

*No Idols:
The Missing Theology of Art*
Thomas Crow

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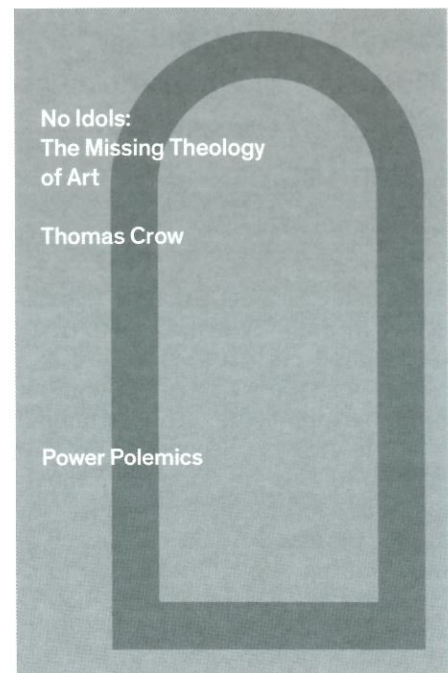
Thomas Crow's most recent book addresses 'a blind spot' in the study of Western art history: namely, a general inattention to theology in the study of modern art. This blind spot, he argues, obscures key aspects of modernist history and deprives the discipline of vital hermeneutical tools: 'Never broached is the idea that the metaphysical basis of so much early modernism could be brought back to life within a Christian religious vocabulary' and its 'robust tradition of erudite philosophical reflection' (p.8). Broaching precisely this idea, Crow, a prominent American art historian and critic, thereby joins a growing number of scholars recovering a theological discourse within the scholarship of modernism.

After a short introductory chapter framing his historical and theoretical contexts, Crow devotes his remaining pages to essays on a handful of artists. Acknowledging that his questions were provoked by late seventeenth-century French art, he starts with Chardin and then leaps forward to five artists working in the 1940s–1970s: Mark Rothko, Colin McCahon, Robert Smithson, James Turrell, and Sister Mary Corita Kent. This selection feels somewhat haphazard and the structuring of chapters is slightly odd (eg Kent is inexplicably folded into the conclusion rather than given a chapter of her own). But the overall approach is effective and illuminating, offering valuable insights in each chapter: Rothko's 'counter-idolatrous' thinking was influenced (via Meyer Schapiro) by the astonishing *Silos Apocalypse* manuscript; McCahon's word-paintings tenaciously mulled over biblical texts; Smithson's mature works were rooted in his earlier mystic Catholicism; Turrell's career has unfolded in productive tension with his Quakerism; Kent's activist pop vernacular was oriented by a deep Catholic faith attuned to Vatican II; and so on. Crow chooses artists whose works (1) evince theologically significant thinking that has not been adequately recognised, and which (2) in 'their collective stature' provide loci 'sufficient to secure the salience of

these first-order theological considerations' (p.14). This method is the strength of the book and is instructive to subsequent researchers. To be fruitful, the theological rereading of modern and contemporary art must significantly contribute to the critical and historical intelligibility of particular artworks (not only general theories and sweeping narratives).

Crow acknowledges significant disciplinary obstacles in academic art history, wherein 'religious behaviour and belief, along with theological meaning, appear as cultural artefacts to be dissected and decoded with clinical detachment' (p.6). Against this, he proposes a heuristic counter-measure that reverses the standard direction of hermeneutical suspicion: 'Just as secularising forces can best be measured via their indirect effects on religious expression, so the strength of religious outlooks and convictions should be assessed by the pressure they exert on ostensibly secular subjects' (pp.6-7). The primary theological 'pressure' he sees cutting across modernism's 'ostensibly secular subjects' is the pressure generated by 'the concept of idolatry and its critique' (p.7). Beginning with Chardin's *White Tablecloth* (1731–32), he tethers the project to instances in which religious subject-matter was evaded for demonstrably theological reasons, providing historical points from which 'to map the ways in which art might appear in a living form under the aegis of this theological critique' (p.8).

In the process of this mapping, Crow ecumenically references a range of Christian thinkers from past centuries – Bonaventure, Pascal, Aquinas, Savonarola, Calvin, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Chesterton, Eliot, Maritain – as well as (surprisingly, for an art history text) major contemporary Christian scholars, including David Bentley Hart, Charles Taylor, and James KA Smith. His primary theological coordinates, however, are taken from Jansenism, a radically Augustinian movement that flourished, controversially, among Catholics in Belgium, Holland, and France in the 17th and



18th Centuries. With strong parallels to Calvinism (both in its understanding of grace/depravity and its iconoclastic tendencies), Jansenism was condemned by the Catholic Church numerous times between 1640 and 1730. But, for Crow, therein lies its importance: 'The break within orthodox Catholicism effected by the Jansenists thus provides an escape from the tautological agreement between doctrine and picturing' (p.8), offering some theological phase lines for understanding aniconic modernisms. This proves helpful in the case of Chardin, but tracking 'neo-Jansenist' artistic phenomena through subsequent chapters becomes strained at points, especially regarding artists whose roots were more Protestant (or Jewish) than Catholic. A fuller approach might explore Jansenism as one significant strand within and alongside Christianity's various anti-idolatrous logics – logics that are indeed at work throughout modernist and contemporary art.

No Idols is a valuable contribution. It winsomely challenges 'the reigning interdiction of theology' (p.134) in art-historical research and further cultivates theology's potential contributions to the study of modern art. The lines of thought opened here are fruitful and worthy of further investigation and elaboration.

Jonathan A Anderson is an Associate Professor of Art at Biola University