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## **Spiritual Affects Against a Secularist Grid: Rethinking Modernism and the Islam/ic**

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### **Revelation in Tongues: Learning to Speak Spirituality & Religion in Contemporary Art**

I like to express my great appreciation and gratitude for this opportunity and invitation to everyone involved in making this gathering possible.

I am always asking myself, "Why am I doing this work? How meaningful is it to me? How meaningful is it to others?" But, digging a little deeper, the questions that I am really asking are, "Who am I? Why am I here?"

These were more or less the feelings behind the conversations that my colleague Tyler Rollins and I were having several years ago, which paved the way for a new journey for both of us and Tyler's decision to establish the Foundation for Spirituality and the Arts. I quote him here from one of his recent talks:

"We may never know the answer to why we are here. And if we can't know that, how could we know who we are in the deepest sense of the ultimate meaning of our existence. Or the ultimate meaning and value of the creative works of our hands and minds. While science gives us a narrative. Facts can tell us very little about this. It is a matter of Belief or Faith."

At the heart of today's gathering is the question regarding the role of museums in our lives?

In her book "What is Islamic Art? Between Religion and Perception," Wendy Shaw observes that museums are where objects are considered mainly through the sense of sight at the expense of all other sensory perceptions disassociated from their intended environments. Plucked away from their once inextricably experiential-ritual-based or functional settings of sacred spaces, houses of worship, palaces, and city and civic sites led to the invention of art history and that of modern human beings' cerebral compulsion to see art through the prescribed ideas of an external authority according to a set of definite positioning in the museum.

Being conscious that we are in a museum of such a history, I invite us to regard this meeting and what will be shared here beyond our exquisite brains as mere intellectual discourse. Let's use this opportunity to open up a portal into the higher realms by consciously tapping the intelligence of all our precious organs, particularly the heart, where all possibilities for hope and change reside.

Our Brains have been doing great work; we have become excellent thinkers with thousands of years of practice. And yet it is the heart, that mysterious chamber inside our chests that fiercely, patiently, lovingly, and begrudgingly is calling us to feel, because there is no living without feeling.

Modern life's limitations reside in humanity's reliance on mechanical mental evolution. A brain on autopilot disconnected from the heart is just a beautiful piece of machinery. But a brain connected to and in conversation with the heart is pure consciousness. So it is not the number of human brains that inhabit this planet that make humanity evolve but how many of those hearts are feeling whatever it is that they must feel and, as a result, can consciously transform repression, anger, doubt, fear, anxiety, and all other negative emotions into inspiration alignment, hope, and fulfillment.

There has been much emphasis in the art world on this idea that there is nothing that isn't political. Yet the reality is that there is nothing that isn't spiritual, And there is undoubtedly no evaluation that isn't part of a spiritual process. We live in the mind of the universe.

A universe that we know is expanding. Our hearts are the only way to the cosmos, that great nurturing environment of well-being that Allen Watts and many others call the godhead where all is one and one is all. And so, without the heart, we cannot access this universal space of harmony.

Instead, we are disoriented, plucked out like objects in a museum on display under the scrutiny of others, caught in a cycle of obsessive thought and action that triggers negative emotion, perpetuating the attraction of the unwanted in our lives.

The heart is resilient and can be soothed when it can process its discomfort and pain. When the heart is peaceful, the brain lights up. Becoming a potent receptor for creativity, resourcefulness, abundance, giddiness, beauty, and much more. Could we see a correlation here with how artists work?

Have we not heard many claim that when they let go of the struggle, the resistance, ultimately control, flow pours in? Do artists and creative collectives pinch off their receptivity by thinking habitual thoughts? What is a belief? It is a thought that one repeatedly thinks consciously or unconsciously. If the majority of our beliefs are mechanical, on a subconscious level, then what is faith? These are not modern ideas but the evolution of profound inquires launched and lived by the spiritual and faith traditions of this planet. Science has caught on thankfully. I highly

recommend the *The Awakened Brain*, by Lisa Miller, New York Times best-seller author and leading Columbia University scientist whose deeply personal research cracks open humanity's fascinating biological capacity for spirituality, providing insight on how faith and the practice of spirituality are the sources for treatment of mental conditions including depression and a host of other psychological ailments. Belief is at the core of it all.

