Article

Conceptual Art, Theology, and Re-Presentation

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Abstract: Within the vast and varied scholarship of contemporary art, the relations between conceptual art and religion generally have not received careful investigation. There are, however, potentially quite subtle and complicated interrelations in play here that warrant closer study. This article develops and expands such study, first, by clarifying how procedural and re-presentational ways of thinking function in conceptual art, and, second, by showing how these help us to identify six general "logics" within which the interrelations of conceptual art and religion might be reexamined in the histories of contemporary art, both critically and constructively. These six categories are helpful heuristic guides, but each must be substantiated through fine-grained investigations of particular artists and artworks, and each involves "religion" in ways that open into and require particular theological modes of questioning. Therefore, third, this article then turns to a case study of contemporary Belgian artist Kris Martin, focusing especially on *For Whom* (2012), a work featuring a readymade two-ton church bell that swings on the hour but without a clapper (and thus without sound). Martin's work consistently re-presents Christian forms and artifacts in compromised states—vacant altarpieces, broken statuary, etc.—invoking histories of European secularization while also retrieving and reactivating theological questions and grammars within those histories. By clarifying these various points of reference, particularly in dialogue with John Donne (from whom Martin borrows his title), this study attends to one instance of a significant interfacing of conceptual art, religion, and theology.

Keywords: Sol LeWitt; Marcel Duchamp; Kris Martin; *For Whom*; John Donne; art and religion; art and theology; secularization; contemporary art

In his seminal "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (LeWitt 1967), Sol LeWitt argued that "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work"—more so than its visual impact, compositional complexity, craftsmanship, expressiveness, or subject matter (p. 80). But of course what an "idea or concept" *is* and how exactly it might function as the most vital aspect of a work came to mean quite different things to different artists and critics. For LeWitt, developing a concept involved selecting some sort of basic form, articulating a particular relational "problem" implicit in that form, and developing an instructional "plan" or set of "rules" through which that problem might be instantiated and ramified in a significant way (p. 80). In this sense, a "concept" is not the overarching scheme of what a work is "about" or conveys. Rather, it consists of the development of specific parameters and a coherent, generative procedure for working within those parameters, whereby "all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (p. 80). This procedural form of conceptual art is exemplified in LeWitt's numerous wall drawings and his series of *Incomplete Open Cubes* (1974) and, in varying ways, in the works of numerous other artists, including Charles Gaines, Mary Kelly, and Bruce Nauman.

For others, particularly those working in the lineage of Marcel Duchamp's readymades, conceptual art centered on the notion, or realization, that fundamentally art has less to do with the qualities of discrete objects than with particular modes of presentation, supported by particular kinds of social interactivity. In works like *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915) or *Fountain* (1917), Duchamp provocatively demonstrated that even the most unremarkable, mass-produced objects—a snow shovel or a urinal, for example—can, by the manner in which they are presented, become highly charged with implications, generating forms

of attention in which the meanings of these objects (and the actions behind them) stand forth and become "an issue" in a new way. As Joseph Kosuth (1969) argued, this means that "art's 'art condition' is a conceptual state" (p. 135), or rather, a conceptual event or activity. For Kosuth, Duchamp's readymades decisively "changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function" and thus shifted the key concerns (both for artist and viewer) "from 'appearance' to 'conception'" (p. 135). For some artists, this implied foregrounding the linguistic structure of this function (e.g., Lawrence Weiner, Jenny Holzer); for others, it meant manifesting and scrutinizing the institutional norms and structures that enable artworks to function in the particular ways they do (Marcel Broodthaers, Michael Asher); and for yet others, it opened endless possibilities for the objects, activities, and patterning of everyday life itself to become both the material and the domain of artistic function (Stanley Brouwn, Adrian Piper). Crucially, in conceptual modes of artmaking, the materiality of the readymade is not a *medium* through which a subject or "idea" is represented but an object, image, or activity that is pulled out of the circulation of everyday life (and everyday use-value) and *re-presented* in ways that concentrate heightened attention onto it, defamiliarizing it enough to generate reflection on what and how it means for the lives we are living (and how it might mean otherwise). The readymade thus displaced methods of representation with strategies of re-presentation, such that even representational images—especially photographs but also already-existing paintings, sculptures, and other artifacts—are often re-presented as *things* that function within, and thereby reveal, larger sociocultural patterns of life. This, alongside LeWittian procedures, fundamentally alters the hermeneutical frameworks for how a subject or idea operates in an artwork, such that the question of "what does this depict or convey?" becomes much less important than "what does it mean to *do* this?".

Of all its impacts on contemporary art, these have been conceptualism's two most generative engines, shifting both the production and discourse of contemporary art from expressive toward *procedural* ways of thinking and from representational toward *re-presentational* strategies of meaning. Of course, these two modes intermingled and were adapted in manifold ways—as artists, for example, began selecting, altering, and presenting readymade objects through procedural modes of decision-making. And in the process, these conceptual operations began to reincorporate older, more historically variegated artistic values into these new conceptual frameworks. For the sake of clearly and decisively exemplifying a different way of proceeding, conceptual artistic strategies were, particularly in the 1960s and '70s, often formulated and theorized in fairly austere ways. But as these became widely accepted and understood, especially from the 1990s onward, conceptual artists became increasingly interested in the importance of beauty, affectivity, labor and craftsmanship, allegorical subject matter, subjective depth, and poetic allusion—all of which gradually came back into conceptual artmaking not as necessary to art but as meaningful *within* procedural, re-presentational modes of working and thinking. In this way, conceptual artmaking opened (back?) into profound meditations on human mortality and loss (Felix Gonzalez-Torres), bodily being-in-the-world (Ann Hamilton), uncanny psychological strain (Robert Gober), lamentation for victims of violence (Doris Salcedo), the sociopolitical structuring of common space (Francis Alÿs), self-defeating innovations (Simon Starling), irreconcilable histories (El Anatsui), the mass waste of consumerism (Moffat Takadiwa), and so on.

