

Paradoxes of an Image: Religion, Art and the Problem of Aura

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Abstract

The article discusses the interaction between religion and art, focusing on the problem of aura of artwork. At first sight It could look like in contemporary culture the contexts of religion and art became very distant. As the example of this kind of alienation the article recalls a recent situation in one of Vilnius (Lithuania) churches, when the original sculpture of St. Virgin Mary, created by Lithuanian artist Ksenija Jaroševaitė, was replaced by the copy of widely circulated sculpture of St. Mary of Lourdes at request of the churchgoers. In the article this situation also serves as representative model, revealing the paradoxicality of an image, when the power of image (aura) depends not on its authenticity and unapproachability (Walter Benjamin), but on the contrary is related to its proliferation and availability (David Joselit). Referring to the theoreticians of contemporary visual studies (David Freedberg, Horst Bredekamp, Georges Didi-Huberman, David Joselit), author polemises with Benjamin's thesis, according to which reproducibility of artwork leads to the destruction of its aura. The article states that rethinking the process of art's reproducibility in a positive way opens up the possibility to discuss the relationship between religion and contemporary art in a new form, however the post-secular approach of this interaction should be taken into account.

Keywords: religion, art, image, aura, post-secularity

1. Introduction

The offhand approach to the visual mediation of the content of faith is discussed in contemporary world already for some decades. As opposed to the Renaissance when the European churches had boasted the most innovative

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achievements of art of that time, contemporary sacral art of our days occupies (with a few exceptions) a marginal place on the periphery of the field. Undoubtedly, this situation can be described as the radical separation of religion and art, and that is inherent to the era of secularisation. At the same time, however, it looks like a more fundamental problem can be seen here, and it is directly related to the specifics of the religious image in Western culture. As we know, Christianity is the only monotheistic religion that accepts the image of God, moreover, the paradox of the relationship between image and its prototype is implicit in Christian theology itself. In the first place, his aspect can be recognized in the figure of Christ as the divine incarnation to a human form. That specific paradox helped to justify the icon at the Second Council of Nicaea by interpreting it not as a direct image of God (which could be understood as an idolatry), but as a reference to holiness. Thus, it could be asserted that in the sphere of faith, the legitimation of image has become an integral part of at least the Catholic part of Christian tradition. However, it is important to stress that in order to justify the necessity of religious image, a requirement of some kind of aesthetic *askesis* has also been implicated in the tradition. The icon was justified not because of its visual-artistic qualities, but only as a mediator, as an indication towards divinity.¹

A quick glance at the field of contemporary religious art could be sufficient to understand that this requirement of aesthetic *askesis* often shifts to the one we might call a kind of aesthetic negligence. The latter aspect is expressed by ignoring the general principles of the contemporary art². At this point I would like to recall one especially exemplar situation that happened in one of Vilnius (Lithuania) churches about 15 years ago, when the churchgoers literally carried out the sculpture of saint Mary, created for that specific space by the Lithuanian artist Ksenija Jaroševaitė. The believers explained their decision and initiative, claiming that they could not pray in the presence of this work. It is even more important to add that the original Jaroševaitė's work was eventually replaced by the well-known and widely circulated copy of saint Mary of Lourdes, originally created by French sculptor Joseph-Hugues Fabish in 1864. The

sequence of these events lets us discuss the presupposition that the main reason for this expulsion was the unrecognizability of the image. In other words, the believers did not need an artistically influential work within the space of the church. Instead of it they chose an image of the saint that would be ordinary and common to them. This story of the new iconoclasm became famous in Lithuanian cultural community as an illustrative example representing the complexity of paths that contemporary art takes on its way to Lithuanian catholic churches (Jačėnaitė 2019). However, we should also take into account that the discussed example can be described not only in terms of these contradictions, accompanying the separation of artistic and religious contexts in our days, but also in those of apparent affection to the particular image, “an image in front of which one could pray”. In other words, it seems like the above-mentioned situation in which the original artwork was switched with a widely circulating copy of canonical sculpture – nearly a religious kitsch can also be explained as the case of the strong emotional reaction overshadowing the aesthetic judgement.

