinary and global perspective that examines art from different cultures, and by considering art in a more holistic sense, that is, by considering popular as well as 'high' culture. The art is discussed thematically, often singling out existential concerns, such as creation, embodiment, and death, which not only highlights shared preoccupations between religions but presents new possibilities for interaction. The thematic focus adopted in these studies conveys a structural shift from earlier studies that sectioned off art in various ways; by individual religious traditions, for example, in Doug Adams' and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona's *Art as Religious Studies* (1987) or by discipline, as in Diane Apostolos-Cappadona's *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art* (1984). The focus on themes present in more recent studies have cross-disciplinary range.

Another general characteristic, as indicated in the titles of the aforementioned studies of contributions in the field, is the more expansive ways in which religion is reconfigured, especially in terms of spirituality, which often functions as an encompassing term to accommodate both religious traditions and none. This reconfiguring can be explained in several ways not least because it reframes the problematic longstanding relationship between art and religion, even if its use is not consistent. Interestingly, mention of religion is kept out of the titles of important international exhibitions held in the later years of the twentieth century including Maurice Tuchman's *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (1986), *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives* (1996), and *Traces du Sacré* (2008).ⁱⁱ All these exhibitions concerned themselves with experiences that can be

described as 'religious' but use of the term was avoided in favour of cognate concepts such as the sacred and the aesthetic concept of the sublime. Building on this idea, in the 2010 issue of *Frieze*ⁱⁱⁱ, Dan Fox explains the resistance to using the term in publicity about exhibitions about the topic, preferring instead terms such as 'spiritual', 'transcendent', 'meditative' and 'sublime', which help qualify the claim that it is more acceptable for artists to be 'spiritual' rather than 'religious' (Fox 2010, p. 15). Robert Wuthnow's *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist* (2001) addresses the scepticism about traditional religion in North America. In his interviews with artists, Wuthnow finds that artists place much more hope and creative potential in spirituality and with what they identified as personal religious experience. Others share this view of the transformative, even redemptive power of art. In *Refiguring the Spiritual* (2012) Taylor argues that contemporary art has lost its way but sees hope in the form of the work of certain contemporary artists – Joseph Beuys, Matthew Barney, James Turrell, and Andy Goldsworthy – who he believes resist the impulse of the commercialisation of the art world and instead bring about transformation in their practices.

The above discussion conveys the breadth of themes and ideas explored within contemporary religious art. The remainder of the article frames contemporary art in its connection to religion in terms of its material practices, such as rituals, how it relates to identity, and the feelings and experiences that religion gives rise to.

3. 1. Religion as a way of negotiating socio-political identity

In the later part of the twentieth century, religion has been explored in contemporary art within the context of politics and culture to negotiate meaning and identity in a globalised

world (Rosen, 2015). Another shift in conjunction with this is the attention beyond Christianity to the representation of religions and religious identity in a pluralistic society. The articulation of identity is especially forthcoming for artists who migrated to parts of the West to escape from oppressive political regimes, for example, or as migrants in the post-war period. In this postcolonial space, artists were able to express their composite diasporic identities, of which religion is one of many variables. They were able to deal with the complexities of belonging to more than one cultural tradition, intersectionally, showing the fluid and sometimes fractured movement of the self. Art was a powerful means of processing feelings of disenfranchisement and dislocation and as a way of negotiating cultural identity and transformation. Kobena Mercer's *Exiles, Diasporas and Strangers* (2007) explores the 'creative role' that migration, exile, and displacement have in shaping contemporary art. Aaron Rosen's *Brushes with Faith: Reflections and Conversations on Contemporary Art* (2019) turns the focus on to the artists themselves, some of whom are migrants, to talk about how religion impacts their practice. Taking a global outlook, he looks at artists from around the world engaging with their studio practices to give viewers insight into the significance of religion for their identities.

