

On Elkins and What To Do With His Ideas About Religious Art
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Why does fine art exclude contemporary religious art? Why do galleries/museums and their art world (criticism, business etc.) not admit work of an overtly religious nature? Is this a problem?

Elkins points out that if you view the whole gamut of art production as a level playing field, then this won't be a problem because fine art and religious art are just two mutually exclusive categories in a range that includes things like tourist art, graphic design, commercial art and children's art (p.2, OSPR). Each has its own sociological purpose and place. If, however, you interpret the gamut with hierarchical differences whereby 'influence usually runs in one direction, from fine art to other kinds of art' (p.3, OSPR), then a problem arises from the obvious absence of modern religious work as having any pioneering role, particularly when considering the fact that it used to.

This mode of 'influence' is one that Elkins situates in the particularly authoritative (if not universal?) concept of fine art as being bigger than, or outside merely sociological concerns: fine art lays claim to concerns such as 'quality, priority, significance, invention, art history: these are not contingent properties just because they are socially constructed to serve certain ends' (p.3, OSPR). These concerns are in fact the hub of an art world that rallies around these ideals and effects their dissemination – whether seen as their institutionalization in museums and academia (and associated business side), or as their eventual effect on the wider field of art.

At the heart of this image is the familiar polarized concept of high and low art, with the former's attached properties of authority being generally applied here to fine art: historically important, qualitatively superior, and unique. As this is an acknowledged framework in what Elkins goes on to consider, we would do well to divert here from his discussion about religious work in particular and ask what he means by fine art in its 'high' sense. It is crucial to understand that this concept is a heavily theorized one, by which I mean that we cannot escape it in the very project of writing about art. Applying words to any art observation will immediately effect judgment that calls on the properties of authority already mentioned. What is interesting about Elkins is the way in which he opens up the field of discussion so as to illuminate this polemic in operation and yet to move forward with it – *as writing*.

Elsewhere, Elkins describes his writing as 'American-style sociology' (p.173, MN), and he is widely known for drawing analyses from diverse fields, whether in subject matter or methodologies of criticism. He is interested in mapping not just varied cultural phenomena such as the use of illustrations in science theory but also in how these phenomena are digested and understood by the wider project of writing about art and images. What is the nature of the kind of 'double-mapping' that goes on with art history's assessment of the importance and boundaries of the initial object? To this extent, Elkins is always concerned about the broader perspective and in fact sees it as a project for art history to raise its eyes to 'larger problems' much in the manner of a physicist who keeps the idea of GUTs (grand unified theories) and TOEs (theories of everything) in front of or at least potentially connected to all smaller, localized enquiries.

In the current climate of art criticism, this is perhaps a call to courage, a call to strategic engagement with culture that is at once holistic *and* specific. It is certainly a challenge to the sort of sociology that would make a level playing field of all cultural enquiry, which we were introduced to earlier. It is also, however, a call that could be interpreted as hopelessly idealistic and generalized, one which may appear to be attempting to resurrect the theory of the grand narrative – indeed Elkins has placed special emphasis on the word narrative (as opposed to theory) to capture 'a kind of talking, or way of writing, that gives the century's art a shape, an overall structure, a form' (p.33, MN).

In the context in which he wrote this, he was pulled up by an art historian pointing out that the very exercise of identifying such narratives, or genealogies, is a modernist one and therefore constrained for being *inside* the wider reaches of the proposed field of enquiry. To this Elkins replies that, 'maybe it's a dogma in the humanities that the demonstration of the double bind is sufficient to cast doubt on an inquiry – but I would note that not every attempt to explain something from the inside is ruined by that fact alone' (p.174, MN).

In fact, this typical response of art history is one that places authority of interpretation in historiographic studies: that 'past ideas are constructions' (p.152, MN) peculiar to their time and place and so should never be claimed today for such overarching objectivity as suggested by 'narratives of art' or 'high/low' divisions of art. The point, however, for Elkins is that one does not assume objectivity by using such terms, nor does one despair in the acknowledgment of a subjective position within the theory, but rather that one permits 'ways of talking that allow a certain sense of culture to go forward with the project of understanding the past' (p.152, MN). In other words, we leave room for judgements about art to carry both inherent and historical baggage – in order the better to grapple with art's meaningfulness today.

This room, crucially, permits a certain seriousness to be brought to bear on contemporary ideas about how to do art writing: out of the fields of sociology and cultural studies (particularly during the '60s in Britain – Hall, Eagleton, Williams) comes the approach of visual studies, or visual culture – such as Elkins has described in 'Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction'. In short, this popular approach mixes theories of the sign/the gaze/seeing (among others) with sociology's methodologies and applies them to a heterogeneous array of subjects – from road signs to TV to installations. It often claims that there is no longer any division of high and low in culture and in so doing 'clear[s] the way to enjoy, consume, and study a fuller range of visual production' (p.152, MN).

From this perspective, one might well be able to approach a survey of religious visual culture which compares, for example, recent productions of the Passion story in film or TV with Renaissance paintings of the same subject. And while indeed there is some case for formal comparison, this is precisely based on the assumption of theoretical compatibility that precludes any notion of those fine art ideals which we met before. As Elkins may have put it, it's too 'easy' (p.63, VS).

So where does this leave us in our approach to examining the place of absented contemporary religious art? In the first place, I think it is to note that in picking up my pen and writing in such a considered manner as this, I am already siding with Elkins' assertion of the primacy of the fine art sphere, both in reality and in the theory surrounding it. That is to say, somewhere in my motives is a concern that modern religious work is not good enough, or perhaps not difficult enough, to be found in galleries and museums today. The thought in the background is that the question of *faith* has, for practitioners in art (and this is directed at myself too), no sharp edges other than the occasional reaction against religion (eg. Terence Koh's sculpture including Christ with an erection at the Baltic centre earlier this year).

However, almost as soon as I agree this separation between fine art and religious art on the basis of a certain 'high' quality, I am propelled by a sense of cultural levelling or equality, more in keeping with the project of visual studies, to acknowledge the plethora of modern religious work that *is* being made, whether on TV, in churches, in theatres, or in community projects such as *The Margate Exodus* in 2006. There is, I think, a validity in treating these efforts seriously, not in order to try to drag them into the fine art coterie by theorizing about them, but in order to *find out what's going on*. Is it possible that the sharp edge of faith is being wrestled with (or starting to be) outside the art gallery? What might this mean for its future? To what extent is this about the locus in contemporary society of spirituality, as opposed to organized religion?

I propose the following two directions: firstly, an examination of the fine art attitude to contemporary religious work as suggested by Elkins ('its North, South, East, West and center,' p.xii, OSPR), together with reference to the different status held by 'traditional' religious art in its history, and secondly an examination of the creation and reception of religious work not found in galleries – particularly its concept and theory of itself, as implied if not specifically outlined. Perhaps in this two-pronged approach we can enjoy the fruitful crossover between the high and the low (in both object and subject), benefitting from a tension that holds them together while yet maintaining some distance between them.

OSPR – 'On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art,' NY & London: Routledge, 2004
MN – 'Master Narratives and Their Discontents,' NY & London: Routledge, 2005
VS – 'Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction,' NY & London: Routledge, 2003