Or, according to David Freedberg, the author of the monograph “The Power of Images” – the influential work in the 1990s field of humanities – at this point the disinterested and sober valuation has been changed by the passionate faith in power of an image. According to Freedberg, both iconoclasm and the emotional need for images should be seen not as opposite intentions, but on the contrary as the two sides of the same coin. According to Freedberg, the acceptance of an image not as the flat reflection of reality, but as a menacing or gracious entity that operates a certain function and power (Freedberg 1989, 407-428) is characteristic to both of these intentions. As a reference to the problematics of this paper it is important to notice that Freedberg invites us finally to refuse the status of art as an exceptional phenomenon. Therefore, as he puts, this resolution could be achieved only if the distinction between the *art as art* and the *sacral art* (Belting 1996) would be refused altogether. In the introduction of his book Freedberg states: “I would, in fact, be happy if the long-standing distinction between objects that elicit particular responses because of imputed “religious” or “magical” powers and those that are supposed to have purely “aesthetic”

functions could be collapsed. I do not believe that the distinction is a viable one.” (Freedberg 1989, xxi-xxii)

According to Freedberg, today the question of the power of image should be asked not in the context of autonomous cultural fields, as the ones of religion or art, but in a more general perspective of visual register. It should be noted that Freedberg's position at this point is inscribed into the context of visual studies which is currently very relevant. The latter perspective is represented by the different scholars, such as Gottfried Boehm, William. J. T. Mitchell, Horst Bredekamp, George Didi-Huberman and others, who call for a more attentive reflection on the ambivalent relationship with images already for an almost three decades now, and often it is based on a sentimental faith rather than rationality. Coming back to the interaction between religion and art, at this point the investigations of various forms of contemporary visuality assume peculiar relevance, because this theoretical approach restores the certain possibility to see that although today the fields of religion and art seem distant, there is still a vivid circulation between them. The theories of the mentioned authors can provide us not only with the reflection on the excessive visuality, characteristic to our everyday reality, but also with the post-secular implications of religious contents. One of the topics where the perspective of new visual studies can be especially relevant is the widely discussed problem of the ontological distinction between image and copy, or in other words – the problem of aura.

2. Reproduction as the condition for the loss of aura

To relate the value of the artwork with its authenticity and on the same time to equate the copy of it to a trifling replicate³ seems to be an old tendency in a Western culture. This tendency is approved by the practice of the world-wide famous museums and galleries, which, in search of the highest standards, almost exclusively display original artworks. On the contrary, contemporary religious spaces (at least in Eastern Europe) apparently have adopted quite different criteria, as obvious from the above-mentioned example, when the original artwork was changed by the copy of St. Mary of Lourdes. In our days it wouldn't be strange to find the copies or reproductions of

artworks – specifically the ones considered having the sacral-cultural disposition – in the catholic spaces of worship. From the first glance this circumstance can appear as an additional argument to approve the radical separation of religion and art. However, the more attentive look at the tradition of art forces us to doubt in this presupposition; and even more – it rises the suspicion that the inclination to privilege the original in regard to a copy in certain way testifies the religious gene, distinctive to the identity of contemporary art as the sign of previously existed symbiosis.

The interaction between religion and art was explained in a similar perspective by Walter Benjamin in his influential text “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935). As we know, in this article Benjamin defines the artwork as a certain formation, in which aural (sacral) and exponent dimensions correlate. Therefore, it is important to consider that by emphasising the religious component in art Benjamin does not appeal to the direct religious interest. The concept of aura in his theory covers quite a wide notional field – it refers to the distinctive importance of art in cultural tradition, more specifically, to the idealistic-romantic concept of it, where art is treated as the possible catalyst for a religious experience. For Benjamin, to assert that the artwork disposes aura first of all means the recognition of the realness of the power of art. On the other hand, by discussing the aura of the work, Benjamin indirectly demonstrates that the autonomy of art is quite conditional – the exceptionality of art as a phenomenon is the result of its tight connection to religion in the past.

