



Hybrid-Spiritual Art

Investigating the Resurgence of Spirituality in Contemporary Art

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Introduction

A resurgence of the spiritual can be seen in current contemporary art. To create an artwork of a spiritual nature in the modern-day innately confronts the interlaced history of religion and art, however this essay proposes that much of the spiritual art of today arises from a vastly different perspective than the historical religious art which has dominated the art world for centuries. Whereas historically spiritual art can be described as principally inculcative, documentative and decorative, contemporary spiritual art of today is liberal, expressive and cerebral. Today, contemporary spiritual art often exists as either a personal reflection of spirituality, entangled with identity and politics, or an expression of broadly spiritual behaviours and ideas. The latter is what this essay will particularly examine: hybrid-spiritual art. This examination will look at my own work, alongside two examples of contemporary artists relevant to this discussion, Wolfgang Laib and Bill Viola.

Defining Hybrid-Spirituality

The notion of ‘hybrid-spirituality’ refers to a synthesis of spirituality which does not align with one specific belief system, but combines ideas and practises from multiple places to cultivate an individual, bespoke and flexible language of metaphysical understanding.

‘Among us is an ever-growing number of “spiritual hybrids,” or those who find fulfilment and truth from a variety of traditions.’ (McClain, 2022)

Spiritualism writer Larry McClain describes that he is ‘just one among millions of spiritual hybrids who draw strength from a multitude of traditions,’ praising a syncretic approach to spirituality. This understanding of the term ‘hybrid-spirituality’ is differentiated, however, from the idea of religious syncretism, an occurrence documented as early as the 1st century, defined as the blending or fusion of two or more religious belief systems into a new system, (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022,

Wikipedia, 2022) by the distinction that hybrid-spirituality is a broader and less formal idea which can be observed even in persons identifying as agnostics or atheists. Rather than a process of developing an altogether new belief system through the blending of other religions to then be established and instructed, such as religious syncretism, hybrid-spirituality is a term I am using to refer to a more niche concept in which each hybrid-spiritualist upholds their own unique combination of beliefs as a more personal endeavour.

It could be hypothesised that such a lifestyle has gained traction in response to the current conditions of modern society, such as the combination of a rising consumerist and materialist culture and an increasing decline of organised religion throughout the past number of decades, as studied extensively. For example, according to the British Social Attitudes 31 report the majority of adult UK citizens identify as belonging to no religion has risen from 31.4% in 1983 to 50.6% in 2013. (NatCen, 2014, Woodhead, 2016) A wider survey by The Centre of Political Studies at the University of Michigan (fig. 1) reports that, throughout 2007-2019, the large majority of the countries studied showed a decline in religion. (Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan et al., 2021)