The photographic and video work of Shirin Neshat conveys the complexity of her identity as an Iranian-born Muslim woman living in New York. In 1974, aged seventeen, she moved to the United States to study art. In 1979 her native Iran became an Islamic republic following the revolution. Her first return visit in 1990 was striking because of the political shifts that had changed the cultural landscape, meaning that women were required to dress according to Islamic tradition. Her series *Women of Allah* (1993-1997) is a response to what she experienced during her visit. She uses her own image as a template for visual

experimentation and adds powerful symbols including the veil (specifically the chador), and the gun. Situated between two cultures Neshat explores the loaded and conflicting symbolism of the veil, which covers and discloses the body. In *Unveiling* (1993), from this series, the chador parts and cloaks her body like a mantel of luscious black hair. A strip of bare flesh is exposed, the tactility of which is reinforced by the loose script that adorns the surface. The veil is frequently used as a symbol of the oppression of women but can also, and when coupled with the gun, represent militancy. In her personal oeuvre Neshat is underscoring her identity as a Muslim woman, as 'a woman of Allah' to echo the series title, but in her own terms. Her face and body are marked with Farsi writing. Beautifully decorative, the script is symbolic and contains the words of contemporary Iranian women writers about a range of topics. The words mark her body as a politicised surface. She is also negotiating her dual identity in a safe space, in the West. Her commanding but vulnerable gaze plays with the position of being othered and conveys the shifts in identity positions. Although resident and established as an artist in the United States, she is still operating in a postexilic state and seeks a homeland, poignantly symbolised by the tooba, a sacred tree mentioned in the Qur'an, which offers comfort to those in need and is featured in her 2002 two-screen video installation of the same name. For Neshat, religion is a way of connecting her past and present through the fluidity of symbols.

In recent decades, the development of the global art world as reflected in the growth of international art fairs and biennales in parts of the Global South and in places outside of Western Europe and North America, such as Istanbul, Havana, and Shanghai, have transformed the art world by enabling the fostering of cross-cultural exchange, which has occasioned looking at religion within different socio-cultural contexts. Developments in the

Islamic world in art fairs such as in Sharjah and Dubai and in award schemes such as the Jameel Prize are noteworthy, given the historic conservatism towards the visual arts in Islamic culture, which was often limited to illustration or decoration and that too in a devotional context. These opportunities encourage growth in the understanding of expressions and representations of religious identity. They also convey the potential to interrogate the possibilities for Islamic art. This entails an expansion beyond how it has traditionally been conceived of, that is with respect to the devotional gaze (see Morgan, 1998, 2005). Wendy Shaw's recent book *What is 'Islamic' Art?: Between Religion and Perception* (2019) addresses this when she asks: what does it mean to describe art as Islamic? The embodied practices of Islamic artists, such as Neshat, whose identity is inscribed on her body, represents progressive attempts to move beyond narrowly conceived definitions of Islamic art.

Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking was an important exhibition held at MoMA in 2006 curated by Fereshteh Daftari (2006). It featured 17 contemporary artists, the majority of whom were born in Islamic cultures in the Middle East but now live in the United States or Europe. The show problematised the notion of origin when thinking about identity and called upon artists to represent Islam without drawing upon clichés or popular representations in the West. Perhaps the most significant detail was that many of the artists included were not Muslim. The restrictions and censorship placed on art within Islam, as well as the sanctions following breaches of its codes, have meant that artists who are not from that faith group are less inclined to approach it for fear of recrimination. The same claim may be made for other religions or cultures given the prevalence of cultural appropriation. What is interesting here is that while not all the artists belong to the Islamic

faith, they have close connection to the religion. Mona Hatoum, for instance, a Christian, was born in Lebanon, a Muslim majority country, and was forced into exile when the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975. The exhibition shows the impact religion has on different aspects of identity and also crucially dislocates the coupling of religion with geographical region, itself a critical perspective of the global world.

3.2. Art that transgresses religion

Frank Burch Brown claims that '[t]he art that has the greatest religious significance is not necessarily the art of institutional religion but rather that art which happens to discern what religion in its institutional or personal forms needs most to see' (Brown, 1989, p. 111). One type of art that qualifies here is art that challenges the boundaries of religious representation. This refers to art that transgresses religion, whether through the violation of what is regarded as sacred within the context of the tradition in question. There are many examples of artworks that deploy religion in a gimmicky or gratuitous way simply for shock value. Sarah Lucas's *Christ You Know it Ain't Easy* (2003) and Gilbert and Georges' paintings for their 2005 show, *Sonofagod Pictures: Was Jesus Heterosexual* are two such examples of this kind. The more interesting cases, however, are art works that push the boundaries of acceptability of conventions of religious representation. Take Francis Bacon's paintings of screaming popes and Crucifixion images, that he produced throughout his career and especially in the 1950s and 60s. In the former he violated the art historical conventions of papal depiction that articulated the grandeur and religious authority of the Pope portraying him instead as a screaming wretch, no different to the beast. He did something unprecedented and looked behind the symbol to expose the elemental truth that the archetypal Vicar of Christ for the Catholic religion was none other than a human being

