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Outlook

Mysticism: playing with religion in an art museum

Mysticism – Yearning for the Absolute

at The Museum Rietberg

Zurich, Switzerland

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While religion plays a central role across the Museum Rietberg's collection, the objects here were not on display because of their inherent “holy” meaning or content. The museum is not a sacred space or a museum of religion; it is a secular art museum and objects are chosen above all for their aesthetic qualities. Whenever religious objects are displayed, they are presented in cases without ritual decoration, contextualized through catalogues and labels, and explained through educational programs. This review explores the difficult and sometimes confused, even nebulous, way of dealing with religion in a museum.

Inspired by Alois Haas's work on mysticism, Dr. Albert Lutz had the initial idea for the exhibition. According to Lutz (2011:11), the greatest challenge was: How to imagine an exhibition on mysticism, a phenomenon which is hardly visible?

I was one of the curators of the show, and we set out to attempt a definition of mysticism, agreeing that it is a conceivable phenomenon, and part of most cultures in Europe and Asia. But how do we describe the phenomenon? We came up with a trick. We delegated the definition to the experts, and focussed instead on historic individuals whom we considered "mystic" (Lutz 2011: 9). We selected historic personalities such as Bernhard of Clairvaux who could be connected with so-called mystic traditions (Figure 1). We could focus on their

lives, disciples, and legacies such as songs or philosophical treatises. In our selection we included people throughout history, but focused on Asian and European traditions: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism. With the selection of mystics we had a storyline, around which we could construct our exhibition (Figure 2).

The exhibition included unique objects from leading museums and private collections all over the world (Figure 3). Apart from paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, textiles and handwritten manuscripts the exhibition offered several multimedia applications. It was the curatorial intention to visualise a religious universe, full of allusions and secrets. Thus, for example in the section on Hindu mysticism, a large touch screen provided direct access to the voice of the mystics on display. Since the most important sources of mysticism are the texts, sermons, poems, prayers and chants left to us, we wanted the audiences to hear the original voices of these mystics, reciting quotations and songs.

From an academic perspective one could argue that the exhibition remained superficial. It did not explore or question mysticism as a concept in any depth. Though we knew that mysticism was a Western concept, we based our exhibition on this vague idea. For example, what related the Indian saint Mirabai to the German mystic Mechthild von Magdeburg? The exhibition did not give explicit answers (Figure 4).

Moreover, the exhibition did not question the legitimacy of any sectarian practice, or the authenticity or holiness of any community, tradition or experience. Rather it legitimized religious plurality as part of human culture. Scholars like Peter Bräunlein (2008) argue that museum curators should not repeat holy or religious truths, but, on the contrary, should irritate or provoke the visitor. But instead of irritating, our exhibition reinforced a quasi-religious

discourse and reconfirmed established beliefs. In fact the exhibition did not receive negative reactions from any religious community.

Through the exhibition, diversified ecstatic experiences, unorthodox, unorganized, spontaneous religious practices connected with pain, bleeding, and sweating, got transformed into an anesthetised and clean coherent corpus of images, objects and data (Figure 5).

Mysticism as High Art.

Even more important than criticism from contemporary academic research is the fact that our audience appreciated the exhibition (Bucher 2011). They came in large numbers and praised its beauty: there were 44,000 visitors, in a museum that typically receives around 100,000 visitors per year.

The Museum Rietberg is an art museum. Our audiences see the institution as a place to relax and admire the beauty of material objects; a “temple” of art (Offe 2004). Through its galleries and exhibitions, it provides space for individual aesthetic and religious experiences. These experiences, along with the interpretation, appreciation, and interaction of objects, go beyond a curator's knowledge, control and aims.

There is no readymade or universal solution for dealing with religion in a museum, each institution being different. However I would like to put forward a few proposals, which might help other museums to tackle this complex issue.

First curators should make their hermeneutic stands clear and transparent. Curators should not be afraid of sharing and explaining how they proceeded, failed and overcame problems. One concrete example is the performance of public ritual in the museum. Objects are only holy for

certain people in certain circumstances (Waardenburg 1993:187). This statement implies that a ritual in a museum is always religious theatre. It is a performance, and as such has different meanings for the audiences and the actors involved. I would argue that the museum curator's responsibility consists above all in acknowledging this multitude of meanings. He or she should invite trained ritual specialists and make their performance visible and understandable for the audiences. The Museum Rietberg has invited its audiences to participate in drawing *mandalas*, performing a *puja* or processing religious icons around Zurich. In all these occasions we had "real" Hindus performing as well as Christians participating, without any problems.

An open debate with external specialists can help. As curators we should not be afraid to ask for expertise or to get support for our questions, which often deal with complex philosophic and hermeneutic dilemmas. An initial exchange between the worlds of academics and museums would ideally be held in the first phase of an exhibition, when the storyline is being developed.

The Museum Rietberg will always deal with a multitude of meanings of religion in a complex and changing world. As a public and secular institution it enjoys high respect, recognition and credibility. It has normative discursive power and a wide impact on the public opinion, which it defends and even expends. In a world in which information travels fast via the internet, the Museum Rietberg educates its audiences and works for mutual tolerance. The question is only how to get people curious about religion and art, which continue giving sense to our human existence.

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CAPTIONS



Fig. 1

A sculpture of Bernhard of Clairvaux represents the section on Catholic mysticism. (Photo: Rainer Wolfsberger)



Fig. 2

This view through the exhibition shows thematic cabinets with sound walls and projections. (Photo: Rainer Wolfsberger)



Fig. 3

A stone sculpture as well as a bronze of the popular Hindu god Krishna, and a series of miniature paintings represent the section on the Indian *bhakti* Saint Mirabai. Mirabai, one of the best-known female holy poets of northwest India, dedicated her entire life to the love of

the Hindu god Krishna. In her role as Krishna's lover she shows similarities with the Christian bride of God Mechthild of Magdeburg and other female Christian mystics of the Middle Ages. (Photo: Rainer Wolfsberger)



Fig. 4

"Krishna plays the flute", master of the first generation after Nainsukh and Manaku von Guler, India, Pahari region, around 1775, gouache on paper, 15.5 x 25.7 cm, Museum Rietberg, inv.-no. RVI 1520; the divine couple Radha and Krishna stand as symbols for the divine unification between god and man; it also symbolizes the love between Mirabhai and her beloved Krishna. (Photo: Rainer Wolfsberger)



Fig. 5

A wandering ascetic saint sings songs of the Indian mystic Bhima Bhoi. Bhima Bhoi, a mystic, poet, and social reformer, lived in the nineteenth century in east India, in today's state of Orissa. Today, many people in Orissa sing Bhima Bhoi's songs, full of passionate devotion. They identify with his piety, but also with his criticism of social inequality. (Photo: Johannes Beltz.)