

## INTERVIEWS

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### Who's Afraid of Religion?

Koken Ergun in conversation with Omar Kholeif



Koken Ergun, *Ashura*, 2012, film still.  
Courtesy the artist.

In this interview, artist Koken Ergun discusses contemporary art's relationship to religion. The conversation raises pertinent questions, including the issue of whether the institution of contemporary art is constructed as a secular one that ghettoizes artists who explore religion and ritual in their work. Ergun discusses these complexities and contradictions by mapping out historical relationships between visual culture and religion, ultimately begging the question: has the institution of the art world become so subsuming that it has stripped artists of a particular agency?

**Omar Kholeif:** I want to begin by talking about religion in your work. You've mentioned before that you think that this is a taboo subject in contemporary art. Why do you think this is the case when nothing else seems to be off limits?

**Koken Ergun:** There is a very complicated relationship between contemporary art and religion and I don't think it is being discussed enough. Once, Boris Groys came out and said contemporary art is godless. And only recently did Kaelen Wilson-Goldie write this challenging text about contemporary art's timidity when it comes to religion.

On my part, well, first of all, it is not a taboo. But I think religion seems to be a subject that is rather absent and naturally avoided in contemporary art. I tend to look for the reasons for this in the personality of people who make or shape contemporary art. Since I started working in this field, my personal feelings and observations have been that people who are working in what we call 'contemporary art' are dominantly living secular lifestyles. Religion is absent in their lives, so it is probably natural that it is not that present in the vocabulary of actors in the field. On the contrary, one can argue another perspective: that it *is* present but rather one sided. We do see quite a few works of art that display a clear opposition to religious structures and phenomena, but do we see works that embrace religion or systems of belief?

**OK:** Why do you think that is?

**KE:** I think there is a serious disconnect between the world of contemporary art and that which we might deem to be sacred. It might be because contemporary art provenance coincides with the rise of secularism in the western world. It may be because it came about at a time when humanity almost destroyed itself in two world wars, neither of which was directly related to religion. Or is it because contemporary art – as a critical sphere – has always been reactionary to the social orders that have predominantly operated around religion?

**OK:** It seems that you are building up to the idea of artistic subjectivity.

**KE:** Aren't artists known to be more inclined to emotional and spiritual things? If so, what makes religion and spirituality so different in the eyes of contemporary art and its artists? Why is it acceptable in particular social circles to say, 'I am spiritual', but not to say, 'I am religious'? Is it because of the excess baggage religion has accumulated in the past centuries, in that it evolved from pure belief into a massive juggernaut of power structures? Should this stop us from negotiating with anything religious at all? Don't we then betray the criticality of contemporary art, which is perhaps its most genuine character, if we relegate everything religious or everyone religious? It makes me sad to witness prejudice against religion and especially religious people within these circles.

**OK:** Could you give us some examples of this prejudice?

**KE:** For example, in Turkey and the wider Middle East where a majority of the public are not leading secular lifestyles, their artists and especially institutions of contemporary art choose to emphasize their secular nature. They do not programme exhibitions or events that could open different perspectives to such a prevailing issue in their society. Aren't they accordingly excluding a big social group in their society? Do these institutions or actors fear stigmatization for

being *religious*? Why do they develop such an allergy to religion or religious subjects? I think this attitude could be deemed an allergy. For example, try using the words *inshallah* in a catalogue text or during an installation/institutional meeting in this geography. I do, and I often get sarcastic reactions. Sometimes it is the curators who give this type of reaction, sometimes directors and other institutional workers, sometimes artists. Occasionally the question follows with an unbelieving but sympathetic smile: 'Are you *religious*?'. This kind of allergic attitude to anything religious feeds from and also contributes to prejudice.



Koken Ergun, *Ashura*, 2012, film still.  
Courtesy the artist.

There is like an invisible wall that holds religion, religious topics or the so-called religious artists outside the control zones of contemporary art institutions in this region. Is it because of their directors or their funders? What about their audience? Are they not responsible for this polarization at all? A few months ago, at an opening of an Istanbul art institution, founded and directed by a woman wearing a headscarf, I was introduced to a guest who was not an artist herself. While we were greeting each other, the (headscarfed) director passed by and the guest whispered loudly to me: 'I hate these *things!*', implying her. I told her she was the director, but it didn't seem to make any effect on her.

**OK:** To what extent do you feel religion is an institution, and how do you view religion's historical relationship with art?