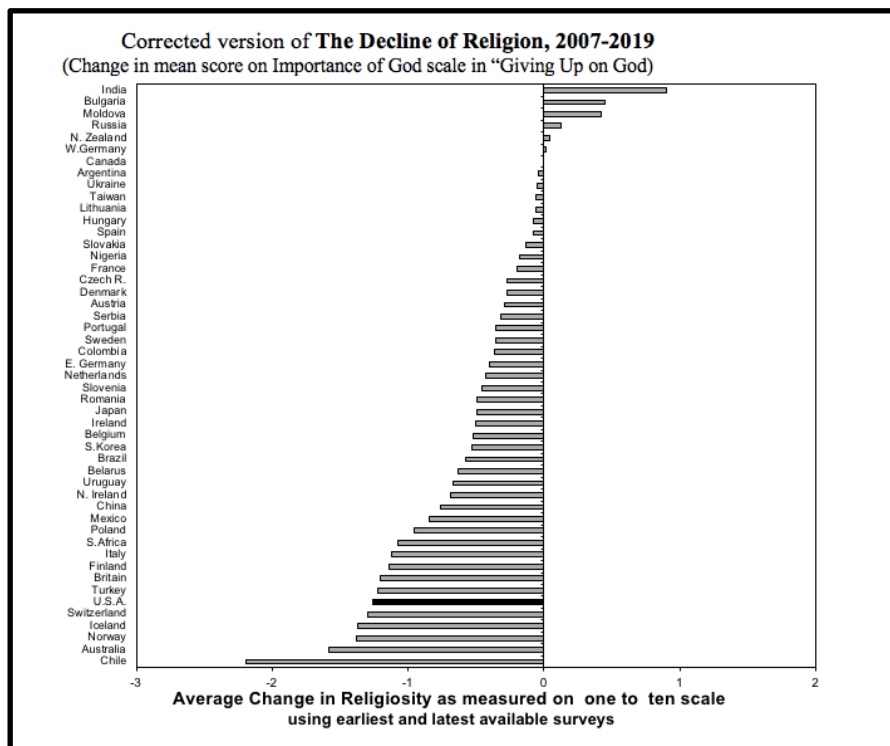


Figure 1: A graph showing the decline of religion, 2007-2019, published in the article 'Giving up on God' in Foreign Affairs.

Such circumstances could theoretically produce a generation of people seeking a sense of connection and essentiality, whom lacking the indoctrination of formal and organised religion, are somewhat alienated from such. It is this reality combined with growing consumerism, (European Commission, 2022), which could be the birthplace of the desire for hybrid-spirituality. Kadinsky describes the effects of the materialistic age in his book ‘Concerning the Spiritual in Art’,

‘Only just now awakening after years of materialism, our soul is infected with the despair born of unbelief, of lack of purpose and aim. The nightmare of materialism, which turned life into an evil, senseless game, is not yet passed; it still darkens the awakening soul.’ (Kandinsky and Sadleir, 1977)

As Kadinsky illustrates in this example, there is an argument to be made about the relationship between our current societal climate of materialism and the conditions of our inner selves.

‘Unbelief’ and ‘lack of purpose and aim’ are states of being which can also be evidenced in the studies on the growing mental health epidemic. Many reports study the statistics on people affected by mental health disorders through documenting the number of disability-adjusted life-years (DALYs), meaning the number of years people have lost due to poor mental health. A report for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2019 attests an increase in poor mental health globally throughout the past 20 years, showing that worldwide DALYs raised from 80.8 million in 1990 to 125.3 million in 2019. (The Lancet Psychiatry, 2022) These statistics are researched to be the product of many causes (Mind, 2017) however this essay hypothesises that one potential cause could align with the global increase of materialism and consumerism and decrease in religion, due to the resulting conditions of disconnection and unbelief. Alongside the natural effects of migration (The World Migration Report, 2022), such as the widespread distribution of cultures and beliefs, this is where the solution of hybrid-spirituality, I believe, emerged.

Hybrid-Spirituality in Contemporary Art

A primary way in which hybrid-spirituality translates into or is expressed within contemporary art is as non-religious identifying artists concerned with and utilising spiritual practises, specifically as an example of systems of inner reconnection as a response to the current social climate. Iranian artist Parviz Tanavoli credits the current societal condition of ‘wars, conflicts, and consumerism,’ to ‘have prompted a desire for transcendence, for refuge, for essence.’ He claims that ‘increasingly, artists are aiming for the essence of spirituality in their work.’ (Gómez-Upegui, 2022) A sense of hybrid-spirituality can be seen as a source of influence in many contemporary artists living and working today, for example, Marina Abramovic has been known to utilise bespoke meditative techniques to prepare prior to performing her tests of endurance, (The Art Story, 2022) and even her endurance-based performances can be argued to parallel Buddhist practises such as vows of silence. The work by Richard Long can also be considered as an ambiguous practise of spirituality, spending ‘extended periods of time in nature, working with nature’s materials, visiting sacred sites and performing walks based on celestial events.’ (Fanning, 2018)