Indeed, at heart, conceptual art was never interested (as it is sometimes accused) in a withdrawal into abstract, asocial "concepts". It was primarily oriented toward reconnecting art to the procedures, activities, conceptualities, and materials of everyday life, across the various dimensions of common life. As Alexander Alberro (2006) argues, conceptual art has been so consequential in the development of contemporary art precisely because of the ways it changes how "art negotiates between, and reveals the interdependence of art and the broader cultural and institutional context that we believe is most important" (p. 14)—whoever the "we" might be and whichever "context" might be determinative.

1. Conceptual Art and Religion

Within the vast and varied scholarship of contemporary art, the potentially intricate relations between conceptual art and *religion* generally have not received careful investigation. Admittedly, these relations are often not obvious, and even where they do become conspicuously visible, the various kinds of hermeneutical distancing produced by the procedural, presentational strategies of conceptual art make any "religious" vectors in this work difficult to interpret as anything more than incidental, critical, or ironic. And this difficulty is compounded by a generally self-reinforcing assumption that the two domains are so culturally disconnected, and perhaps philosophically inimical, that truly meaningful interchange between them is improbable. Careful inspection, however, reveals many more subtle and complicated interrelations in play here, especially if we take seriously, and nonreductively, conceptual art's capacities for negotiating and revealing "the interdependence of art and the broader cultural and institutional context" (to repeat Alberro's phrase). There are many focal points and frames of reference in which such interrelations might carefully be reexamined, both critically and constructively. In this section, I want briefly to survey six general "logics" within which conceptual art is interfacing with religion, before turning, in the final two sections, to a particular case study.

First, the *procedural* logics that animate LeWitt's artistic practice, for instance, seem to have significant connections to the Judaism in which he was raised and to which he returned later in life. The dialogue of his work with Jewish worship became more overt in his later years, as exemplified in his architectural design for the synagogue of Beth Shalom Rodfe Zedek in Chester, CT (2001) (where LeWitt was a congregant from about 1986 until his death in 2007), which included a specially made Torah cover and matching kippot; his *Untitled* semicylindrical construction near the ruins of Europe's oldest synagogue, in Ostia Antica, Italy (2002); and his powerful *Lost Voices* installation in the former Stommeln Synagogue in Pulheim, Germany (2005), which featured recordings of eighteen sacred songs, all sung in Hebrew on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, heard from behind a brick wall that he built to brutally truncate the sanctuary (for all these, see Areford 2021). But even well before these direct engagements, LeWitt's rule-based procedures—which hinge on physically interpreting and instantiating written instructions into diverse particular contexts—are deeply resonant with Jewish thought and practice, ranging from Torah to midrash halakhah to Kabbalah (e.g., Haxthausen 2014). In the first of his "Sentences on Conceptual Art" (LeWitt 1969), LeWitt asserts that "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach" (p. 3). For him, the conception of "mystics" is not reducible to, but was deeply and primarily informed by, Jewish mysticism (and its meditations on the generativity of Torah). LeWitt read avidly across a range of subjects, and by the end of his life, he was well read in Jewish thought and Jewish mysticism.[1] This was especially a focus in the last two decades of his life, but it seems to be a topic he *returned* to with renewed interest (rather than discovered) in those decades. The point here is not to collapse the "ruled" procedures of conceptual art and Jewish practice into each other. Rather, it is to recognize potentially symbiotic exchanges (perhaps mostly intuitively) between similar modes of thought as they relate to generative activity. Ben Schachter (2017) traces the ways that Jewish understandings of "image, action, and idea" illumine the conceptual, procedural strategies of many contemporary artists. He does not address LeWitt's work, focusing instead on artists more conspicuously engaging Jewish thought and practice, but many of his arguments can productively be read back into LeWitt's work—and, indeed, into the works of various other artists who were shaped by Jewish traditions (e.g., Allan Kaprow, Robert Mangold, Helène Aylon, and others). And this kind of inquiry need not be confined to Jewish traditions. Similar arguments can be made about the procedural logics of conceptually oriented artists who are deeply shaped by Christianity (Andy Warhol, Dom Sylvester Houédard), Islam (Zarah Hussain, Soheila Esfahani), Buddhism (Zhang Huan, Xu Zhen), or Hinduism (Subodh Gupta, Sheela Gowda).

Second, several art critics have begun arguing that the various *presentational* logics of the contemporary readymade are derived from and remain in dialogue with religious modes of display. Matthew Bown (2010, 2015), Arthur Danto (1981), Alexander Nagel (2011), and Alena Alexandrova (2017), for example, have, with varying emphases and terminologies, each argued that there is a "crypto-relic" logic built into the lineage of the Duchampian readymade, particularly as it functions in the presentation, collection, and circulation of contemporary artworks (Bown 2015). This logic continually operates in dialectical tension with the deep iconoclastic impulses in the same readymade tradition, which extend from and are informed by anti-idolatrous drives formulated by Protestantism, Jansenism, and other dissenting traditions (e.g., Crow 2017). Indeed, Duchamp's own early Catholicism and its unraveling (or maybe transposition) into a series of profoundly icono-clastic gestures—eschewing the categories of "artist", "God", "believer", and "atheist" alike (Cabanne [1967] 1979, pp. 64, 106–7; Hopkins 1998; Schwartz [1970] 2000, p. 256)—provide relevant points of reference for investigating *one* way an iconoclastic "crypto-relic" dynamic functions in the history of contemporary art. In a related way, Eleanor Heartney (2004) discerns a cross-pressured "Catholic imagination" informing the conceptual strategies of several influential artists in recent decades, whose Catholic upbringings have deeply shaped their work long after they rejected or became estranged from the church. For many artists, the religious points of reference for conceptualism's presentational logics are implicit or unintentional. For others, they are more clearly visible, including experimentations with forms of reliquaries (Joseph Beuys, Paul Thek, Jesse Darling), memorializations of lost people and places through relic objects (Donald Rodney, Cornelia Parker, Teresa Margolles), and readymade re-presentations of religious artifacts, including disused Christian statuary, church bells, and other liturgical objects (Danh Võ, Theaster Gates, Kris Martin).