subject to the same mortal fate as any other (Arya, 2012). The symbol of the crucifix is similarly taken apart. By looking behind the sanitised veneer of many representations of the crucifixion that have been central to the history of Western art, Bacon likens the crucifixion of Christ to the slaughter of an animal in a butcher's shop. His inversions of both the symbol of the pope and the crucifix paradoxically reinforce the religiosity of the symbol by underscoring the centrality of the Christian narrative. His paintings, at once so graphic and abhorrent, and seemingly anti-Christian then form a powerful narrative about human horror (Stevens and Swan, 2021; Arya, 2012). Alena Alexandrova makes a case for the reappropriation and recycling of religious (particularly Christian) motifs, themes and images since the early 1990s in Western contemporary art. Including Bacon as an example of such an artist, she argues that these practices of reusing religious notions whether through motif, theme or image are not to represent conventional religious truths but instead to critique and ask questions of religion and to reflect the shifting landscape of art and religion (2017, p. 3).

Whilst Bacon's work is unequivocally transgressive from the perspective of the conventions of religious depictions of crucifixions and popes within Western art history, others examples are more context specific. The photographs of Shirin Neshat discussed earlier, of her partially cloaked body revealing loose hair and flesh would almost certainly be banned in her native Iran but in New York, her artistic milieu, they are poignant depictions of her Islamic identity. S. Brent Plate argues for the importance of viewing art work from the perspective of the 'religious visual culture' lens (rather than the art historical one) which takes into account 'the importance of cross-cultural meaning and interpretations' (2002, pp. 1-10). His monograph *Blasphemy – Art that Offends* provides a much needed cross-cultural

contextualisation of blasphemous art (2006). He discusses this with reference to Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), which was the subject of an unsuccessful attempt in 1999 by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to have it banned when the touring *Sensation* exhibition moved to the Brooklyn Museum. Giuliani took issue with the cut-outs of female genitalia that surrounded the main image of the Virgin and the fashioning of the Virgin's right breast out of elephant dung. From an African perspective, the cultural background of Ofili, elephant dung is a sacred and purifying material, not something dirty or defiling as it may be viewed from a different cultural context. This reading promotes the idea that Ofili was in fact reinforcing the sanctity of the Virgin rather than desecrating it. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona pointed out that when *Sensation* was at the Royal Academy in London, it was Marcus Harvey's portrait of *Myra* (1995) that caused controversy, rather than *The Holy Virgin Mary*, thereby confirming the relevance of context.^{iv}

Another controversial case in a different cultural context was that of M. F. Husain, founder of the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group, and one of India's most celebrated modernist painters of the twentieth Century. He gained notoriety because of his series of naked Hindu female deities. A Muslim born in the (majority Hindu) pilgrimage town of Pandharpur, Husain represented the Hindu mythology present in his youth, often interweaving religious images with historic figures and events. In the 1990s he became the target of sectarian hatred because of the erotic sketches he made in the 1970s as part of his series on Hindu deities, such as the goddess Durga and Saraswati, that was subsequently printed in *Vichar Mimansa*, a Hindu monthly magazine with the article heading 'M. F. Husain: A Painter or Butcher'. Husain received death threats from Hindu fundamentalist groups, had lawsuits filed against him, and spent the last years of his life exiled from India. Aside from his right to

free expression is the fact that there is a strong tradition of the erotic in Hinduism, both in iconic and aniconic forms, and visible in symbols such as the *Shiva Lingam*, and more generally in temple sculpture throughout India.^v Husain was harking back to aesthetic styles and traditions in the past that were deployed in religious temple art. The deleterious effect of this isolated body of work in an otherwise esteemed oeuvre raises the question whether it was his identity as a Muslim that motivated the condemnation of his work. Perhaps the issue was about cultural appropriation, that is, the unauthorised taking from a culture outside of one's own and the implications this has for the culture that has been taken from (Young, 2010, p. 5).

