

The End of Religion Is the Beginning of Art

By Sinziana Ravini

WheredoIendandyoubegin?

Göteborg International Biennial for
Contemporary Art, Gothenburg
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Basim Magdy, *They Endorsed Collective Failure as the Dawn of a New Renaissance*, 2013.

During a doctoral dinner in Heidelberg in the spring of 2001, I sat next to the founder of modern hermeneutics, Hans Georg Gadamer. He was 101 years old. An entire century sat beside me, literally, and I wanted to make the most of it, although I didn't quite know how. Finally I asked him «What do you think should be the most important question for philosophy today?» Gadamer became completely silent. Everyone at the table waited in suspense for his answer. At last, he replied solemnly: «The single most important question for philosophy today should be: how do we live at peace with each other, despite of our religious and ideological differences?»

While viewing the 8th edition of the Gothenburg International Biennial of Contemporary Art, I realized that Gadamer's question epitomized the most pressing dilemma of secularity, the theme of this year's exhibition. Secularity derives from the latin «saeculum» which means «of a generation» or «of a century», implying an interesting tension between the religious desire for eternity and the modern passion for the present. But what does secularity mean more concretely? Freedom from religion, but also freedom to exercise one's faith as long as it doesn't interfere with the faith of others. Considering the great comeback of religiosity in our time, curator Nav Haq couldn't have chosen a more urgent theme.

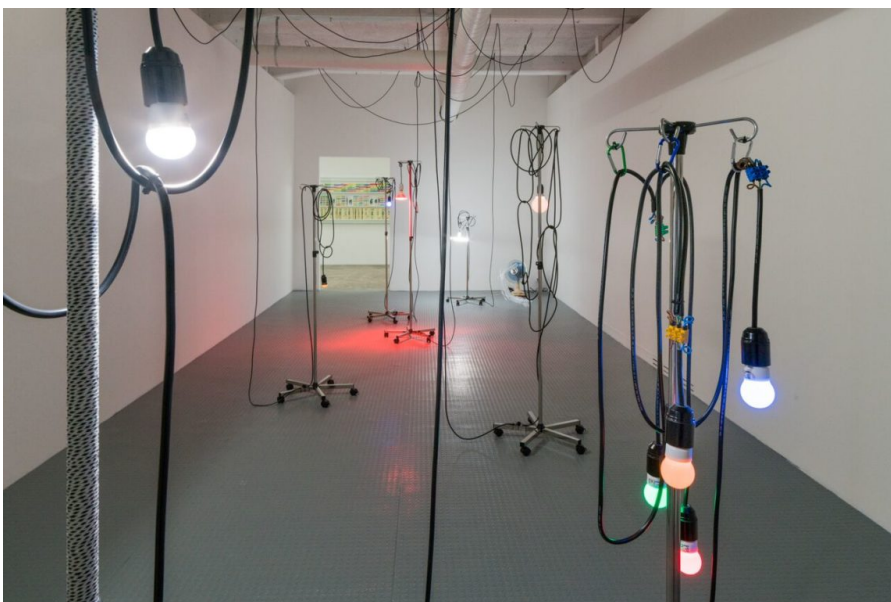


Fahd Burki, *Optimist*, 2012.

The biennial's slightly claustrophobic title, *Wheredolendandyoubegin?* adds a psychoanalytical dimension to the very core of human interaction. In other words, the stage is set for a compelling biennial – an agora of dramatic frictions and bonds. Not least, this should be an opportunity to illuminate something that we have always known, but have been unable to deal with, namely that secular humanism is itself a belief with rituals and symbols of its own.

Yet the disparity between the aspirations of the biennial and the result couldn't be greater. This biennial is one of the most bland art events I've ever experienced. It's like a quiz walk organized by the youth league of the Swedish Church, in other words far from the agora, scandals and renegotiations, with works that are informative rather than discursive. Take for example *Sicherheit* (2017), Saskia Holmkvist's parafictional film about the Swedish weapon export, made in collaboration with Ellen Nyman and Corina Oprea. Although Holmkvist is one of Sweden's most interesting artists, I learn nothing new by watching this film. Its reflections about German sociologist Ulrich Beck, who contends that when faced with choosing between democracy and security people will always choose security, is although admittedly crucial left unchallenged like many others statements in the film. And when the filmmakers hang their cardboard model of a weapon on the living room wall, the effect is simple irony in the bad sense.

Neither is there any tension to speak of between works. It is as though Nav Haq has chosen to arrange the works according to a throw of the dice. Regarding the friction between spirituality and secularity, the biennial would have done well to include a bad guy or two capable of stirring the exhibition space and the conversations. Instead, Nav Haq has comfortably chosen Fahd Burki's Paul Klee inspired geometric figures – including, however, an interesting work called *The Shape of Punishment* that looks like a Klu Klux Klan mask sculpted by Brancusi – and crammed them next to a few of Hilma af Klint's sketchbooks encapsulated in a vitrine. And in the Masthugg Church are Alexander Tovborg's paintings that weaves together the mythologies of Europe with the Syrian conflict.



Haegue Yang, *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements*, 2006/2017. Photo: Hendrik Zeitler.

These are conceptually well wrought decorative art works, yet why not supplement the exhibition with an artist like Cristel Büchel who caused an uproar a few years ago by building a mosque inside a catholic church? Why not include Andres Serrano, Lars Vilks or, even better – Dorinel Marc. Marc has been deposited in the biennial's archive section at the city library, where one of his most innocuous works is on view. It is a video work from the 1990's that shows a street musician singing in front of a large poster ad with the message: «The danger is past, how lucky that someone believes in Sweden». Yes indeed, better to sweep the dangers under the carpet so that we can keep our faith in Sweden.