Ahh, but I am getting distracted why not feel the power of our presence here right now.

Exercise: ask everyone to put their hand in their heart, feel the beating, and just listen and feel the sound.

I hope to better decipher many questions that art historians such as James Elkins, Wendy Shah, Aaron Rosen, Leesa Fanning, Eleanore Heartney, Rasheed Aareen and other colleagues have raised for many years. We at FSA recognized within a short period of just two years, sitting in intense listening tours with colleagues from around the world, that scarcity is more an illusion than reality.

Religion and spirituality have been the greatest of wellsprings for the artistic imagination for centuries across world history and continue to be till this day despite the appearance of a vast gulf between the contemporary art world on the one hand and the realms of religious faith and spiritual expression on the other.

To my great astonishment and delight, we have been discovering and uncovering a great deal of art, exhibition-making, and even writing surrounding this topic for decades and as far as we can trace back to the beginning of modernity and beyond.

Our aim with Foundation for Spirituality and the Arts (FSA) has been to open, cultivate and nurture relationships between these two spheres by opening dialogues for collaboration between contemporary artists and spiritual leaders, sacred spaces and communities of faith, and contemporary art institutions while also filling the gap of context and information about the history of their connectivity in the recent and distant past.

We do this through residencies, interactive and performative art-making and reflective writing commissions, public forums, and online showcasing of recent and historical examples of what we call inspiring and noteworthy current and distance practitioners, not only visual artists but other disciplines relating to and informing modern life and contemporaneity such as architecture, literature, poetry, music, dance, theatre, and film.

We research and highlight exhibitions, books, and scholarly and educational texts to help us respond to many bold but sincere questions, such as what is really keeping more artists, exhibitions, collections, and art-historical discourses from speaking directly and sincerely about a belief in god or affiliation with religion and or spiritual practice. Is our disenchantment with

museums, galleries, and university departments' neglect of communities of faith justified at a time when many have devoted dedicated attention to "diversity" as a top priority on their agenda.

On that note, why don't considerations of diversity extend beyond race, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality to include religion and spiritual affiliations in cultural institutions? Will this era marked by the significant sweep of "inclusion" policies in the United States and Europe be directed by the same erroneous ideologies that perpetrated "exclusivity" in the presentations of Modernism all these years?

When did the spirituality of faith-based traditions, or "organized religion," become divorced from culture? How has such a significant fracture been justified? Has the project to have the world's largest communities of faith, namely Christians, Moslems, and Jews, disregard the ties between their spiritual and cultural heritage for the sake of globalized secularism in the name of modernity not yet run its course? And is secularism the main culprit to cultural museums' alienation from religion and vice versa?

Could the answer to all these inquiries lie in the case of a missing language? Did we never develop the tongue to tell the concurrent intermingling of ideas from both sides of the aisle? Can we make a new lexicon of glorious intersectionality that links the space between these two assumed opposing arenas where our spirits roam? Suppose we are ready for such a middle-ground tongue to reveal itself. Can we vocalize without the baggage of our curatorial expertise steeped in decades worth of suspicion, identity politics, and East-West superiority inferiority complexes to sufficiently think, speak, and make art related to faith, religion, and spiritual transcendence?

Is the desire for inclusive practice sincere or motivated by the need to expand untapped audiences into the mix? Suppose we are genuine and serious about our intentions to break the museum away from its secularist grid. Can this be achieved through current expertise in the museums, or is there a need for professionals who practice these specific spiritual and religious traditions in their lives?