Third, there are strong links between religious ritual and the *performative* logics that are integral to many conceptual artworks. Doris Salcedo describes the labor-intensive process of making *A Flor de Piel* (2013)—a huge memorial "shroud" composed of thousands of preserved rose petals sutured together by hand—as "a solitary liturgy" and a proxy "funerary ritual" for a nurse-nun who was abducted and murdered in the decades-long Colombian civil war (Brinson 2015; Salcedo 2015). The influence of religious ritual is even more conspicuous in the performance works of artists like Linda Montano and Ernesto Pujol (both of whom were formerly members of monastic orders: a Maryknoll nun and a Cistercian-Trappist monk, respectively) or Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Allan Wexler (both of whom draw from Jewish belief and practice).

Fourth, site-specific conceptual artworks are often directly in dialogue with the local religious *histories* of a place. This is evident in LeWitt's constructions at the Ostia Antica and Stommeln synagogues (mentioned above) but also in numerous other examples. Mel Chin's *Ghost* (1991), for example, was a temporary nylon mesh recreation of the façade of the Talcott Street Congregational Church, Connecticut's oldest free black church, which stood on this site from 1826 to 1906. Wedged between the pillars of the parking garage at One Talcott Plaza, Chin's temporary installation reasserted an awareness of the thriving African American community whose meeting house once occupied this location. Theaster Gates similarly engages the religious histories of particular sites, as he did in *12 Ballads for Huguenot House* (2012) in Kassel, Germany; *Sanctum* (2015) in the bombed-out Temple Church in Bristol, England; and *Gone are the Days of Shelter and Martyr* (2014) in the now-demolished Saint Laurence Church in Chicago.

Fifth, many artists working in a postconceptual vein bring religious points of reference into their work through the direct *appropriation* of religious imagery, text, or titles. John Baldessari's *Blue Line* (1988) centers on a large, two-sided reproduction of Hans Holbein's *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521), which bisects both the gallery space and the video delay in a nearby room. Mark Wallinger's Via *Dolorosa* (2002) appropriates the 18-min Passion sequence from Franco Zeffirelli's film *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), which plays without sound and without the central 90% of the projection, leaving only the outer margins of the film visible around a rectangular black void. Wallinger's effacing of Zeffirelli's film is

not simplistically an effacing of its Christian subject matter, which, as he says, still clearly registers against one's own background familiarity as one watches: "However familiar or patchy your grasp of the story of the gospel, you might know more than you think" (Wallinger 2013). Andrea Büttner's *Shepherds and Kings* (2017) features two 35-mm slide projectors cycling through Nativity images culled from the archives of the Warburg Institute, projecting images of the adoration of (or annunciation to) the shepherds on the left and images of the adoration of the magi (often depicted as "kings") on the right. These pairings highlight socioeconomic contrasts between the shepherds and the "kings"—traditionally visually interpreted as representatives of low and high social status, respectively. But of course these pairings do more than that, opening into the richer exegetical terrain of the gospel texts from which these images derive—the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew, respectively—which in fact theologically unsettle the social stratifications of these images.

Sixth, in many instances, these religious points of reference are more subtle but also more central to the *structural* logic of the work. In her huge installation *corpus* (2003), Ann Hamilton transformed the ribbed architecture of Mass MoCA's building 5 into a "body" of language (both verbal and textual). At the far end of this massive architectural body was a two-story "head" space in which a slowly spinning projector showed close-up video of typed words (as if reading one or two letters at a time) of a text that seemed to be stammering over the opening five words of John's Gospel—In the beginning was the beginning was beginning the beginning in the beginning was the—without ever arriving at the decisive "Word" (Raab 2004; Wallach 2008). Cornelia Parker's *Anti-Mass* (2005) consists of the burnt wooden remains of an African American Baptist church in Kentucky that was destroyed by arsonists. Parker presents these artifacts of racist violence (truly an anti-Mass) suspended in midair in the form of a huge cube—a form that seemingly defies the material finality of this violence (connoting other kinds of anti-mass) and even allusively identifies them (perhaps inadvertently) with the eschatological redemption toward which that Baptist congregation was oriented, a cosmic New Jerusalem that explicitly takes the cubic form of the holy of holies (Rev 21:16; cf. 1 Kgs 6:20).

In short, many prominent artists working in a generally conceptual vein have been (with increasing frequency over the past two decades) exploring—both critically and constructively—a complicated array of religious beliefs, practices, imageries, institutions, and histories in their work. These artists tend not to locate themselves within orthodox religious belief or practice in any straightforward way, but neither do they situate themselves simply as outsiders or orient their explorations solely from critical distances. The vast majority of them had some sort of religious upbringing and remain in constructive dialogue with one or more religious traditions—not merely as a vague cultural condition but as a resource for addressing what is vital or fundamental in life. These various artistic explorations are also expanded and complemented by several curators, who have in recent years organized major exhibitions drawing out the ways that conceptually oriented art-making is engaged with various forms of religious thought and concern. A small sampling includes *Traces du sacré* [*Traces of the Sacred*] at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (2008), *The Quick and the Dead* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (2009), *Wunder* [*Miracles*]: *Art, Science, and Religion from the 4th Century to the Present* at the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg (2011–12), *Sint-Jan* [*Saint John*] at St Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent (2012), *The Problem of God* at K21 in Düsseldorf (2015–16), *Ecce Homo* in Antwerp (2017–18), and many others.