A more radical reading veers in the direction of anti-Muslim condemnation by Hindu officials. Other artists come to mind who have depicted Hindu deities in controversial ways without reproach. Chila Kumari Burman, for example, a contemporary of Neshat, sexualised deities in her oeuvre. Born to Punjabi Hindus, her parents migrated from India settling in the North of England near Liverpool where her father traded as an ice cream vendor on beaches in Merseyside. Burman turned to pop culture to experiment with representations of her fluid identity as a second-generation South Asian woman. She combined the colourful paraphernalia of Indian popular culture with motifs of ice cream lollies in irreverent mixed media compositions. In *Global Fiddle* (2009-2012) an elephant-headed god, reminiscent of Lord Ganesh, emerges from between the open legs of a female warrior, 'Bindi girl'. In *Churning Curds* series 9 (2006-12) an image of the deity Lord Shiva is placed incongruously amongst phallic shaped ice lollies. These are two of many images used to support a wider argument about the artist's feminist stance and socio-political identity (Nead, 1995) and within the context of the broader argument about Husain's condemnation further

underscores the methodological importance of the visual culture lens. As a statement about her socio-political minority status, which included the identity politics of her ethnicity and gender, Burman used symbols from *her* culture, her minority culture, and that to in the space of the Western art world. Husain, a Muslim minority within India had fewer rights to representation.

3.4. Contemplative spaces

Contemporary art provides spaces for contemplation, for viewers to take time out from the everyday, and to be transformed in uplifting ways that give them a renewed sense of being. Anthony Gormley's *Event Horizon* (2007) is a multipart installation of thirty-one body-forms of the artist cast in iron and placed in different locations that tour, starting off on top of well-known buildings, along London's South Bank. Mark Wallinger's *Threshold to the Kingdom* (2000) features slow motion footage of people arriving at London city airport to the soundtrack of Allegri's *Miserere*. Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present* (2010) sees the artist seated at a table awaiting visitors to sit opposite her. Bill Viola's *Nantes Triptych* (1992) features three videos representing birth, (the journey of) life and death with an accompanying soundtrack. These works are characterised by their simplicity and feature pared back elements. Gormley's and Viola's figures stand in for the 'Everyman'^{vi} and enable the viewer to substitute oneself in their place. Wallinger and Abramović fix on the intensity of human encounter in these liminal spaces and communicate the power of human contact and emotion.

Artists used media forms, such as installation, video, and the body, to create experiences through which the viewer would be able to interact through immersion or in other ways.

Performance artists such as Abramović often used their body as the medium of expression and the tool through which to explore issues about identity, community, and other fundamental experiences. They often subjected their own bodies to pain and other experiences of the limit in ways which created heightened reactions in their viewers, and challenged the audience to think in new and unconventional ways (see Gonzalez-Rice, 2016).

Earlier in the article, a claim was made for the extent of participation required, thereby revising assumptions about the role and function of the viewer. Engagement with the work is required on different levels and includes interaction with the spaces/context that the work is experienced in. The space/context is integral to the holistic experience and engagement between the viewer-cum-participant and art work in its locale. The technical term for art work designed specifically for a particular location is 'site-specific'; built into this notion is the integral interrelationship it has with the location. Some works require a more active level of participation, without which the work remains incomplete and fragmented. The viewer brings a sense of totalization (Townsend, 2004, p. 125). In *The Artist is Present* the 'presentness' of Abramović necessitates the presence of the other, the viewer-cum-participant. In *Nantes Triptych* the viewer is required to attend to the simultaneous video footage with the audio soundtrack. Without the audio the video screens are construed linearly. The thirty-minute soundtrack, which features crying, the movement of water and the sound of breathing, aid the synchronising of the narrative in the cyclical nature of life.

These works can also be described as spiritual exercises which leads to a deeper engagement with life; a heightened state of awareness, and where sense perception becomes a route to self-knowledge. Digital multimedia often heightens the sense of the phenomenological because of its ability to generate multisensory experiences which lead to states that are *felt* rather than simply understood. In *The Artist is Present*, the exercise extended both ways. A total of 1,200 people chose to sit opposite Abramović. What is so special, even sacred, about this encounter is the nakedness of human presence, stripped of extraneous details. There is nowhere to hide when looking someone squarely in the eyes without distraction or mediation. The various 'portraits' conveyed the power of the immediacy and intimacy of such an encounter. Abramović's ascetic commitment to sit in silence for eight hours a day for three months shows her discipline and spiritual endeavour. During this time the Museum of Modern Art became a space for the renewal of human vitality, a secular and silent confessional. Michael D. Jackson would argue that a crucial factor of the success of art operating as ritual is that the spaces offered are safe, even revitalising (Jackson, 2016, p. 67). The prospect of contemplating mortality in one's own hospital bed, as captured in the third piece of video footage of *Nantes Triptych*, is daunting but through the literal and metaphorical screen of art work becomes more manageable and results in a feeling of catharsis.