A number of recent exhibitions have discussed the themes of a modern fusion of spirituality. For example, Camden Arts Centre held a show, Botanical Mind: Art Mysticism and The Cosmic Tree, focusing on the significance of nature and plant life within ‘consciousness and spirituality across cultures and through time,’ considering the plant as a symbolic constant appearing in all religions and spirituality. (The Botanical Mind, 2022) These topics provoke the viewer to view spirituality from a broader perspective, evoking a notion of hybrid-spirituality. Another example of a recent exhibition on spirituality is the show On the Spiritual Matter of Art held at Maxxi in Rome, 2020, which aimed to explore spirituality through the lens of contemporary art, seeking to determine where such fits into an ultra-deterministic world dominated by the superficiality of the digital and technological. (E-Flux, 2019, Maxxi.art, 2019)

‘Over the last several decades, spiritual themes seem to have been largely missing from contemporary art, replaced by the conceptual, the grandiose, the high-tech, and the

monumental. But now a host of exhibitions suggest a new trend toward spiritually minded art and, perhaps, a more spiritually minded world.’ (Proctor, 2020)

Rebecca Anne Proctor, a writer for Flash Art, reporting on the resurgence of spirituality seen in contemporary art today, also credits the current geopolitical state, climate emergency and the Covid-19 pandemic as contributors to the new abundance of spiritually engaged exhibitions.

This essay will be focusing on two examples of contemporary artists who directly approach spirituality and encapsulate a modern perspective on the subject: Wolfgang Laib and Bill Viola. Although both involved in particular strands of religion at some points in their lives, Laib often aligning with Buddhism and Viola with Christianity, their works nonetheless pull inspiration from various beliefs and express a broad notion of spirituality. I intend to evaluate how and why the work by these artists indicate this subject, and then compare the individual functions of such works in relation to hybrid-spirituality. I will also be presenting my own artwork as a characterisation of what I recognise as hybrid-spiritual art, as an artist with no prior associations with religion. It is my hypothesis that the following work has come into existence as a result of artists experiencing hybrid-spirituality, and in many ways the work develops and embodies their exploration of it.

Annabelle Keyes

The fundamental intentions behind my own work are concerned with an exploration of human essence. My process involves looking at an expansive range of behaviours in order to identify similarities between vastly different cultures, from palaeolithic to present, with the objective of unearthing a new or deeper understanding of being human. These ideas then materialise within my practise as photographic documents of performances deriving from one or more researched behaviours, then developments through responsive works within painting and sculpture around what was subsequently learned regarding the experience. My research often responds to the spiritual, for example uses of ritualism and transcendence-based traditions, as this is an area of behaviour observed throughout all human history and a characteristic which differentiates humans to other animals. I am personally of the opinion that spirituality and humanity are intrinsically analogous; my work is interested in revealing this. Principally never bound to one belief system, my own notion of spirituality is therefor, by nature, a hybridity.



Figure 2: Sacrality Cultivation by Annabelle Keyes

My work specifically exhibits hybrid-spiritual art through a means of celebration and methodological demonstration. My pieces are influenced by multiple areas of ritualism, displaying an ambiguous theme of spirituality. For example, my sculptural and film piece titled *Sacrality Cultivation*, (fig. 2) which invites the viewer to actively engage with ritualism while eliciting discussion on the ancient act of preservation. The piece is shown within a museum of natural science, referencing the examples of taxidermy and animal specimens in glass jars and formaldehyde which occupy the institution. This uniquely human behaviour of collecting and cataloguing different animal species has existed for centuries, beginning around 1500 – 1700 C.E., the Age of Discovery, when scientists started travelling globally, such as Charles Darwin, and the procedure of embalming was started by Frederik Ruysch. (Show.me, 2021, Kwapis, 2018)