**KE:** Well, first of all I believe that religion preceded culture. Also, it had aesthetic importance. It always brought with it a certain kind of visual culture. Historically, the relationship of art and religion has always been a productive one, not counterproductive. They still mingle. We see it in Indonesia, in Muslim Java, where religious rituals – once attributed to pre-Islamic traditions and then appropriated according to Islam – gracefully blend with local puppet theatre. We see it in East Africa, where tribes continue to develop their own music and set of movements for rituals attributed to different deities, even if most are now practicing monotheist religions introduced to them by the occupying west or Arabs. The people of Bali believe that if God gave them a talent, such as a good voice, skilful hands or a good physique, they must use and display their talents as a thanksgiving to God. They do not see it as art only. It also continues to be

this way in the west, in some forms of art, but those forms of art are not considered to be in the same league with contemporary arts. We are to blame for this polarization. It seems like the Enlightenment has corrupted us.

And yes, religion was probably the first institution.

**OK:** Do you see a difference between how religion has played a role in creative practices, or in art history, in Turkey and the wider Middle East and the western world? How do you see these two institutions colliding today – the notion of organized religion, and the contemporary art world in its global incarnation as a network of art fairs, biennials, galleries and foundations?

**KE:** The Enlightenment was a game changer in the relationship of arts and religion. It forced art and religion into a divorce. Today, western culture – which contemporary art is a child of – is clearly dominated by the ideas of the Enlightenment and so the divorce has its strongest effects here. Some view the Enlightenment as a religion itself. If that's the case, one could argue that the new religion did not want the old ones to survive. But they all do, unfortunately. As I said, contemporary art can treat other forms of art in a patronizing way. In this way, it resembles both the Enlightenment and religion.

The cultural revolutions of the new nation states that occurred in our region following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire were all pivoted by a social elite that was trained in the west. Therefore, a rather late appropriation of western modernism happened here. We are still experiencing the side effects of this. Since this elite still holds key positions in the art world, whatever happened in the west after the Enlightenment – in terms of art and religion – also happened here. So contemporary art and religion *are* colliding today both in the so-called East and West.

**OK:** Is art a religion in itself, in that it tends to operate as an institution and through institutions?

**KE:** Contemporary art is institutionalizing at a fast and worrying pace, but this should not mean that it is a religion. I think for something to be considered a religion, what is more important than being or having an institution is how essential it is to have an unconditional belief in something abstract or something not easily explained or proven. In fact, in any given religion there is not a pressing need to define the supreme being or order, rather it is taken for granted. In this sense, science can never be a religion for example, because it is doing exactly the opposite. But art is closer to religion in that sense. This is why the pairing of art and religion seems to me more interesting than the pairing of art and science. You could say that some forms of art are religion-like, in that it has a set of rituals and devoted followers, such as opera or club music ('God is a DJ'). But in general, art is something that developed in close contact with religion, but it is not a religion on its own. Specifically, contemporary art is unique in this way, because its distance from religion characterizes it.

**OK:** What kind of place does religion have in the discussion around future arts institutions, infrastructures and audiences, particularly in the MENA?

**KE:** It could be dealt with like any other topic. And I wish it would develop naturally and organically, because if the state, or let's say ruling governments,

starts to insert religion into this sphere, I think it would be very problematic. For example, here in Turkey the current AKP government has already hinted at something called 'conservative arts' indicating – perhaps – stronger state support for projects or institutions that produce art that would please their voters. But the nature of this plan (if it really is a plan) is absolutely unclear and if it involves state control over this delicate topic, then it posits immense dangers. The region is still prone to modern dictatorships, be it through a person who was democratically elected or through lineage, and if they try to dictate their way (whatever way it would be) into culture it would only be harmful to artistic production and reception, and by this I mean the audience.

On the other hand, I have been observing that most institutions in the Arab world tend to support more Arab artists. For example, Iranian or Turkish artists are not so much included in that circle. This gives a picture to the outside that Arab art institutions are primarily endorsing Sunni Arab art, which is a pity. The issue is really not about me, but I have experienced it first hand: when a curator in Dubai – where the state is the main funder of art institutions – wanted to show my work *Ashura* (2012), which deals with a Shiite religious ritual, it was problematic for her to programme it because anything related to Iran would be potentially seen as unfavourable. Again, when she wanted to show my work about the beauty pageants of Filipino guest workers in Israel (*Binibining Promised Land*, 2009–10), the fact that it took place in Israel was a problem. That is an example for you of the state being too involved in terms of religious or cultural sensitivity.