Such developments are perhaps surprising in social and artistic contexts that otherwise seem pervasively post-Christian, and they present significant interpretive challenges. Art critics and historians (and often the curators of such exhibitions) are generally reluctant or unprepared to engage these developments in an extended way—particularly in a way that allows these various religious topics to be understood within advanced forms of religious discourse and reasoning. In other words, even as "religion" reemerges as an object of inquiry in the histories of contemporary art, this category is generally constructed in anthropological terms rather than theological terms, restricting the hermeneutical range of

vision primarily (sometimes exclusively) to the sociocultural and/or political implications of whatever religious topics come into view. This produces its own valuable insights, but it also tends to produce reductive understandings of religion and of the manifold ways religious points of reference function in artworks, including in many of the examples given above. There is, in fact, a wide range of sometimes profound engagements with religious traditions going on in contemporary art—including conceptual and postconceptual art—which are opening lines of questioning that are not only anthropological or "anthropolitical" in character but also *theological* in the ways they delve (intentionally or otherwise) into ontologies, hamartiologies, eschatologies, and so on. These lines of questioning deserve further critical attention and reflection than they have yet received in the corresponding writing about contemporary art.

This brief survey suggests an array of possible focal points for reconsidering the role of religion and theology in conceptual art. Ultimately, however, all these examples remain merely suggestive until each is carefully worked out in extended critical engagement with the artworks themselves, elucidating in finer detail what is (and is not) happening in each case and demonstrating how deeper investigation of religious frameworks or theological modes of reasoning contribute to thicker understandings of the work. To that end, I want to select a case study from one of the artists mentioned above and experiment with various ways of understanding how the conceptual procedures and re-presentations in his work are meaningfully interfacing with theological points of reference.

2. Kris Martin's Re-Presentations

The work of contemporary Belgian artist Kris Martin consistently generates questions about how the inheritances of conceptual art are interfacing with religion and theology. His work was included in all of the curated exhibitions mentioned above and has been exhibited in direct dialogue with various religious sites and contexts, including the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome, Saint Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, and others. Familiar Christian themes and forms regularly appear in Martin's work, but they almost always appear in compromised states, riddled with absences, silences, and operational failures. His sculptures often include broken and disused Christian artifacts that have been slightly altered and resituated into arrangements and contexts in which the cultural imagination that once supported these artifacts appears to be malfunctioning or misfiring.

Festum (2010), for example, consists of hundreds of metal crucifix figures that have been detached from their crosses and strung together through the nail holes in their hands, like garlands, creating a destabilizing merger between devotional images of Christ's suffering and party décor. *Altar* (2014) is a full-scale steel replica of the frame of the renowned *Ghent Altarpiece* (1425–32). While the van Eycks' original polyptych is a dense visual meditation on Christological, eschatological, and eucharistic theology, Martin gives us only the vacant frame. Significantly, this work is only ever installed in outdoor contexts,[2] which causes it to appear, on the one hand, as a skeletal figure in the landscape—alluding to a historical evacuation of Christian vision in his native Belgium in the centuries since the van Eycks—and, on the other hand, as a still functional polyptychal aperture or eschatological "framework" through which one might still see the givenness of world and time.

In *Eve and Adam* (2016), Martin further riffs on the *Ghent Altarpiece*, displaying reproductions of van Eyck's renderings of the primordial parents from the outermost interior panels of the altarpiece, each cropped into a "portrait" format. In displaying them on a gallery wall, Martin simply but evocatively swaps their compositional positions, which intensifies the sense of lapsarian estrangement between the two but, more provocatively, also throws into question the rest of the altarpiece's visual and conceptual structure. Where, for instance, does one now look to find the altarpiece's central vision of the enthroned Pantocrator and the redemption of the earth?

In a similar vein, Martin uses many old, broken, and disused Christian sculptures in his work, each of which had been already displaced from its original liturgical context. His many "Idiot" sculptures, for example, resituate readymade sculptures of Christ into

the interpretive logic of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1869), a novel which is profoundly significant to the artist and provides a conceptual engine for many of his works.[3] *Idiot XLV* (2019), for example, presents a crossless sixteenth-century carving of the crucified Christ, which Martin has altered only by placing an inverted metal funnel—a symbol of idiocy—on Jesus's head.[4] This subtle alteration efficiently maps the allusive Christology of Dostoevsky's *Idiot* (e.g., Givens 2011) onto the kenotic "foolishness" of Saint Paul's "*logos* of the cross*", in which the infinite wisdom and power of God is decisively revealed in the seeming idiocy and weakness of a man executed on the margins of the Roman Empire (Phil 2:7–8; 1 Cor 1:17–25).

Even when Martin turns to non-Christian images that loom large in the Western visual imagination, the absence or presence of God is still an overriding subject. *Mandi VIII* (2006), for instance, is a plaster recreation of the ancient marble sculpture of *Laocoön and His Sons* but without Poseidon's divinely-sent serpents. If the original sculpture is, as Nigel Spivey (2001) says, "the prototypical icon of human agony" in Western art (p. 25), then Martin reimages this agony without any obvious signs of divine involvement—positively, negatively, or otherwise. The result is in many ways more troubling than the original, with the sources of the figures' suffering becoming invisibly internal (psychological, biochemical, etc.), invisibly environmental (virological, toxicological, etc.), invisibly systemic (sociological, political, etc.), or invisibly spiritual (hamartiological, apocalyptic, etc.)—at any rate, either detheologizing or retheologizing human agony in a way that sends viewers into an underdetermined range of causal explanations other than the one(s) provided by the ancient Laocoön narrative.