The jars in *Sacrality Cultivation* are displayed on a plaster plaque with a carefully configured arrangement of indents for the items, transforming them into a piece with ceremonial function. Furthermore, the somewhat instructional film piece invites the viewers to contribute to the open jars with anything they have to hand; it depicts a performance in which myself and another participant perform a ritual and appear to follow the ‘steps to preservation’ which are texts periodically cut between the footage. The steps are shown in this way to guide the viewer into interpreting them as instructions for the sculptural piece before them. The interactive nature of the work re-identifies the act of preservation as a uniquely and historically human behaviour, posing questions such as, why do we humans do this? This is produced with the intention of methodically demonstrating hybrid-spiritual practise, exploring the modern use of historically human traditions. The findings of which often lend themselves to a statement on the benefits of reconstructing our relationship to nature, and therefore ourselves and one another. The title, *Sacrality Cultivation*, refers to what spiritualists argue such activities truly are, a method of cultivating a sense of transcendence, holiness, and sacrality. It is my belief that through determining what is sacred, we create what is sacred. This sort of mantra is an integral part of my own bespoke hybrid-spirituality, a notion which, through my art, is attempted to be shared.



Figure 3: Detail of Sacrality Cultivation by Annabelle Keyes

Alongside the overt spiritual nature of organic-based ritual, Sacrality Cultivation utilises symbolism seen in various cultures. The sealed jars (fig. 3) contain spiralled locks of the artist's hair, the spiral widely considered by many throughout history to obtain a spiritually symbolic quality in itself for the cycle of life, as employed by contemporary artists such as Louise Bourgeois and Robert Smithson, for example. (Tate, 2005, Public Delivery, 2022) These 3 jars of preserved human hair are placed equally apart on the plaque atop small mirrors. The number 3 is largely considered to have religious and cultural significance, for example the Wiccan Rule of Three, the Christian Holy Trinity, the Three Pure Ones of Taoism, and the Hindu Trimurti. (3 - Wikipedia, 2022) Mirrors are also 'significant objects that have existed throughout the history of mankind,' for example, 'in ancient East, mirrors were regarded as sacred objects having magical powers.' (Lee, 2018)

The work is essentially a celebration of the general act of spirituality, a uniquely human, fascinating and beneficial aspect of life; in celebrating a generality of spirituality it becomes an archetype of hybrid-spiritual art. The concept is shared through the example of ritualism performed in the film, which lends to the first-hand interactivity aspect of the sculpture. It was my intention to evoke a sense of tranquillity and introspection through an act of ritual disconnected from any established belief system, suggesting the benefit and importance of hybrid-spirituality.

Wolfgang Laib

German conceptual artist Wolfgang Laib creates artwork within the realm of minimalist sculpture as an expression of spiritual practise (Artsy, 2022). Although said to not be “an adherent of any one Eastern philosophy, Mr. Laib has been greatly influenced by them all,” particularly Taoism, Zen Buddhism and Lao-tse. (Duray, 2013, DailyArt Magazine, 2020) Laib has a history in medicine, this study undoubtedly influencing his artistic investigation. His artwork is described as a product of his lifestyle, (Artsy, 2022) his practise is interlinked with his personal beliefs and rituals; such rituals arguably indicating hybrid-spirituality. Laib’s work has a focus on the simplicity of materiality alongside the ritual aspect of creating it, he utilises “natural materials and reintroduces them in their purest and simplest form for deliberation,” a process which author Celina Jeffery writes “can lead to individual spiritual inquiry.” (Jeffery, C. 2013)



Figure 4: Wolfgang Laib collecting pollen

The rituals of Wolfgang Laib which inform and distinguish his practise are examples of hybrid-spirituality as they are bespoke to himself. One example is his site-specific and personal ritual of pollen collection since 1977. (fig. 4) This is something Laib describes very poetically, suggesting spiritual importance of the annual endeavour, detailing the significance of pollen in plant-life and

thus all life. He visits the same fields every spring and collects pollen for hours at a time, this same pollen becoming the essence of his pollen installations. Laib speaks of the material:

“Pollen is the potential beginning of the life of the plant. It is as simple, as beautiful, and as complex as this. And of course it has so many meanings. I think everybody who lives knows that pollen is important.” (MoMA, 2013)