Koken Ergun, *Ashura*, 2012, film still.  
Courtesy the artist.

**OK:** Do you know of alternative examples in (contemporary) art where religion is acceptable?

**KE:** There are, but I think they are coming more from the artists than the institutions. And interestingly, artists whose religiously or spiritually informed works are exhibited in and acknowledged by major institutions are often ones who have already been accepted by the art world: Bill Viola, Huang Yong Ping, and so on. I will never forget when I first saw Wael Shawky's 2005 work *The Cave* in which he was almost prophetically reciting verses of the Qur'an inside a supermarket in Amsterdam. It was pretty strong and while many people were

laughing at it at that year's Istanbul Biennial, I took it quite seriously. I wondered if this work would find wider audiences. Luckily it did, but when I read texts about the work I realized only few writers actually commented on its factual importance in terms of Islam. Most read it as a sarcastic work, but years later in Berlin, when Wael told me that he had become a devout Muslim, I smiled. It was obvious. He was not joking in *The Cave*.

**OK:** Your work is also very much about ritual, but also the rituals that are involved and invoked by religion. Is this correct?

**KE:** More so recently. Prior to my last video work *Ashura*, I was examining more profane rituals, such as state rituals of the Turkish republic (*I, Soldier* and *The Flag*; 2005 and 2006) or beauty pageants of Filipino guest workers in Israel (*Binibining Promised Land*). However, looking back at them now, I realize that the rituals they portrayed somehow hold a connection to religion. While the former appropriated ancient, sacred rites for a deity into rituals for a 'religion of the state', the latter casually inserted Catholic church services into a beauty pageant, and such a twisted one! A pageant of very religious Filipino maids staged in a night-club housed in the murky depths of a giant bus terminal in Tel Aviv; a secular enclave in a country so heavily describing with a 'members only' type religion.

**OK:** Your work often involves intense proximity with subjects: friendships are formed and you are let into other worlds, as is the case in *Binibining Promised Land*. How do you negotiate this proximity?

**KE:** It grows naturally. It is part of my character to develop warm relationships with people I have only just met, especially if they are from different social strata. This is probably something I got from my mother, who as a state bank branch manager used to sit down with her subordinates at lunch instead of her co-workers. At acting school, I used to couple mostly with classmates who were almost ousted by our fancy, half-British, diva, actress/teacher. I always protected scorned drivers who were listening their music perhaps a bit too loud in their minibus against the uptight Republican ladies who couldn't stand this 'uncivilized' folk music in a public transport vehicle.

It was similar with the Filipino maids in Israel. We met at the church for the first time, where I was joining the communion. Then I started strolling in their neighbourhood, a part of Tel Aviv where many Israeli friends of mine would only pass by, and a great majority of Tel Avivites simply tried to avoid. It was here I came across the poster for their beauty pageant with a mobile number on it. It only took a phone call to reach one of the most influential figures in their community. And she – James is a transvestite – gradually introduced me to the rest of the community, who all warmly accepted me as their friend. During their off days – Saturday evening into Sunday evening – we would first hang out at various makeshift churches in the neighbourhood, then go party inside that bus terminal well into Sunday morning. In between, they were performing a lot of community work as well as their pageants, so I filmed them. After deciding to do something with the footage, I asked some of the girls how I should edit the film. The scrolling subtitles – at the bottom of the video, in big pink letters – were their idea for example.

**OK:** In terms of your practice, it often involves a lengthy period of time and research. You have said it takes you roughly a year to produce a project. How does this work formally for you? What ecologies have supported your practice? Do you find this way of working difficult to sustain?

**KE:** Actually, it is more than a year, sometimes two, even three years; *WEDDING* (2006–2008) and *Ashura* were both two years in the making, *Binibining Promised Land* was three. It's not difficult at all and I enjoy it immensely. In fact, I think this durational process is the ideal way of working on subjects like these. It's good to go back and forth while developing the work. I mean, I used to go to Israel or the Shiite neighbourhood in Istanbul, back and forth, even after the shootings.

Work always starts with a personal curiosity and then I gradually get drawn into it. It never starts with a concrete idea. First, I observe and mingle for a long time. I don't film during this period. When I feel we are becoming friends, at the level of being confidants for each other, then I start. Some of the most memorable moments of my life were during working with those groups. I have learned some of the most valuable things in life from them. I become emotionally attached to them. Perhaps, this is the hardest point, because after a while, we both know that I will go back to my own life. But we remain in contact, as much as possible. The Shiite community in Istanbul for example, who I made *Ashura* with, bestowed upon me an honorary prize in one of their celebrations this year for promoting their culture to the international community.