In all these examples and others, Martin's works have a procedural simplicity to them, performing seemingly minor alterations to already-existing objects.[5] But the questions that reverberate from these alterations are consistently complex, touching on existential issues of life and death, time and eternity, doubt and belief, etc., often in direct dialogue with the histories of Christianity (especially European Catholicism). Critical engagement with Martin's work demands careful consideration of its ongoing dialogue with Christianity, yet it is also unclear how exactly to do so—and, to date, the writing about his work has generally avoided the task.

We might summarize this difficulty as arising from three facets of Martin's general working strategy: (1) His works regularly feature socially and historically charged objects, images, and forms that have been removed from their previous contexts and re-presented to us for a second look—sometimes with minimal intervention, sometimes with extensive reengineering—specifically for the sake of reconsidering the tacit (whether historical or poetic) implications of these objects in everyday lives. (2) The sociohistorical "charge" in these works consistently moves along distinctly theological circuits, both in the kinds of topics they address and in their use of objects and forms that are directly connected to—often even material artifacts of—centuries of an inherited European Christian iconology. However, (3) this iconology almost always appears in Martin's work as a kind of faulty circuitry. He repeatedly chooses objects whose meanings have become culturally and/or theologically depleted, and he presents them in ways that only further weakens them, causing them, in the words of one critic, to "feel strangely emptied out, as though their essence has been drained away" (Furness 2009, p. 54). Yet, as Volker Adolphs (2012) argues, that is precisely the point: "the gap, the empty space is the essential element in Martin's work" (p. 42). Martin isolates and emphasizes instances in which Christian visualities (and the Christian theological imagination undergirding them) seem *simultaneously* to be profoundly meaningful and to be socially malfunctioning, thus highlighting several cultural disconnects in contemporary life. The challenge of achieving thick descriptions of Martin's work is to carefully articulate how the emptying, the draining, or the gaps in his work are functioning with respect to the religious and theological contexts with which the work is engaged.

For Martin, the conceptual procedures generating these works are not haphazard, cynical, or polemical. Rather, they are attempts to address pervasive human concerns:

"We all share the same thing. We all have questions about religion, about death, about the end, about life after death. I mean we all face the same problem: that it's just a big question mark" (Sies + Höke 2011). And within a post-Christian context, he recognizes the considerable sociohistorical cross-pressures surrounding this question mark:

> My generation is the one that really absorbed the death of God. When I was a child, everyone went to church and nearly everyone in my parents' generation believed in Christianity. Today [in Belgium] hardly anyone goes to church and few people really believe in Christianity. This is understandable, but it's also very problematic. As we lose Christian belief, we are also losing social cohesion, a way of having a common vocabulary and a common set of rituals for discussing and wrestling with the deepest questions of life—the questions of the meanings of life and death (Martin 2018).

Or as he says elsewhere: "People are doubting, and they are doubting themselves anyway. Many step out of the church. But you cannot step out of religion, because you are a religious being anyway, whether you are a Buddhist or a Muslim, even when you are not practicing at all, even when you don't even think there is a God" (Sies + Höke 2011). One cannot ultimately step out of a religious frame of reference because "you cannot avoid the biggest question in life—the meaning of it" (Schmelzer 2014). And, for Martin, posing that kind of question with the depth that it deserves demands recourse to the most robust theological grammars available in the European public square—namely, those developed through the traditions of Christian thought and practice—even if those grammars are themselves also placed under question.

The compromised character of the Christian iconographic tradition in Martin's works—vacant altarpieces, broken statuary, unreadable texts, etc.—highlights an extensive shifting of religious belief in his own society. But his acts of "draining" these frameworks and presenting them in such a state also temporarily reveals, even reactivates, the enduring structures of belief in that same society. In other words, Martin's procedures and re-presentations do not evacuate Christianity but display its enduring structures. Indeed, what I want to explore here is the possibility that Martin's re-presentation of "emptied" religious artifacts is precisely what might cause the theological substance of these objects to register anew. How this works, however, requires closer, more detailed investigation of particular artworks. In order to tease out these claims in more concrete terms, I want to think more carefully about one of Martin's most important works.

3. For Whom

Martin's large sculpture *For Whom* (2012) is a potent example of his formulating the "big question mark" within a theological grammar. This work consists of a two-ton, four-and-a-half-foot-wide bronze church bell mounted to a steel I-beam construction with a silent, magnetically motorized swinging mechanism.[6] The bell swings at the top of every hour, marking the passage of time in tandem with every other public bell in the general vicinity of wherever the work is exhibited. The singular difference with this bell, however, is that it operates without a clapper. It swings forcefully but without any resonant sound, creating a surprisingly unsettling effect. "Bereft of its actual function", writes curator Isabelle Malz (2015), this bell "becomes a silent symbol and representation of something absent" (p. 314). Yes, but within this symbolic logic what exactly is (and is not) absent? And what kind of structure or presence must be assumed for the "something absent" to be discernable in the first place?

