

Introduction

From its beginnings, artists have been participants in ESWTR-conferences, giving performances (e.g. Barbara Heinisch, Arnoldshain 1989, “Und ist noch nicht erschienen, was wir sein werden”), leading rituals (e.g. Caroline Mackenzie, Bristol 1991, “Ritual on the Labyrinth”), exhibiting their works (e.g. Sylvia Grevel, Soesterberg 2003), giving lectures (e.g. Benita Joswig, Budapest 2005, “Die alte Brücke von Mostar und die Macht der gespiegelten Welten”). Also, theologians have contributed articles and given lectures in the inter-context between art & theology (e.g. Annette Esser, ESWTR-Journal 2001, “Kreation und Performance: Zur Bedeutung der Kunst für die Gestaltung feministischer Liturgien”; Melissa Raphael, Winchester 2009, “Clouds of Glory: A Jewish perspective on the Angel of Beauty Moving over the Face of the Female Religious Subject”).

At the ESWTR-conference in Winchester 2009, a Subject group on “Art & Religion” was introduced. It was due to this group, led by artist-theologian Megan Clay, that Annette Esser suggested the theme of “Feminist Theology and Visual Art” for this 2011 ESWTR-Journal. In Winchester itself, women as different as Carol Christ (presenting Goddess spirituality), and, Angela Berlis (teaching Church History) supported this idea. In other words, art seems to be an acceptable theme mediating the spaces between for example esoteric wisdom and a theoretical development of feminist theology. Art may therefore take up a function in dialogue.

A basic decision for this volume was then to concentrate on the Visual Arts, and not to include all arts, e.g. also music and literature (themes that might be dealt with in later volumes). As soon as the theme was adopted, it began to unfold dynamically. Artists interested in religious and feminist issues (Caroline Mackenzie, Megan Clay), or theologians practicing art (Sylvia Grevel, Benita Joswig, Annette Esser et al) were called upon. A series of different contributions in the inter-context of feminist theology and art – sometimes controversially – were accepted.

The question of a justification of the religious application or interpretation of art was a frequent topic in the articles as well as in the dialogue and the conversations among the editors of the Journal, especially in regards to contemporary secular art. Asking in the opposite sense whether art is applicable to religion or whether images should be used at all in its practise – as in the historic (patriarchal!?) controversy on image-worship, or, in the demand for a moratorium of images in the practise of meditation – didn't appear to raise questions. Yet, an

emerging topic was the impact and the place that a growing number of women's religious artworks should have; that is art by women who do not receive much attention in the (post) modern art-scene and its economy, but rather develop their work on its margins. The basic agreement amongst the authors – namely that visual art should not any longer be regarded as a mere handmaiden to theology but has to be treated as an equal partner – therefore posed the question of how such a dialogue on a face to face level should best be realized!?

For an introductory article on the theme, some of the authors delightfully, accepted the invitation to join in an e-mail dialogue on “Feminist Theology & Visual Art.” This dialogue forms the first article of this book. Others have contributed articles on various themes, projects and women-artists who seem to be of importance between feminist theology & art and its ongoing dialogue.

Thanks to the methodological contribution of *Monika Leisch-Kiesl*, three dimensions of the relation of art to theology can be named that are especially relevant to contributors in this volume: namely (1) the religious perception of art; (2) the question of the religious artist; and (3) the works of art – also in form of a reception of their work by women theologians who approach this spiritually, academically and analytically.

As *Stefanie Knauss* and *Sylvia Grevel* suggest, contemporary art by the women artists, Tracy Emin and Marlene Dumas, can function as a source for (Christian) religious meaning; art as “locus theologicus” and as critical of social and cultural theories at the same time. In doing this the writers engage with the existing tensions within the post-secular era as feminist theologians and are critical of traditional theology, gender theory, art theory and also promote an internal criticism of feminist theology itself. This internal criticism is mainly concerned with body and gender theory and identity politics.

This critique can also be applied to religious art within a church-context – as in the case with *Spyridoula Athanasopoulo-Kypriou* who looks at Orthodox icons from a feminist-theological perspective.

Following these contributions dealing with feminist theory are two contributions deriving from a feminist theological practise. The article by *Silvia Martinez Cano* on the image of God in the teaching of religion at school can be positioned in the inter-context of feminist theology, art and a pedagogic of religion. *Annette Esser's* article on feminist theology and art therapy reflects an experience of three decades that she shares with many women interested in their own practise linking religion, feminism and creativity.

What follows in the “Forum” are three contributions dealing with two art exhibitions and a film. *Ursula Rudnick* reflects on the exhibition “Next Year

in Jerusalem” as a contribution to inter-religious dialogue. *Heike Knops* reports on a local exhibition in a church space in Wuppertal dealing with bio-medical interventions on the female body. And *Agnese Fortuno* reflects on the impacts of gender relations in the film “Hail Mary,” directed by Jean Luc Godard.

Under the rubric “Women’s Traditions in Europe” two articles deal with two Jewish women artists and their effort to come to terms with the Shoah. In writing about Dutch Jewish artist Judith Gor and her paintings “Women on the *Himmelstrasse*,” *Thalia Gur Klein* reflects on spirituality in the art of atrocity. In presenting the image of “left luggage” by Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon (born in Berlin 1917, killed in Auschwitz 1943), *Liesbeth Hoeven* explores the artist’s iconography of exile and the consequences of the fact that Charlotte Salomon succeeded in culturally developing herself by being excluded from public life due to the rise of Anti-Semitism.

It was an initial wish for this ESWTR-book to introduce women’s art work in it as well. Under the rubric “Work in progress” artists *Benita Joswig*, *Caroline Mackenzie* and *Megan Clay* present work that they have created and on which they reflect themselves in the inter-context between art, theology and feminism.

One concrete result of this book was also the suggestion that there should be an exhibition at the 2011 ESWTR-conference in Salamanca, Spain. In the event, four women contributed to this exhibition: *Silvia Martinez Cano*, *Megan Clay*, *Caroline Mackenzie* and *Annette Esser*. And, *Stefanie Knauss*, presented a lecture on “aisthesis.” This lecture plus the ongoing dialogue on art & religion generated a controversial discussion amongst the editors of this book. For this reason, we the editors of this Journal, have also decided to accept this lecture as an additional article. Yet, we should also say that neither the choice of certain artists (like Tracy Emin), nor any particular notion of art itself is based on our general agreement. What we agree upon is that various and different voices in this important debate should be heard. And, that whatever we present in this book, our mutual goal is to support our awareness of what we see and to feel encouraged to name it.

If we have managed in this Journal, to bring visual work and reflection from the margins into the centre of feminist theological reflection, then we have successfully completed our task.

We are happy that fittingly a Journal about Art is the one which introduces the cover change.

Annette Esser, Christine Gasser-Schuchter, Sylvia Grevel, Alison Jasper