

Eternal life in a digital world

Fri, May 22, 2009

Ritual, immortality, repetition – where can they all now be found? The answer, according to Boris Groys, is in digital media, the catalyst, he argues, for the global comeback of religion. He talks to **BELINDA MCKEON**.

BORIS GROYS, the Berlin-born philosopher of art, religion and the media, knows that it's not easy to listen to his lectures. He doesn't mind. In fact, he welcomes that difficulty into the lecture hall. Which is not to say that Groys, who currently holds professorships at both New York University (NYU) and at Karlsruhe, Germany, is unsympathetic to the trials of his audience or that he casts a cold eye on their fractured attention spans and drowsing heads. For Groys, who has always been interested in the ways the artistic and the aesthetic manifest themselves beyond the confines of the traditional art world, the slumber realm of the lecture hall offers a perfect opportunity to create something that is, in itself, a work of art.

Enter Groys's propensity for the video lecture, in which he combines his own discourse with a collage of selected historical and film extracts circling and hovering around his chosen theme.

"It's like lecture-dreaming," Groys says, sitting in a cafe close to his office at NYU. "If people are listening to a lecture, they are always half-asleep. And there is a kind of flow of images that streams through their imagination as they listen. So what I show in my video is what I would like them to see if they would be half-asleep. I want to design the dreams when they sleep during my lectures."

But at the Model Arts and Niland Gallery in Sligo tomorrow, Groys can be assured of a wakeful audience when he gives a public talk to open the exhibition, *Medium Religion*, which will include two of his own most recent video-lecture projects, *Religion as Medium* (2006) and *The Immortal Bodies* (2007), and will also include work by more than 30 other contemporary artists from around the world, including Paul Chan, Barbad Golshiri and Christoph Büchel. What is likely to keep the west awake is the provocative clout of Groys's statements about religiosity in the age of digital media, and about the relationship of religious extremism to contemporary art practice.

Religion has made a searing comeback in today's world, Groys argues, emerging as the deciding factor in political and cultural situations all over the globe. And the reason – and the medium – lies, for a large part of many of our days, beneath our very fingers, in front of our flickering stares: the computer keyboard, the internet browser, the webcam, the YouTube video, the jpeg image. It's with digital images which can travel the world in a matter of seconds that religious movements today primarily operate, that they create their visual propaganda.

The "return of religion" in which Groys believes has nothing to do with a surge in worship, but with the surge in visual communications which has allowed religions to move from the cultural margins back into the mainstream. "The modern age," he writes in a recent essay, *Religion in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, "has not been the age in which the sacred has been abolished, but rather the age of its dissemination in profane space, its democratisation, its globalisation."

ONCE UPON A time, according to Groys, ritual and repetition were "matters of religion"

practiced in sacred spaces, involving ceremony, scripture, scrolls which passed down and canonised belief. But now, with ritual and repetition at the heart of everything we do, with media channels steering and shaping us in everything we see and share and say, a fundamental change has occurred. This, Groys believes, has given unprecedented strength to religion. And it is fundamentalist religions, he argues, which are strengthened more than any other. Because at the heart of fundamentalism, he says, are the ritual acts of repeating and reproducing the basis of a religion.

“The fundamentalist is a person who insists not on a set of opinions, but on a set of rituals and on the faithful reproduction of that set of rituals,” he says. The true fundamentalist, he argues, does not care about notions of fidelity to truth; truth is seen, rather, as inaccessible, incommunicable. This is not science, this is obedience. And what matters is how correct and unvarying the ritual, in its performance, must be.

“Fundamentalism is a decision taken in favour of sameness over difference,” says Groys.

“Religion has always been stimulated by a desire to escape time, to overcome mortality, to get access to eternity, to immortality, to transcend time. And transcending time has to do with repetition, with erasing the time flow and time change between the original and the copy, with insisting that they are both the same. And if I insist that they are different, for example that this Catholic Mass is not identical to the previous Catholic Mass, then I put myself, as most of us do, under the control of time. So I become modern, or contemporary.

“I look at things from the perspective of changing design, changing fashion, and so on. And I am rewarded with a better sense of modernity. But I lose my relationship to immortality, and to faith. Because immortality is intimately connected with the concept of repetition. And if there is no repetition, there is no promise of immortality.”