How would we create a policy of inclusion in the museum for faith-based traditions that resonate with the spiritual language of such practices? Are we willing to relinquish the divisive and demeaning terminologies of corporations, governments, and politicians aimed at assessing, regulating, and controlling constituents and the general population in the name of social and environmental justice? Will we settle for the comfort of the regular cutting and pasting policy language. Will we lament and blame, finger-point and complain, demand and assert, coerce or shame?

Are these attitudes in resonance with the divine purpose? How do terms like love, humility, compassion, and tolerance, as the essence of all religions, come into the picture? Indeed, we would have to be in a receiving mode for such spiritual tongues to reveal themselves to us.

Words that would transcribe the vibrational meaning of the intersection of art and spirituality in a way that considers the nuances of multiple faiths simultaneously. Vibration merely implies a feeling, a resonance. What feeling do we want our museums to permeate? Empathy, wonder, and welcome, or judgment, distance, and alienation? How do we refrain from the categorical entrapments that Shah and many colleagues incite? Do we respect one another's nuanced beliefs and convictions?

As St. Augustine beautifully put it, “the truth is like a lion; you don’t have to defend it. Let it loose; it will defend itself.”

According to Chicago Art Institute art historian and professor James Elkins whose 2004 book On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art described the problem on both sides of the isle still rings truth “The overwhelming majority of work that presents itself as religious does not engage modern and postmodern values like ambiguity, the avant-garde, or the desire to present a compelling step forward for historically minded art. And conversely, a lot of modern and postmodern art is predicated on ignoring religion, tacitly devaluing it, or actively critiquing it.”

Discussing various critical methodologies in academia, Jonathon Anderson Postdoctoral Associate of Theology and the Visual Arts at Duke University asks how art theories and histories can be revised and re-contextualized to include a theological interpretation. To consider an example of this as an interpretive method, he refers to the thesis of art historian Thomas Crow’s book, *No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art* (2017) which examines the work of Colin McCahon, Mark Rothko, James Turrell, and Sister Mary Corita Kent. Anderson posits: “It’s not just that this handful of artists managed to be theologically interesting despite the depth of their engagement with the values of modern and postmodern art, but that the central values of modern and contemporary art are themselves theologically interesting or are inwoven with significant theological concepts and concerns.”

In his latest manifesto “Artist, writer and philosopher, Rashid Araeen contemplates the problem of how to assert his Muslim identity both within his practice and within the broader doctrines of modern art [...] Critical theorists like Okwui Enwezor have thoughtfully diversified the category of modernity, yet the canon of modern art continues to struggle against a European origin story. By looking at an artist like Araeen, can we find an alternative narrative, one that looks to the “Spirit of Geometry, namely the architecture of the Ka’ba and iconoclasm of Islamic art first and Cézanne’s contemplation of geometry second?”

While we have a lot to understand, to gather to initiate, sift and sort through to carve out the languages of seeing and feeling through a lens that was once at the center of knowledge and wisdom, let us now humbly acknowledge dear colleagues, the fact that we are gathered here is a testament to our arrival at a beautiful station of a process many of us have longed for. Here we are in the Tropenmuseum in a magical city through the generosity and hospitality of exceptional beings that make up the Tate research and curatorial team. So allow us to acknowledge the

progress we have made. It has taken many individuals and collectives feeling and focusing on this subject for years for this meeting to manifest.

Nothing can stand in the way of the fire burning brightly within our collective intention, not even the reptilian labyrinth of our ego, for the ego is a divine instrument conveniently placed at the service of our spirits. So let us feel settled and inspired to invoke the cosmos, nature, god, or whatever you believe or do not believe in support of this precious and expansive threshold through our hearts and breath today, all day. Let's allow each presentation to ring the silence of a thousand sacred spaces in our ears like a prayer. Let's lean in and feel the call and response energetically, much like the ecstatic deliberations of a Qawaali by Ustad Fateh Ali Khan and his family.