Figure 5: Wolfgang Laib installing Pollen from Hazelnut

The creation of the installations are also slow-paced, the pollen, a luminous yellow powder, is evenly distributed in a large rectangular or square layer on the floor of a gallery space by sieving it gradually, (fig. 5) Pollen from Hazelnut at the Museum of Modern Art in 2013 (fig. 6) measuring at 18 by 21ft. (Whitewall, 2013) Laib appears to always install his installations himself, suggesting the act of such is as much an integral aspect of the piece as the final outcome. All aspects of the pollen works are highly meditative and spiritual, yet are still personal and unique. This parallels the idea of hybrid-spirituality: examples of transcendent ritualism which are not the direct imitation or fusion of established religious practises, rather they are individual, often time and site specific, for personal exploration.

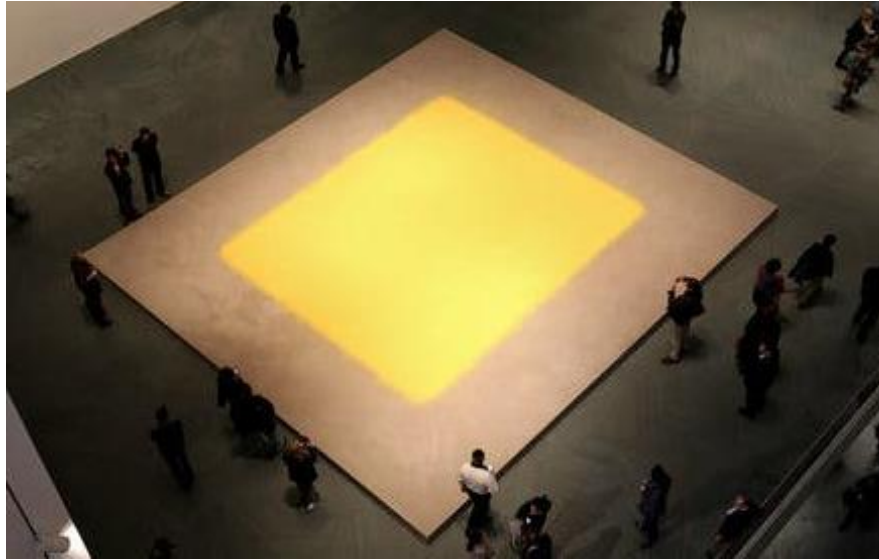


Figure 6: Pollen from Hazelnut by Wolfgang Laib at MoMA

Considering the function of Laib's work in relation to hybrid-spirituality, the art exists as the means of the spiritual practise. For this artist, there is no one without the other, they are integrally synonymous. This is communicated to the audience quite immanently. With Pollen From Hazelnut as an example, the slow and purposeful process is evident within the piece, surrounding the installation with an allusive nature of introspection, aided with the ethereality of the pollen itself. An account of the work describes the pollen as possessing a sunlight-glow. (Artforum, 2013) The scale of the installation is particularly important; with such expansive subjects such as spirituality and philosophy, the monumental size of these works aid in emitting the immersive and grandiose impact needed. DailyArt Magazine describes the communicated effects of Laib's work:

“From ephemeral to eternal, his works magnify the natural world and the universe, encouraging us to contemplate humanity's lost connection with nature. By reawakening our curiosity, Laib gives us hope to repair our relationship with the living world.” (DailyArt Magazine, 2020)

As illustrated in this quotation, the work by Laib has an intertwined secondary function of demonstration, portraying a particular process to the viewer, sharing hybrid-spirituality in an ontological sense.

Bill Viola

Bill Viola, an American artist working primarily with video, draws inspiration from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islamic Sufism and Christianity and has said to be creatively driven by the ‘awareness or recognition that there is something above, beyond, below or beneath what’s in front of our own eyes.’ (Fanning, 2018) Viola’s work can be characterised as a synthesis of modern modes of representation, that being video and audio installations, and immersive spiritual concept through symbolism. Utilising the contemporary medium of audio-visual installation, this artist comprehensively translates the conceptual subject matter for the audience of today.