On the one hand, given the literary reference inscribed in the title, this silently swinging bell ominously alludes to the loss of human life. *For Whom* takes its title from John Donne's famous "Meditation 17" in his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Donne [1624] 1959), written on the occasion of an extreme sickness that brought him "so near the door" of death (p. 108).[7] Donne's meditation opens with the sound of a funeral bell ringing in the adjoining church building and the author's spiraling sense of empathy for the person passing into death: "Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill, as that he knows

not it tolls for him" (Meditation XVII, p. 107). This thought immediately flips back on the author, as he internalizes the possibility that the bell may in fact be tolling for him. In this way, Donne hears in the reverberating announcement of a single human death a summons to recognize the mortality that all people (and all creatures) have in common, prompting him "in another man's to consider mine own condition; and to know, that this bell which tolls for another, before it come to ring out, may take me in too" (Prayer XVII, p. 112). The gravity of this common condition produced the most famous lines of the *Devotions*, which still echo in the popular imagination as an affecting statement of human solidarity:

> No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe [or wherever one's home] is the less . . . [A]ny man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee (Meditation XVII, pp. 108–9).

Reverberating (only) with the reference to Donne's prose, Martin's silently swinging bell is thus an image of death: the death of any and every particular someone who is only rightly addressed as "thee"—or, echoing Martin Buber ([1923] 1996), as "thou". The troubling muteness of this bell disconnects the form from its fundamental function, emblemizing the deathly silencing of a life. As an emblem, Martin's swinging bell rhymes the silence of Donne's bell, which is mediated to us only in the silent letterforms of ink on paper. In both cases, we hear the clanging funeral bell only by way of artists evoking a sound that we viewers and readers must ourselves provide—an evocation that immediately pushes the "sound" of the bell into a symbolic register. As Martin says, the primary effect of the bell's soundlessness is that "in your imagination the sound is amplified", which in turn "elevate[s] this personal story, this trivial story, to a universal level" (Schmelzer 2014).[8]

On the other hand, this silently swinging bell inevitably stands for more than individual human lives lost. It also suggests an institutional, ecclesial structure that has fallen mute. The bell in question—both in Martin's work and in Donne's—must be recognized specifically as a *church* bell.[9] Martin had nothing to do with forging this bell; it was made (and inscribed) for a church in Minheim, Germany, in the year 2000, commemorating the beginning of the third millennium Anno Domini.[10] Due to engineering failures, the bell could not be installed in the church's bell tower, causing a kind of symbolic miscarriage in its raison d'être. As Martin recounts, "They made a mistake. And I bought it" (Schmelzer 2014). In Martin's care, this fugitive church bell is given a function something like what it was intended for, but in a situation dislocated from its intended ecclesial context and without its intended voice. And it is presented specifically with this compromised operating condition on display. The swinging of this bell without any clapper thus suggests a failure in the vocalization of the church as it enters this millennium—including, vis à vis Donne's *Devotions*, a failure to articulate the meanings of human living and dying. In this sense, a particular "trivial story" of one failed church bell might be elevated to denote broader social and theological shifts at a slightly more "universal level".

Traditionally, the function of a church bell is not only practical (marking time) but also theological. Bell towers are sonic symbols for the public proclamation of the church. The regular ringing of bells enacts both a calling-out and a calling-in: projecting the good news of Christ's resurrection out into the world and summoning people into the resurrected body of Christ (represented by the cruciform structure of the church building itself), proclaiming that in him all things are being made new (Rev 21:5, 2 Cor 5:17; cf. Col 1:20). In this context, the muteness of *For Whom*—accentuated by the failed plans for this particular bell—generates a disquieting image of post-Christian Europe. The traditional ecclesial form remains intact, but it is displaced from the body of the church, carrying on its duties without any audible voice, without any resonance. It swings, but, as Deborah Lewer (2016) notes, "there is no call to worship" here (p. 9). The meaning of the title thus detaches from Donne's usage and flips around the other direction, as if to ask *for whom* does the church still speak? *For whom* is its calling-out and calling-in still audible and persuasive? *For whom*

does it still "world" the world of human experience, vocalizing the primary meanings of (life and) death today? In other words, while this bell signifies the frailty of human lives, it also emblemizes the fragility of the ecclesial structures and values by which European Christianity has historically accounted for and made sense of the meaning of human living and dying.

But the significance of this point requires greater care and subtlety than it often receives. Martin re-presents an ecclesial and theological symbol in crisis, but he does so in a way that retains its symbolic structure and enormous cultural "weight". In other words, *For Whom* may indeed be figuring "an unsettling void" ([Malz 2015](#), p. 314) in the cultural life of post-Christian Europe, but it is also retrieving the theological forms whereby that void has shape and meaning. Just as the questions of world and time in Martin's *Altar* are theologically structured by the van Eycks' *Ghent Altarpiece*, so too the questions of human death and solidarity in Martin's *For Whom* engage the theological structuring of those same questions in Donne's *Devotions*. Or put the other way round: Martin's appropriation of van Eyck and Donne clarifies (by making more conspicuous) the ways these particular questions—world and time, death and solidarity—are already operating within some sort of theological grammar. When Martin re-presents *Altar*'s empty frame or *For Whom*'s mute bell, he is not polemically assaulting their Christian frameworks by emptying them as much as he reveals their structure by displaying them in an "emptied" form—the altarpiece presenting world-and-time without representations, the bell tolling for life-and-death without sound. The important point is that in each case the questions are conspicuously recognizable as theological questions.