**OK:** A lot of your work focuses on marginalized characters, but I don't think you are actually talking about their status as being marginalized, but rather, you are celebrating them. Is this a fair assessment?

**KE:** Totally.

**OK:** Have you felt that the context of Istanbul has been supportive of developing your practice or is it under-resourced? And as such, this is why you have required/needed to work in Germany?

**KE:** On the contrary, I think that Istanbul is actually over-resourced and very stimulating. That is why I often call it 'Istanbul Empire'. I just needed to change cities and at that time Berlin seemed to be the most plausible option, so I went. After six years of great and productive time in that city I am moving back to Istanbul. There was only one piece I felt able to shoot in Berlin, and that was, *WEDDING*, about the wedding ceremonies of the Turkish/Kurdish community living there. The other pieces I have produced while being based in Berlin were all shot elsewhere and only edited there. Berlin is still an excellent place to make post-production. It always gives me that state of concentration but it is poor in action, as well as spirit. I had my first minor depression while living in that city.

**OK:** What institutions have been particularly useful to you, building up this practice? Have any, indeed, shaped or formed your practice or has it been autonomous?

**KE:** I can name three major ones, The Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), where I worked for almost 10 years and who produce all the major Istanbul festivals, such as film, theatre and music, as well as the Istanbul Biennial and Robert Wilson's Watermill Center, where I was an active member of the 'core team' who continued to work with him for many years – earlier, most artists gradually opted out. Finally, Platform (now SALT) in Istanbul, which helped a generation of Turkish artists like me.

It was at IKSV I learned different forms of art from first-hand experience working with visiting artists, all leaders in their field. I also obtained most of my production skills while working there. The Watermill Center was a life changing experience, which probably turned me into the communal and intercultural creature I am today. It was like the school I never had, but it was not a school. We learned through experience, not with teaching. It was so amazing that at some point I think it even went beyond Bob's imagination. Every summer, some 50 participants, each from different countries from all over the world, would make a unique community and its effects would exceed the centre and stay with us wherever we went, for years. At Platform, Vasif Kortun also created a similar environment for local artists where experience and friendship shaped us. In that sense, Platform was not only an art institution – it was a laboratory, with room for failure, mistakes, love, parties ... the works, especially the hilarious residency floor, which was sort of a Chelsea Hotel – more than your usual residency. I think I learned more from these institutions than any school I have been to.

**Köken Ergun** was born in Istanbul in 1976. Ergun studied acting at Istanbul University and completed his postgraduate diploma studies in Classics at King's College London, followed by an MA in Visual Communication Design from Bilgi University. After working with the American theatre director Robert Wilson, Ergun became more involved in contemporary art, specifically video and performance. He has exhibited internationally at various institutions including; Platform Garanti (Istanbul), KIASMA Museum of Contemporary Arts (Helsinki), Sparwasser HQ (Berlin), Digital ArtLab (Tel Aviv), the Museum of Contemporary Arts Taipei, Casino Luxembourg, Art in General (New York), and the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam. His video work has been screened at various film festivals, including Oberhausen, Rotterdam, Sydney and Zagreb. He was the 2007 recipient of the Tiger Award of the Rotterdam Film Festival for his short film *The Flag*.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Omar Kholeif

**Omar Kholeif** is an Egyptian-born, UK curator, writer and editor. He is Curator at The Whitechapel Gallery, London, Curator at Large at Cornerhouse and HOME, Manchester and Senior Editor of Ibraaz. Previously he was Head of Art and Technology at SPACE, London and Curator at FACT, Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, Liverpool. Kholeif has also been Artistic Director at the Arab British Centre and founding director of the UK's Arab Film Festival. In 2012, he was a co-curator of the Liverpool Biennial.

Omar writes for the international press and was a founding editor of Portal 9, an Arabic-English journal of urbanism and architecture. His most recent publications include, *Vision, Memory and Media* (Liverpool University Press, 2010), *Far and Wide: Nam June Paik* (Leonardo, 2013) and *You Are Here: Art After the Internet* (Cornerhouse Books, 2014). Kholeif holds degrees from the University of Glasgow and the Royal College of Art, London. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a member of AICA, the International Association of Art Critics.