This is where the internet and digital media enter the picture, and where they keep reinforcing the picture, over and over. In his book *Art Power*, published last year by MIT Press, Groys talks about the exclusion of propaganda – the art, for example, of former socialist and communist states – from the contemporary art scene, the way in which propaganda, because of its lack of value as a commodity, has never been taken seriously in the art world. In the actions of religious movements which use the internet to install and spread propaganda and to make a global impact, he sees an aggressive, inevitable turning of the tables.

“The ways in which contemporary religious movements, including fundamentalist movements, represent themselves in the media, the visual worlds they create, are not at all unlike the means that contemporary artists use,” says Groys. “Collage, photography, video. They are moving in the same space, using the same means, as artists. People say that Islam isn’t modern, because it doesn’t allow the creation or production of images. But actually Islam is postmodern, because it allows the use or the reproduction of images. So actually, Islam is absolutely on the same wave as contemporary art.”

Many of the works in *Medium Religion* explore this connection and the challenge it poses to contemporary art. Joshua Simon’s video collage, *Shahids*, for example, considers the aesthetics of video messages by suicide bombers, and the particular confidence and authority the medium gives to these initially fearful young recruits. Barbad Golshiri’s video installation, *mAmI*, uses a projection of eight young women in Iranian school uniforms, and a television screening of a six-year-old professional mourner, to reflect on the impact of visual media on traditional religion.

Moving to another tradition, Israeli artist Nira Pereg's film, *Sabbath 2008*, is a slow and careful observation of the ritualistic closing-off of Jerusalem's ultra-orthodox neighbourhoods on the eve of the Sabbath. It is a scene which replicates itself each Friday evening, but is also a digital capturing that is unique.

Meanwhile, a piece which has already been causing a stir in Sligo, according to Model Arts and Niland curator Seamus Kealy, is Sang-Kyoon Noh's *Twin Jesus Christs* (2001), which are visible through the main gallery windows and have been drawing their share of curious glances.

ONE OF GROYS'S most striking statements about the proximity of fundamentalism and modern media technology has to do with the power – the imagined power, perhaps, but the power nonetheless – of digital imagery, and in particular of the digital video. The origin of digital images, he argues, is much like the origin of divine messages, difficult to trace and generated by means of something we can never see, or hold, or truly know in any sense.

“The digital image file,” argues Groys, “functions as an angel, as an invisible messenger transmitting a divine command.”

The image itself, he says, functions more like an icon, the visible, material representation of the invisible. So the digital image, in other words, has the exact character of a religious ritual. In the act of recording a digital video – a suicide confession, a threat, a piece of recruitment propaganda, a declaration of war or worship – and in the promise of its future repeated performances is the act of ritual, of connection to the invisible, which guarantees a sort of immortality. It's this new immortality, intimately linked to the power of the digital, which new religious movements offer their recruits. It's a substitution, says Groys, of the old spiritual immortality, the world beyond this one, with a technical immortality of this world, an eternal repetition seen and heard across the globe.

It's a substitution, Groys suggests, that he himself finds not so difficult to understand. After all, he makes a living trying to persuade sometimes reluctant viewers and listeners of his own beliefs, his own messages.

“Yes, if you're lecturing for a long time,” he says, with the trace of a grin, “you begin to think about substituting your voice, your presence, by a video. You always have a feeling that your face, your voice, your figure, are not capable of constraining the attention of the public.”

So it's back to the creation of the dreamworld, “where you are subjected not only to the influence of the voice but also the stream of images. And everybody says it is even more difficult to react to that. Because they are used to either listening to the voice, or looking at the images. Not both. They find it difficult to correlate the two. They have to concentrate. But I like this complaint. Because that's precisely the kind of concentration that I would like to provoke. Where you can't just relax, where the relationship begins to be more complicated, difficult to concentrate on – and I like that.”

Medium Religion is at the Model Arts and Niland Gallery (Model Satellite space, Castle Street), Sligo, from Sunday until Aug 16. Boris Groys's public talk is tomorrow at 5pm in the Clarion Hotel, Sligo; modelart.ie

© 2009 The Irish Times