We could claim that in analysis of Benjamin the aura is described by indicating two main aspects: firstly, the presence of aura is considered as the evidence of the authenticity and uniqueness of artwork, and secondly – aura is related to the unapproachability of artwork as such. According to Benjamin, the uniqueness of artwork is directly dependent on the anticipatory condition to maintain what he calls the “Here and Now” of the origin of the artwork. In other words, it is possible to assert that on this point Benjamin adopts an approach that the experience of aura is presupposed by the artwork’s dependence to the certain situativity, to the concrete temporal and local

conditions, which influence the process of formation. As for the criterion of the unapproachability, Benjamin characterises it “as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (Benjamin 2007, 222), at that point providing the direct indication of the religious remnant in art. According to Benjamin:

„The definition of the aura as a “unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be” represents nothing but the formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of space and time perception. Distance is the opposite of closeness. The essentially distant object is the unapproachable one. Unapproachability is indeed a major quality of the cult image.“ (ibid, 243)

As Benjamin diagnoses, both criteria by which he defines aura – authenticity and unapproachability – are destroyed during the process of technological intensification in art. According to Benjamin, the possibility to make the incalculable number of copies makes it increasingly complicated to define the artwork in the terms of unique value – even the works of old masters of their epochs circulate then by withdrawing them from their local and temporal structure. Even more severe problem arises when it comes to the condition of unapproachability of artwork – the process of visual reproduction inevitably violates it. Physical or visual appropriation of art also functions as its disclosure.

Thus, by referring to the position of Benjamin, it is possible to assert that the exploitation of the visual reproduction, which happens in the sphere of art, directly generates the process of desacralization. At this point desacralization should be understood, on the one hand, as an ultimate loss of the religious residue, and on the other hand – as an exhaustion of the idealistic concept of art. However, it should be taken into account that Benjamin sees this turning-point not only as a situation of loss, but also as the moment of positivity and deliberation. As Benjamin claims: „for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility.“ (ibid, 224) Referring to this quotation, we may assume that from the perspective of the

identity of art, this transformation due to technological reproduction is even more significant than the turn of the Renaissance era when the art as such has begun to form its autonomy in the world dominated by religion. The principle of technological reproduction leads to the fundamental transformation of the ontological constitution of artwork, which now requires not only a totally different artistic approach, but also a different reception. In short, Benjamin's diagnosis lets us state that technological turn in art signs the beginning of art which cannot be interpreted in the romanticised or idealised categories such as aura, mystery or truth anymore.

3. Sacral Art and Reproduction

Despite the huge impact the article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" made on the later theories of art and visual studies, its main thesis about the decisive importance of the reproduction on the devaluation of aura of artwork nevertheless has met more than a few doubts and confrontations. At this point it is handy to remember the French philosopher George Didi-Huberman who in his analysis of the connection between photography and sacrality (or in Benjaminian terms – aura) offers an insight that technology not always is the one to be blamed for the destruction of a sacral dimension. In his article "The Index of the Absent Wound" Didi-Huberman discusses the photos of one of the most famous Christian relics – the shroud of Turin. The given photographs were made in 1898 by Italian photographer Secondo Pia and, as it is well known, the negatives of these photographs have revealed to the author an image which could not be seen by the eye – the face of the wounded man. As Didi-Huberman suggests:

"As the photographic "evidence" objectified an aspect of the shroud, it became proof of a miracle. Not only did it sanction an unprecedented sort of expository value for this relic heretofore hidden from view, it reestablished the *aura* of the shroud, investing the object itself with a counterpart to its semiotic status. The holy shroud became the *negative imprint* of the body of Christ, its *luminous* index miraculously produced and miraculously inverted in the very act of resurrection, henceforth to be conceived of in photographic terms." (Didi-Huberman 1984, 65)