Speaking of bad boys, where are all the bad girls? Where are all the women who have challenged the confinements of religion? The list can be made long, but to keep it simple I'll take only one example. Would Nav Haq have risked to exhibit an artist such as Louzla Darabi, whose work *Scène d'amour* was shown at the Museum of World Culture a few years back? The painting represented a couple making love with the first verses of the Quran written at the top edge of the image. The artist sought to demonstrate how even the ecstasy of physical love can form a path to God, because if God loves man, by extension he should love what she loves, namely the act of love. This move caused the indignation of a number of muslims, which in turn lead the museum's director at the time, Jette Sandahl, to remove the work. When museums adjust to a loud minority, they simultaneously ignore all the muslims who have fled their country to enjoy democratic rights. When curators censor themselves beforehand, well, then they hardly deserve to be called curators.

The catalog includes a conversation where Nav Haq in a very avoiding and cowardly manner says: «There will be a work we most probably won't show because of fear from some of what response it might get». What work is he referring to? We'll never know, since the conversation quickly moves on to the next topic. How does Haq struggle for secular society and artistic freedom? By exhibiting the historical caricatures of jewish people at Röda Sten? Is Haq unaware that Sweden has dealt with this dark history countless times? Why open this recently re-opened wound yet again?



Rose Bothwick at Röda Sten Konsthall. Photo: Hendrik Zeitler.

Certainly one can argue that the ambition of the biennial is not to show works that are critical of religion, but works criticizing the notion of non-religious secularity. Yet as far as I can tell, there is only one work that really deals with secular society's hidden religiosity: Eva Linder's documentary exhibited at the city library, about a woman who has worked all her life at the Swedish Tax Agency. She is so possessed and fascinated by the tax agency that she has tattooed their logo on her buttock. Where are the works that seriously critique the fundamentalism of Enlightenment?

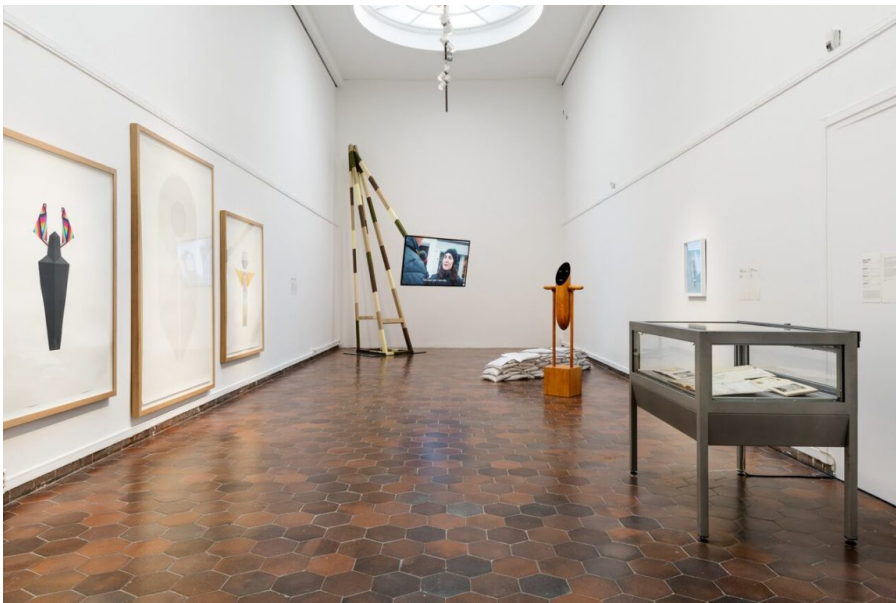
My disappointment does not, however, keep me from appreciating a number of works such as Dimitri Venkov's documentary about the tragic life of a black man and his family in Russia's deeply racist society. I am truly touched by the young daughter, who answers racist attacks by saying she was sunbored during vacation. And Rose Borthwick's staging of a mormon chapel with pink benches, surrounded by paintings of the archipelago and the surreal film *In But Not Of*, is among the most uncanny and solid works I have seen about the obscure connections between art and religion.



Installation view from Röda Sten Konsthall. Photo: Hendrik Zeitler.

Likewise Joakim Forsgren's installation at Göteborg's Konsthall, *The Resurrection of Carolus Rex*, which makes King Karl XII of Sweden appear as a castrated mystic, is skillfully made and multifaceted in its play with punk arte povera and surreptitious sectarian aesthetic. Another work that captures the mutual attraction between anarchism and neo-spirituality is Carl Michael von Hausswolff's och Leif Elggren's micro-nation Elgaland-Vargaland, which in this rendition offers visitors the opportunity to be crowned as kings and write their own constitutions. One even gets the option to be elevated to God over oneself, which I accept. I eat the sacramental bread, spit it out in the plastic cup behind the voting booth, sign the document and go merrily on my way. It's not everyday that one gets the chance to become one's own god. It is a good thing that art seeks to deliver us from the yoke of religion, but does it have to subject us to domination by the self?

On my way out into the city, I encounter an election poster with a priest on call. Call 911. At first I think it's a work in the biennial, but I soon realize that there is a church election coming. This makes the poster even more absurd. How secular is Sweden, really? In France, a poster like this would have caused an outrage. All things considered I am prepared, like Bengt Kristensson Ugglå who is one of many thought provoking writers included in the biennial catalog, to view secularity as a moderate form of Christianity. I look forward to a time when religions will give way to art, because art contains all the promises any religion can offer: spirituality, beauty, moral categories such as right and wrong and, indeed, eternal life. And besides, as far as I know, no one has yet killed in the name of art.



Installation view from Göteborgs konsthall. Photo: Hendrik Zeitler.