In the sound of the clanging church bell, Donne hears the voice of his anonymous dead neighbor: "I hear this dead brother of ours, who is now carried out to his burial, to speak to me, and to preach my funeral sermon in the voice of these bells . . . He speaks to me aloud from that steeple; he whispers to me at these curtains, and he speaks thy words: *Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth*" (Prayer XVI, pp. 106–7; cf. Rev 14:13). In hearing this dead brother, he therein also hears the voice of God calling to him,[11] summoning him to a more fundamental fullness: "I hear that which makes all sounds music, and all music perfect; I hear thy Son himself saying, *Let not your hearts be troubled*" (Expostulation XVII, p. 109; cf. John 14:1–7). In the midst of his sickness, Donne responds by turning toward his neighbor and toward God, whom he trusts will gather up the pages of every life, translate them into a finer language, and "shall bind up all our scattered leaves again" (Meditation XVII, p. 108). Martin's *For Whom* isolates and repeats the key material event in Donne's recounting—the swinging of the church bell—but transposes it into a churchless, soundless church bell, thereby forcing the question of how (or if) the calling(s) Donne heard are discernable today. The work thereby turns us toward the *question* of our neighbor as it stands in relation to the *question* of God, putting pressure on our own (theological) capacities and resources for responsive solidarity, transhistorical meaning, and hope in the face of a mortality we all hold in common. If the church bell goes mute in a society, then what happens to the call Donne heard? Does it also fall mute, or does it persist in other forms? Is it somehow discernable in the swinging form or in the muteness itself?

In the wake of his experience, Donne finds himself profoundly opened to hearing "that which makes all sounds music" ringing all around him and whispering from the most unexpected places. And precisely here he identifies a pneumatology without clear delimitation: "my God, what thunder is not a well-tuned cymbal, what hoarseness, what harshness, is not a clear organ, if thou be pleased to set thy voice to it? And what organ is not well played on if thy hand be upon it?" (Expostulation XVII, p. 110). Once Donne concedes to God speaking even "in the speech of speechless creatures (in Balaam's ass), in the speech of unbelieving men (in the confession of Pilate), in the speech of the devil himself (in the recognition and attestation of thy Son)", then he also must "humbly accept thy voice in the sound of this sad and funeral bell" (Prayer XVII, p. 112).[12] Martin's *For Whom* extends and examines this thought by re-presenting a seemingly voiceless bell,

swinging silently overhead without a clapper, without a church tower or church building and without marking the funeral of anyone in particular. Here, we encounter not hoarseness or harshness but muteness, and not the voices of speechless creatures, unbelieving men, or devils but the seeming desuetude of European churches. And so the work asks a strikingly articulate question that cannot be closed down: Is there a voice to be heard in the soundlessness of *this* sad and funeral bell?

Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.

4. Conclusions

Conceptual and postconceptual art has been informed by, in dialogue with, and relevant to religious and theological traditions in an array of potentially quite subtle and complicated ways—all of which warrant more careful study than they have generally received. The point of such study is not to neatly align artists or artworks with religious traditions, associations, or doctrines; nor is it to utilize them for (one's own) religious affirmations or denials. Rather, the point is to become more critically sensitive to—and thereby to do better critical justice to—one significant aspect of how particular artworks work within the contexts in which they are produced and received. In order to develop and expand such study, the first half of this article outlined six general "logics"—procedural, presentational, performative, historical, appropriative, and structural—within which these interrelations might be investigated in the histories of contemporary art, both critically and constructively. In focusing on the example of Kris Martin's *For Whom*, we have seen how these might operate in an artwork and how attention to them generates new insights and thicker criticism of the work. I have emphasized the procedural and presentational logics of Martin's readymade church bell, but the others have also been weaving throughout this account, including careful attention to the local historical context of the Minheim bell, Martin's appropriation of John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* in his title, and the overall structural logic of the silently swinging, churchless church bell in relation both to Donne and to broader cultural contexts. At each turn, inquiry into the religious and theological dimensions of these various "logics" helpfully crystallizes and complicates the implications of this artwork, and it generates forms of critical dialogue that might also pertain to the works of many other artists referenced in this article and indeed to concerns running through contemporary art more generally.

Notes

[1] LeWitt's library at the time of his death included many books on Jewish thought and Jewish mysticism, including Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941), Milton Steinberg's *Basic Judaism* (1947), Perle Epstein's *Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic* (1978), Aryeh Kaplan's *Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide* (1985), Rabbi Joseph Telushkin's *Jewish Literacy* (1991) and *Jewish Wisdom* (1994), Norman F. Cantor's *The Jewish Experience* (1996), Avram Davis and Manuela Dunn Mascetti's *Judaic Mysticism* (1997), and two copies of *The New Union Prayer Book* ([1895] 1940). For this selection, see (Howard and Piper 2010, at 30:33; cf. Haxthausen 2014, pp. 54, 57n50).

[2] *Altar* was first installed on the beach in front of the Thermae Palace Hotel in Ostend, Belgium (2014–present), and other editions of it (*Altar* exists in an edition of five, plus one exhibition copy and two artist's proofs) have been subsequently installed in many other locations, including, for example, on the High Line over West 24th Street in New York City (2015–16); in the garden of St Botolph-without-Bishopsgate Church in London (2015–16), in the garden (Parco Savello) adjacent to the Basilica of Santa Sabina

in Rome (2016–17), in front of the Langen Foundation in Neuss, Germany (2018–19), in front of St Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, Belgium (2020); and in the main cemetery of Hall in Tirol, Austria (2021).

3   See, for example, *The Idiot* (2005)—in which Martin painstakingly produced a handwritten copy of Dostoevsky's entire novel, altering the text only by replacing the name of the protagonist, Myshkin, with his own name, Martin—and *Idiot Library* (2013), a bookcase containing 250 editions of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. See also *Vase* (2005), a seven-foot high Chinese vase that the artist shatters (by pushing it over) and repairs (carefully gluing it all back together) every time it is exhibited, subtly alluding to and reenacting the pivotal scene near the end of Dostoevsky's novel in which Myshkin accidentally breaks an expensive Chinese vase at his own engagement party (part IV, chap. 7).