Viola's work is more complex because, while much of it is situated in secular spaces, he has also had work commissioned for religious venues. Indeed, *Nantes Triptych* was originally conceived to be shown in a seventeenth century chapel in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Nantes in 1992. The placement of Bill Viola's digital installations within ecclesiastical spaces conveys the significance of context in shaping audience perception. Outside of this

placement his works speak of monumental themes that are designed for the 'Everyman' but the situatedness of his art in religious buildings heightens the gravitas of the rituals or events experienced by his figures. Being plunged into or emerging from water become suggestive of rites of passage, for example baptism.

The Protestant Church in particular has become viewed as a cultural space for the display of contemporary art, commissioning work on a temporary or permanent basis. This tradition can be traced back to the pioneering work of individuals who extolled the importance of art in churches. One of these, the Dominican friar Marie-Alain Couturier, called upon the Church to enlist the ideas of contemporary artists regardless of their religious persuasion in the revival of 20th-century church decoration which, he argued, had become outdated and sentimentalized. He believed that it is better to offer commissions to geniuses without faith than to employ believers without talent (Couturier cited in Dillenberger, 1986, p. 227). This bold view took seriously the potential that good art has to move our emotions and its impact on viewers. The trend for commissioning contemporary art by the Church has continued and is part of a broader agenda to increase its relevance to diverse, especially younger, audiences.

Contemporary artwork commissioned for religious spaces especially the Church is done so on the basis that the work responds sensitively to the space in which it is placed and to encourage reflection. Stipulations about the faith background of the artist or whether or not the work is actually religious in intention or approach are rarely considerations within the programming of commissioning art. Such initiatives have helped churches and cathedrals update their image, appeal to broader audiences, thereby potentially increasing visitor

numbers and to be more integrated into everyday life. Notwithstanding this is the fact that spaces are not neutral and can affect the way in which artwork is seen. The installation of Tracey Emin's *I felt you and I knew you loved me* (2008) is a striking example of the significance of context. In a secular venue this blaring pink neon sign spelling out a provocative message is cheap and tawdry, throwaway even. Its installation under the west window in Liverpool Cathedral in 2008, however, transforms its meaning into an appeal of religious devotion, a testimony of faith. The simplicity and accessibility of its message conveys its power in such a setting where one is equal under God. The placement of art in a religious setting such as a church contributes to the way in which it is interpreted both with respect to the physical features such as the dimmed light, vaulted ceilings, arches, and other architectural features that creates a certain ambience, and also the conditioned response to the particular environment. The expectation of certain behavioural conditions in such a space has a bearing on the disposition of the individual. The viewer has to maintain receptivity to being moved emotionally and otherwise by the artwork. Receptivity usually entails the willingness to engage with the work, which means allowing it to unfold or make meaning.

4. Conclusion

This article has shown several ways in which religion is present in contemporary art. In the global art world religion is a source of energy and conflict. It is an essential way for many artists to explore their socio-political identities, their intersectional realities and to understand their roots and heritage. The global spaces that have come to signify the contemporary in the sense of 'current' gives artists the opportunity to share their experiences of being in the world, opening up possibilities for cross-cultural exchange.

Interpreting contemporary religious art of this kind requires a cross-cultural methodology that considers broader questions about the representation of objects and identities.

The other type of art discussed is not religious in content or theme but in the experience that it gives rise to. The art works of Viola, Wallinger, Gormley, Abramović, described earlier, open up spaces for contemplation and engagement. Created using digital media and other creative technologies, they enable the viewer to interact in immersive and meaningful ways that transcend the mundane to heightened (in the sense of distilled) experiences of reality. Their appeal is generated by their simplicity and universality meaning that the viewer is able to place themselves in the situation described.

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ⁱ Other terms in place of 'viewer' could be 'audience member' or 'public'..

ⁱⁱ The exhibitions were held at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and Centre Pompidou, Paris respectively.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Frieze* is a London-based contemporary art magazine.

^{iv} *Myra* was a 'mugshot' portrait of the English serial killer Myra Hindley who killed five children in the early 1960s. The image was made using an infant's hand prints caused anger in the British press before the exhibition opened.

^v The Shiva Lingam is an abstract representation of the Hindu god Shiva, which depicts the coming together of the male (lingam/phallus) depicted by the shaft, with the female (yoni/womb-vagina). For erotic temple sculpture see for example Khajuraho temple (Madhya Pradesh) and the Sun Temple (Konark, Orissa).

^{vi} Hereby acknowledging the author's unease at using gendered terms.