Figure 7: Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water) by Bill Viola

The commissioner, John Moses, of Viola’s piece *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)*, (fig. 7) reflects on the ‘tech-heavy medium’ of the work, explaining that Viola’s ‘contemporary form requires a greater degree of involvement from the viewer than the traditional ones,’ (Feay, 2019) such as painting, for example. This echoes the argument that the modern medium of Viola is highly comprehensible and therefore a powerful vehicle for artistic communication. *Martyrs* is ‘an installation consisting of four colour vertical plasma screens, each showing a single figure who is

progressively overwhelmed by the onslaught of a natural force,' (Tate, 2014) permanently installed within St. Paul's Cathedral. Viola describes that the figures 'exemplify the human capacity to bear pain, hardship and even death in order to remain faithful to their values, beliefs and principles.' (Tate, 2014) The elemental symbolism evokes the idea of hybrid-spirituality; the natural elements of earth, air, fire and water are seen widely referenced throughout many spiritual beliefs. (Brethauer, 2022) The concept of this piece, the human ability of faith, similarly highlight a consistent throughout all spirituality.

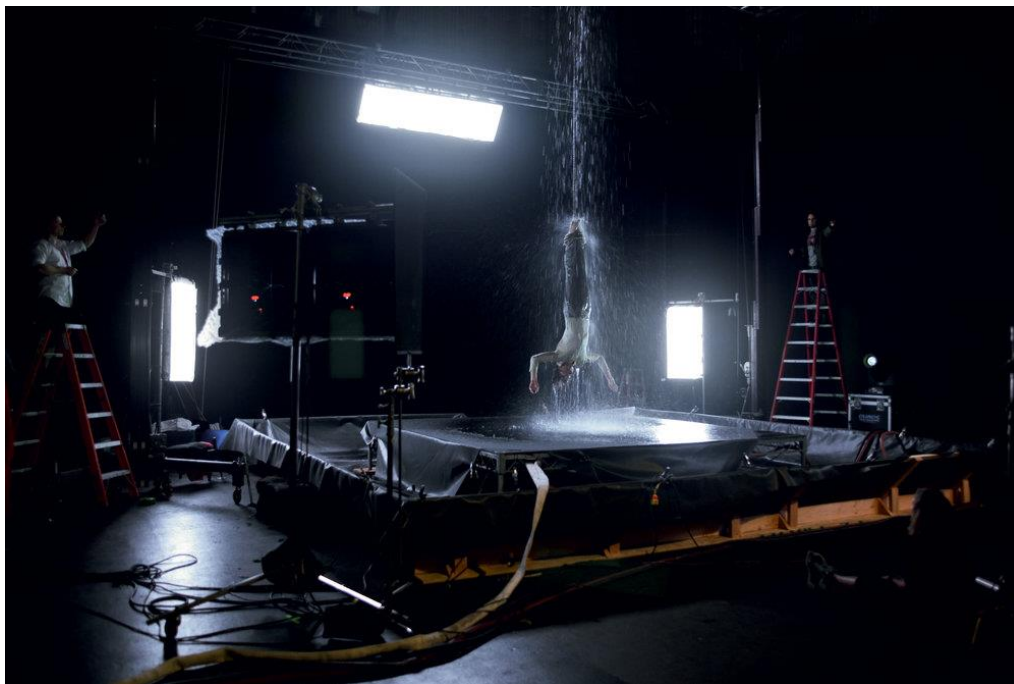


Figure 8: Behind the scenes making of Martyrs by Bill Viola

The spiritual aspect is symbolically evident in all Viola's work, however is particularly an example of hybrid-spirituality as the symbols throughout broadly reference many systems of belief rather than adhere to one. Drawing 'freely from Western, non-Western, pre-Christian mythology, belief systems and rituals,' (Fanning, 2018) Viola represents an ambiguous inquiry into the spiritual. For example, the 'fire and water symbolism to represent creation and destruction, which is reminiscent of many spiritual and religious traditions' (The Art Story, 2022) in his piece *The Crossing* (fig. 9). Duality is also a recurring symbolic theme:

‘Viola’s work typically employs the concept of dualities that seem to have universal significance, including light and dark, the ancient and the modern, nature and civilization, object and subject, and rational thought and intuition.’ (The Art Story, 2022)



Figure 9: The Crossing by Bill Viola

In a similar way to how Wolfgang Laib’s spiritual life embodies his art, Bill Viola had a revelation on his practise while travelling in Japan, a trip which greatly impacted his spiritual studies:

‘It was beginning to sink in that perhaps art resided in life itself, that as a practice it derives primarily from the quality of experience, depth of thought and devotion of the maker.’

(Lion’s Roar, 2004)

Despite this similarity in ideology, this essay identifies two distinct modes of hybrid-spiritual art. Whereas Wolfgang Laib’s hybrid-spirituality is immanent to the substance and creation of his art, Bill Viola’s process is more engineered, as to convey his hybrid-spirituality through eliciting a sense of familiarity within the viewer in terms of contemporary art standards. Essentially, the process consists of transcendent subject combined with high-definition film work, alongside certain details such as the modern clothing which the figures wear, for example ‘khaki pants and a blue button up shirt.’ (The Art Story, 2022) Creating such spiritually engaged works in the modern day, through modern means, functions as a method of reintroducing spirituality to contemporary society. This

resulting fusion echoes the core motivation of the hybrid-spirituality concept, with a certain degree of practicality in the transmission of ideas.

Conclusion

The cases of Wolfgang Laib, Bill Viola and my own work exemplify various ways in which hybrid-spirituality can be seen newly prevalent to contemporary art, created through ambitions of practising, expressing or demonstrating spirituality. Laib exhibits technique, process and activity as the primary and inherent expression of spiritual practise. Viola shows a method of spiritual injection into the established every-day of contemporary society. My own work falls more inline with the practise of Wolfgang Laib, a series of personal, celebratory and investigative processes.

Now that it has been evaluated what hybrid-spirituality is and how it exists in contemporary art, we ought to now question why it exists in contemporary art. A critique that could be made on the development of hybrid-spiritual art is that the very difference, as described in the introduction of this essay, between traditionally religious art and hybrid-spiritual art is the degree of inculcation. There is a paradoxical element in which hybrid-spirituality is principally non-governing, however manifested within contemporary art, it becomes somewhat didactic in its endeavour to share and change. My argument to this criticism would be that the motivation for change is powered by different motivations; religious art, although varying from creatively narrational and devotional, largely services power systems. Hybrid-spirituality is rhizomatically structured and has no institutional body to hierarchically gain from indoctrination, so the only motivation to change is to heal and revive.

Developing on the motivation to heal and revive, it must be evaluated, why specifically through art? Why express or explore it through art rather than merely report on it? To me, it is clear this question indicates the profound capability of art to communicate, share and change, and that hybrid-spiritual artists acknowledge the importance of sharing this mode of thought through the most appropriate means. As mentioned throughout this essay, some of the troubles of today's society are generally agreed to consist of the consumerism culture, climate emergency and

geopolitical state in a time where increasingly more of society are internally suffering due to global degrading mental health and decreasingly less of society are turning to religion for refuge. It is my argument that hybrid-spiritualists find less value in materialism, develop a deep connection to nature, and prioritise connection and authenticity, as natural effects of the ontology. Such qualities are conceivably the antithesis of society's current complications. Perhaps the resurgence of spirituality in contemporary art signifies that humanity has begun a metamorphosis toward a more spiritual age in the pursuit of solutions to the difficulties of today.

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