4   For other works in this series featuring Christian artifacts, see *Idiot III* (2006), *Idiot IV* (2007), *Idiot V* (2007), *Thirteen Idiots* (2008), *Idiot X* (2012), *Idiot XIII* (2015), *Idiot XLIV* (2016), *Idiot LVIII* (2016), and *Idiot* (2022). For a sampling of further works that explore overtly theological themes, often incorporating Christian artifacts, see *Spatium* (2009), *Stabat Mater* (2010), *The Fall* (2015), *Resurrection* (2015), *Either* (2016), *Annunciata* (2016), and *Angel* (2016).

5   Martin's works usually have a *procedural* simplicity but often involve great *technical* complexity and specialization. In *For Whom*, for example, the procedurally simple "church bell that swings silently without a clapper" was not at all simple to make.

6   There are four versions of *For Whom*, featuring four different bells. The first version of *For Whom* (2008) is always installed inside museum spaces with the swinging I-beam mechanism mounted directly to opposing walls, without any other visible scaffolding. See, for example, its installation at the Sammlung Boros in Berlin (2008–12) or in *The Problem of God* exhibition at K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf (2015–16). The other three versions are almost always installed in outdoor locations with the swinging mechanism supported by a free-standing A-frame steel scaffolding. The first of these, *For Whom* (2008), was exhibited at Art Basel Miami Beach (2008), temporarily installed at Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden in Miami (2009), and then installed in Florida in a private collection (2009–present). The second, *For Whom* (2012)—which is the focus of this present study—was exhibited in Martin's large exhibition *Every Day of the Weak* at Kunstmuseum Bonn (2012), Aargauer Kunsthaus in Aarau (2012), and Kestner Gesellschaft in Hanover (2012–13), and then installed at the Walker Art Center sculpture garden in Minneapolis (2013–present). *For Whom* (2016), which features an iron (rather than bronze) bell, was exhibited on the roof of the OK Center for Contemporary Art in Linz, Austria, as part of the exhibition *Höhenrausch* (2016) and then installed in a private collection in France (2017–present). For images of *For Whom* (2012) at the Walker Art Center, see (Walker 2013).

7   Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* consists of twenty-three chapters or "Stations of the Sickness", each consisting of a Meditation, an Expostulation (or debate with God), and a Prayer. In all subsequent citations of Donne's text, I will identify these subsections in the parenthetical notes.

8   The fuller context of Martin's statement is instructive: "That's the big question: how can you elevate this personal story, this trivial story, to a universal level? It's by shutting up—and [allowing for the experience of] time. The best example is the billboard Felix [Gonzalez-Torres] made after his partner died from AIDS, the billboards with the empty bed in New York (*Untitled*, 1991)—it yells very loudly without sound. Actually, that was a big inspiration for the bell, because in your imagination the sound is amplified. It's only in your mind. It's in your head that it's happening, but there is no noise" (Schmelzer 2014).

9   For Donne, the power of the bell's tolling rests on his belief that "The church is Catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me: all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another. As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come, so this bell calls us all . . . " (Meditation XVII, pp. 107–8).

10   Each of the bells used in the four versions of the work is a church bell. The discussion in this paragraph refers specifically to the second version of *For Whom* (2012), which is the most widely exhibited and discussed. The inscription on the bell is dedicated to "The messengers of Jesus", specifically naming St Nicholas of Myra, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, and two locally known missionaries, Father Ferdinand Diedrich and Father Matthias Koenen. The full German inscription reads: "Die Boten von Jesus:/Bischof Nikolaus von Myra, 4.Jhdt/Mutter Teresa von Kalkutta, Missionarin der Nächstenliebe, 20.Jhdt/Pater Ferdinand Diedrich, Volksmissionar, 1911–1945/Pater Matthias Koenen, Afrikamissionar, 1906–2000/Minheim A.D. 2000". The other side of the bell displays a relief image of St Nicholas of Myra blessing three children, who, according to tradition, he raised from the dead after they had been murdered. This image is a copy of an early seventeenth-century sandstone rock carving near the town of Minheim known as the "Niklosfels" (Nicholas Rock). Below this image, the inscription on the bell reads: "Die Minheimer/bitten mit 'Niklosfels' und Glocke/den Moselheiligen um Geleit/durch die Furten des Lebens [The people of Minheim, with 'Niklosfels' and bell, ask the saints of Mosel to escort them through the fords of life]".

11   As Donne says of this "dead brother": "In him, O God, thou hast . . . sent one from the dead to speak unto me", which includes preaching Donne's funeral sermon "in the voice of these bells" and speaking the words of God to him (Prayer XVI, pp. 106–7). In this sense, the dead man begins—quite apart from his own agency—to perform a priestly role for Donne, becoming "a superintendent, an overseer, a bishop, to as many as hear his voice in this bell" (Expostulation XVII, p. 109).

[12]   For the sake of clarity, I have altered the punctuation of this quotation, inserting parentheses around phrases that, in the original, are offset only by commas. The full original sentence is: "O eternal and most gracious God, who hast been pleased to speak to us, not only in the voice of nature, who speaks in our hearts, and of thy word, which speaks to our ears, but in the speech of speechless creatures, in Balaam's ass, in the speech of unbelieving men, in the confession of Pilate, in the speech of the devil himself, in the recognition and attestation of thy Son, I humbly accept thy voice in the sound of this sad and funeral bell". For the biblical references in this sentence, see Num 22:22–35 (speech of Balaam's donkey); John 18:28–19:16 (speech of Pontius Pilate); and Matt 4:1–11, Mark 5:1–13, Luke 4:31–37 (speech of the devil).

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