

Dan Fox, catalogue essay, published in:

Andrea Büttner, I believe every word you say, argobooks, Berlin 2009

In 1918, the philosopher Bertrand Russell was imprisoned for several months for his involvement with the pacifist No-Conscription Fellowship, an organization that encouraged men to refuse military service. On Russell's arrival at Her Majesty's Prison Brixton, the warder at the gate registered his personal details. Russell recounted how 'He asked my religion, and I replied "agnostic." He asked how to spell it, and remarked with a sigh: "Well, there are many religions, but I supposed they all worship the same God." This remark kept me cheerful for about a week.'

There's more wisdom in the prison warder's theological gaff than one would initially think. Spiritual doubt is, after all, not a negation of belief, but a form of belief in itself. Only religious evangelicals brand atheists as 'non-believers', and only evangelic atheists sneer at those with religious convictions for having 'beliefs'. In our present age, the certitudes of science, the solace of consumerist materialism and media attention on the violent spasms of religious fundamentalism have alienated secular society from the idea that meditation on matters spiritual is even an acceptable thing for a 'normal' person to do these days. (It strikes me as odd that people are currently perhaps more suspicious of rabbis or priests who have spent their lives in quiet contemplation than celebrities whose accessorizing of world religions – a bit of kabbalah here, a little Shinto there – is somehow considered, if not acceptable, then merely lovably eccentric.) As hellfire preachers and radicalized imams duke it out centre stage with militant atheists and rabid rationalists, all shouting themselves hoarse with assertions that they and they only can lay claim to absolute truth, the idea that both the

secular and the religious world can learn from each other seems to be quietly slipping from sight.

Although it would perhaps like to think otherwise, one particular minority group once deeply entwined with religion, but now avowedly secular, is very much part of this process: the art world. With their cultural roots, economic and political power bases located in the still heavily Judeo-Christian countries of Europe and the USA, many of the various intellectual factions which go to make up this art world today regard religion as a subject for either art historians or for an artist's amateur anthropological analysis. It is interesting to note how religious belief is not currently regarded as a suitable subject for art – unless it is being viewed through, say, the lens of documentary video or satire – whereas some of the most vital lessons of the late 1960s, an era which is today venerated and idolized by younger generations of artists, curators and writers for its radicalism, have been forgotten – Marxist theoreticians being invited to lecture on dialectical materialism at Catholic seminaries in Rome, for instance, or clerics on the barricades in '68. It's fine to discuss how Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri name-checked Saint Francis of Assisi as a proto-revolutionary in their catechism for the anti-globalization movement, *Empire* (2000), but don't try telling anyone you're interested in Christianity. (Casuistry is as rife in art-critical discourse – or even the art market – as it is in any Jesuit order.)

However, like the atheist, agnostic and theist, the art world has its own belief system, its own mother discourse to which all others stay faithful or play recusant. Much to the surprise or disdain of its often self-absorbed parishioners, this discourse can seem impenetrable to those outside it – like a strange liturgy spoken in a foreign tongue, as obscure as any Latin Tridentine high mass. To many, the art world can appear to be a closed

order. It is this perspective on it that gives Andrea Büttner's work a charge not immediately apparent in the modest and self-effacing surfaces of her delicate, HAP Grieshaber-esque woodcuts, screenprints, archives (of artist nuns and dancing nuns) and hand-held video documentaries. Often hung against heavy brown walls – walls the colour of mud, of chocolate, of a Franciscan monk's habit – Büttner's work makes a confessional virtue of the equivalences between the practice of making and interpreting art, and the practices of Christian religious orders maintaining and interpreting their faith: be they nuns whose work has famously been associated with art, such as in the activism of Sister Corita Kent or the television art history programmes presented by Sister Wendy Beckett, or those whose daily lives are structured in ways that strangely echo those of the contemporary art community.

This is perhaps most clearly articulated in Büttner's video *Little Works*, for which the artist gave a group of Carmelite nuns in a closed convent in west London a video camera in order for them to document their life, in particular the creation of 'little works' – small votive offerings made by each nun in the form of craft works, traditionally made for certain feast days. Aside from loose parallels which could be drawn between processes of peer approval, collaboration, value, interpretation, criticism, hobbyism and the latent creative impulse in both the art world and in religious orders, *Little Works* is also, in a sense, about Büttner allowing other people to make the work for her – a gesture of ambivalence that enables the artist to avoid claiming responsibility for aesthetic decision-making. Avoiding making those decisions is a form of avoiding the shame of art as a confessional statement of intent, inasmuch as any art practice is about confession of one kind or another; the realization, in concrete form, of one person's position on

the world, no matter how ambiguous or devoid of emotional content a work may seem. And shame, as Büttner has suggested, is very similarly structured to criticism: it is 'I in the eyes of you'. When art is as contested as any matter of personal faith, and can be used as a blueprint for living as much as any religious order uses its spiritual beliefs, who has the authority to speak about art? That, Büttner's work suggests, is a matter for discussion between you and your God, whether that God exists or doesn't.