German art historian Horst Bredekamp, who provides an original reflection on a process of reproduction of images, would totally agree with Didi-Huberman on this point. Bredekamp also objects to that thesis of Benjamin in which the latter claims that the domination of technological reproduction in art is the main condition of the decline of the aura. This problem is analysed in Bredekamp's article, from 1992, "The Simulated Benjamin: Medieval Remarks on his Actuality" (*cf.* Bredekamp 2009).⁴ Opposing the ideas presented in the influential Benjamin's text and especially to their reception in the thought of French postmodernism, Bredekamp provides a couple of arguments. The first one could be defined as historical and the second one as theological-ontological. According to Bredekamp, from a historical point of view, despite the fact that Benjamin was a meticulous follower of the Western tradition, he interpreted the dynamics of sacrality and reproduction in a different way in regard to how this interconnection expressed itself (and still does) in the Christian practices. According to Bredekamp, if one investigates the field of sacral art more attentively, it becomes hardly possible not to notice that the reproducibility of sacral images was especially widely used during the Middle Ages, Renaissance and also the Modern times. Even more – in the context of sacral art there was a common opinion that the copies of image not only do not annihilate its sacrality (aura), but on the contrary – they multiply it or at least maintain at the same level. By asserting this Bredekamp refers to the iconographical data on the images of St. Virgin Mary and Christ that were abundantly widespread in Western Europe in XV century:

"The image of clemency, replete with divine power, radiates this power through its physical appearance; its healing, godly substance is contained and identified in its form, which thus takes on a divine character. As the supernatural is indissolubly held in this form, its copy represents the duplication or at least the transportation of its healing aura. In terms of the theological image, it is significant that even the small, mass-produced devotional figures appear to have possessed no less value than their grander counterparts; the authenticity of the original and its power to heal had been conferred on each of the many copies." (Bredekamp 2009, 295)

As we can see in this quotation, Bredekamp defines the structure of the power (aura) of image in a way that totally differs from the Benjaminian one. According to Bredekamp, the constitution of aura does not depend on the conditions of temporality and locality related to the creation of an image; rather it correlates with the intention and functioning of the image. Thus, in this perspective the copy is treated not just as the simple copying of the surface, transporting the image from one media to the other, but as the duplicate. As it is well known, in the sphere of the law duplicate serves as the second exemplar of the document. In other words, legally speaking duplicate acts on behalf of the original – it disposes the same executive power as an original. In the interpretation formulated by Bredekamp, the copy of an image should be understood in this exact sense – it has to be treated as a duplicate that maintains the same divine power of the original. Even more, Bredekamp adds, “It is probably that printing derived from the same impulse, for it is invariably forgotten that the first printed works were devotional texts.” (ibid., 295-296)

Bredekamp analyses this impulse, which, in his own words, was inspired by religious intention and afterwards had the impact on the flourishing of the machinery of reproduction, even more properly in the monograph “Image Acts. A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency”. In this book Bredekamp elaborates the so-called Image Act theory, interpreting image as the substitute of reality – in other words, not as a mimicking of it, but rather as it’s analogue, which has the other, invisible side of reality in its disposal. In his analysis Bredekamp addresses the religious context and invites us to remember St. Veronica and the huge impact a traditional depiction of this saint had had on the Christian iconography. According to Bredekamp, the figure of St. Veronica served as a critical factor by decisively influencing the foundation of ontological status of the image in the theological sense and also beyond it. This was apparent during the process of secularisation, when the interpretation of image as an element of reality, which disposes the immediacy of acting, was adapted in a wider cultural view. To the Christian tradition belonging the story of the cloth used by St. Veronica to wipe the face of Christ which led to the imprint of the divine

image and subsequently to the healing powers it possessed, became the starting point for applying the contact imprint model in the field of physical sciences as well. As Bredekamp writes, the understanding of the image as something that reveals and affects reality in a unique way was taken over along with the practical circumstances of this act. According to him:

Through recourse to naturally occurring forms of imprint, the principle of the legend of Saint Veronica entered the realm of scientific research. Just as the imprint of the face of Christ was preserved upon Veronica's veil when this had been brought briefly into contact with it, so too might the imprint of diverse natural objects be preserved upon certain types of fabric or paper when these had been brought into contact with them. By this means, the atmospheric connection between image and body became the basis for a living, and thus active, presence that made for a valuable natural-historical document (Bredekamp 2018, 143).

As Bredekamp explains, during the Renaissance and later centuries the term *vera icon* was used to name not only the sacral relics such as the Shroud of Christ, but the contact prints of natural plants as well. The fact that an image emerges on paper or other materials without a direct human intervention was understood as a testimony of its authenticity to a higher degree. By referring to the tradition according to which the miraculous image on St. Veronica's cloth retains the divine properties linked to those of the very Christ, in the same manner it was believed that modern versions of the *vera icon* should retain a similar effect, or using Benjaminian terminology, an aura. Such a belief, as Bredekamp notes, became a significant impetus for the development of, for example, botany or such a new science as criminology. On the other hand, if the belief that the transmission to the corporeal dimension still preserves the properties of plants or fingerprints is quite uncomplicated to explain in the context of these sciences, the analogy presented by Bredekamp between *vera icon* and photography seems much more unexpected and intriguing. According to Bredekamp:

“When, in February 1947, the inventor of the Polaroid technique, Edwin Lands, publicly announced the production of a self portrait that had come about in a fashion as direct as it was mysterious, without

any processing in the dark room and without any human intervention in the laboratory, it was hardly necessary to spell out a notional connection with the *vera icon*. As if he had himself adopted the hand movements of Veronica and of Christ in Schongauer's engraving, Lands as recorded here looks at the miraculously appearing portrait of himself. All surviving descriptions of this moment have emphasised the stirring element in the scene. The event also had a particular magic because, through it, the primal experience of photography – the technically realised production of a “true image” – seemed to be recaptured, albeit now as the outcome of a procedure of apparently heightened authenticity.” (ibid., 148)

As we can see, here Bredekamp arrives at a similar thesis as before cited Didi- Huberman – media, which operates on the principle of technological reproduction, does not negate the possibility of creating an aura of an image, but on the contrary, it may even contribute to it. However, if the discussion on tension between photographic image and authentic reality (the fact that the “true image” appears in the negative only accentuates the dialectical nature of this tension) for Didi-Huberman is his primary concern, it seems like Bredekamp at this point seeks to emphasise yet another aspect – for him it is important to stress out that the veneration of relics - the ancient practice implied in the Christian tradition - is essentially inseparable from the genesis of reproduction and it's mechanisms in a Western culture.

4. Re-actualization of the concept of aura and contemporary art

It's worth to notice that Bredekamp's thoughts acquire even more relevance if they are revised in the perspective of contemporary art theories, where this question - of how significant the impact of Benjaminian diagnosis of the aura-less identity of art still remains - is raised over and over again. This question stands out as even more vital if we turn the focus to those more and more common forms of art based on the principle of reproduction. Let us shortly examine the position of American theoretician David Joselit, who explores the question of aura in his book *After Art*. By following the actor-network theory by Bruno Latour, Joselit investigates the essence and identity of contemporary art. In the age of mobile phones, Google and

YouTube, he argues, brilliant analysis of artwork made by Benjamin has become a roadblock. One must notice that Joselit criticises not the very thesis of Benjamin, but the inert practice to applicate it for contemporary art, at the same time ignoring the fact that the principle of multiplicity and repetition has already become the foundation of it. Therefore, considering the problematics of this paper, the most intriguing aspect of Joselit's theory is the intention to revive the relevance of the notion of aura. Joselit's strategy to grant positive value to the process of art's technological digitization (reproduction *par excellence*), at the same time relating this process to the effect of aura, is yet another important aspect of his position. As Joselit notes, multiplying and repetition in art function not by annihilating the charm of reality, but by producing certain effect of saturation, the one that could be compared to aura, or, in Joselit's own terminology, the effect of *buzz*. According to him:

“Instead of radiating nimbus of authenticity and authority underwritten by site specificity, we have the value of saturation, of being everywhere at once. In place of aura, there is buzz. Like a swarm of bees, a swarm of images makes a buzz, and like a new idea or trend, once an image (whether attached to a product, a policy, a person, or a work of art) achieves saturation, it has a buzz.” (Joselit 2013, 16)

Thus, as Joselit explains, the factor of repetition creates a certain vitality, which becomes active precisely by rewatching “the same” image multiple times. Joselit draws our attention to the fact that the sameness, usually attributed to the reproducing as such, is, in fact, quite questionable, the image that has been copied, multiplied, reproduced is not any more the same one. The multiplication of an image empowers it to circulate in different contexts where it acquires yet another, not final, identity again and again. In this perspective the impossibility to identify the copy versus the original is treated not in reductive terms, but as emancipation of an image in general. So, it could be said that Joselit contributes to the polemics on aura by turning upside down the dynamics of power of artwork as it was defined by Benjamin. For Joselit, relevance of aura in the context of contemporary art should be discussed not in terms of authenticity and unapproachability, but on the contrary: he claims that when the image circulates deliberated from any site

specifics and remains always accessible, the effect of aura forms itself. That leads, on the one hand, to the image acquiring a flexible, undetermined identity, and on the other hand, gaining the possibility to be perceived not as a single, unique piece, but as an element belonging to the extended net of links.

If we turn back to the interaction between art and religion, it is evident that although Joselit's intention to discuss the notion of aura in a new light does not take out directly to the possibility of reviving this reunion, this theoretical position opens up a space for the potential of similar configuration. This assumption is supposed in Joselit's very concept of art, where the art is attributed to exceptional power of connecting heterogeneous contexts⁵. Certainly, in this approach the probable interaction between art and religion could be possible only as a connection of a horizontal dimension – in other words, it should be discussed exclusively in the terms resounding the post-secular condition. At this point it could be useful to remember that Jurgen Habermas was the first one to use the term “post-secularity”. Analysing the structural transformations of contemporaneity, Habermas stated that we should refuse to restrict our public space into frames of a secular discourse, because, as it was proved by recent challenges in the field of global politics, the latter strategy clearly did not serve the purpose. Thus, in his proposal Habermas discusses the necessity to reconcile the institutions of rationality and faith that were autonomized and radically separated during the process of secularisation (Habermas 2008). Theoretically, it would mean that the interconnection between such fields as religion and art becomes possible again. However, an important question of how should this “again” be understood today – considering the defragmentation of cultural horizons, the impact a secular worldview has on our everyday reality and such processes as desacralization of art – still remains unanswered. It seems that this return, the “new” form of connection between religion and art, would be not in the least an easy going, fluent return to the harmonious compatibility, characteristic to the premodern epoch. On the contrary – it looks like the apparent post-secular configuration of religion and art should be marked, on the one hand, by the lack of pretension to reconstruct the symbiotic

relationship between these fields and, on the other hand, by the revision of purely secular approach when the topic of religion as such is considered unwelcome guest in the sphere of contemporary art. In other words, it would mean to presume the constellation of religion and art as the horizontally oriented plane where the religious sphere would be drawn into the artistic one at the same, non-special status as, for example, in the case of science, technology or politics.

A relevant example where the encounter between religion and art could be seen in a similar lens is the video polyptych “Martyrs (Earth. Air. Fire. Water)”, created by the American artist Bill Viola, who has been exploiting the theme of religion for more than several decades now. As it is widely known, this artwork, which is on display in the cathedral of St. Paul in London since 2014, is considered to be the first video permanently installed in the sacral space. Video work “Martyrs” consists of four equally-sized panels which show four different, albeit synchronised, actions. In each of the displays, a single person is subjected to the violence of one of nature’s elements. As explains Viola, his aim was to demonstrate the inner strength of people who remain faithful to their convictions and thereby are capable to overcome their sufferings (cf. Viola 2014). The narrative of this art project is elaborated by representing the processuality of human existential experience and especially focussing on the transformative character of it. Thus, the dimension of temporality becomes crucial here, and, undoubtedly, the media of the video allows to show these aspects in a more effective way as compared to the more traditional, static art forms, such as painting or sculpture.

As one would suppose, the installation of Viola’s video work has provoked quite a controversial reaction. Big part of the spectators welcomed it enthusiastically – the project was greeted as the contemporary version of an icon, the meditative mood of it, it’s minimalism and resemblance to the Medieval altar paintings (cf. Cumming 2014) were taken into notice. On the other hand, there were more negative responses as well. According to some of them, the work of Viola did not demonstrate sufficient attention to the specifics of the sacral site, moreover, the artist did not emphasise the historical relevance of Christian martyrdom and

ignored the whole tradition of iconographic attributes (Berger 2015). Therefore, reacting to the similar remarks, it could be noticed that the power of Viola's "Martyrs" probably comes precisely from its ability to resound the post-secular condition of our days in a particular way. This project highlights the universal aspects of human experience – suffering, faith, and death. These kinds of liminal experiences are reflected by connecting Western artistic practices with various spiritual traditions – Zen Buddhism, Islamic Sufism, Christian mysticism. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that despite the meditative feeling and resemblance to Christian sacral paintings, the topic of religion in Viola's project does not become dominant. The approach to religion in this case is not oriented to the hierarchical vertical, it is rather maintained at a horizontal level. "Martyrs" in equal rights draws in the contexts we see today as being beyond the autonomy of religion – the project remains open to neuro sciences, psychology, politics, ethics; it resounds the problems concerning globalisation and refugees. Because of this openness to heterogeneous contexts, one could claim that Viola's "Martyrs" do not represent the restitution of religion in art (or the restitution of art into the sacral place), but rather it makes us reflect on the position of religiosity in contemporaneity and invites to imagine the forms it could acquire in the future.

NOTES

¹ This aspect was analyzed by Jean-Luc Marion. Marion argues that, if the profane image is based on means of mimetic logic when one visible object is imitated by another visible object, the case of icon is totally different because here the importance is laid on what is indicated by the visible, rather than on what is exposed for us to see, thus by this the dimension of exposing itself has to be destroyed. The visible at this point is significant only as a medium, opening the possibility to indicate what it is not (Marion 2004).

² The latter problem was discussed by James Elkins in his book *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*. According to Elkins, bringing the problem of religion into the serious discussions on contemporary art can be associated with "living in a house infested with mice and not noticing that something is wrong" (Elkins 2004, XI). The prevalence of this kind of preconceived opinion is influenced by the secularisation of society which brought the cultural sphere into a situation where the big part of

contemporary art exposed in most important biennales and galleries refuse to touch upon the topic of religion. On the other hand, Elkins argues that religious art produced in our times is simply bad art in most of the cases.

³ At this point it would be useful to remember Hans-Georg Gadamer who in *Truth and Method* analysed the correlation between image (*Bild*), the copy (*Abbild*) and reality (*Urbild*). According to Gadamer, the function of a copy (*Abbild*) is restricted just to its identification with an original image (*Bild*). According to him, in a copy (*Abbild*) resides the objective to self-destruction. Meanwhile the purpose of the image (*Bild*) has to do with the demonstration of how the reality (*Urbild*) is revealed through it. Compared to a copy (*Abbild*) the image (*Bild*) does not have to be identical to the original (*Urbild*) and precisely in this incompatibility resides the positive value of the image (*Bild*) (Gadamer 1986, 139-149).

⁴ Originally the text was published in German as „Der simulierte Benjamin: Mittelalterliche Bemerkungen zu seiner Aktualität“, in *Frankfurter Schule und Kunstgeschichte* edited by Andreas Berndt et al. (Berlin: Reimer, 1992).

⁵ As Joselit notices, the very title of his book *After Art* indicates contemporary art's power to conclude the stage of the “era of art” where the function of art was limited to expression of secular contents in an aesthetic form. As Joselit argues: “Art can establish a wide variety of connections simultaneously: after art comes the logic of networks where links can cross space, time, genre, and scale in surprising and multiple ways.” (ibid., 89).

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