

## Holland Cotter: An Art Critic on Art and Religion

*Interview by Ashley Makar*



Holland Cotter

*Holland Cotter is co-chief art critic and a senior writer at The New York Times. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2009. In 2010, he was given the Lifetime Achievement Award for Art Writing by the College Art Association. In 2012, he was a Poynter Fellow in Journalism at Yale University, and the recipient of the Religion and the Arts Award from the American Academy of Religion. In April 2013, he was the Alain LeRoy Locke lecturer at the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University. He has an A.B. from Harvard College, where he studied poetry with Robert Lowell; an M.A. in America Modernism from Hunter College of the City University of New York, and an M.Phil. in South Asian art, with a focus on early Indian Buddhist art, from Columbia University. He was for many years a contributing editor to Art in America, and an editorial associate of Art News.*

*MAVCOR Research Affiliate Ashley Makar spoke with Cotter at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) Conference in Chicago on November 18, 2012. This conversation is based on an essay he delivered at the Religion and the Arts Award ceremony.*

**Ashley Makar:** You speak of your work as an art critic as a form of continuing education,<sup>1</sup> and you say that you are addressing the audience as a learner. I would love to hear more

about what you've learned through your work as an art critic regarding the ways people engage with images and objects.

**Holland Cotter:** Well, I can start by saying that many times when I'm going to be looking at material, particularly material I'm not very familiar with (and because I cover a wide range of material, a lot of it is material I'm coming at, if not for the first time, in serious ways for the first time) I often draw on the help of experts in the field. I talk to a lot of curators. I'm not a critic who avoids curators and scholars. I like to engage with them, particularly with the stuff that I'm not up on. That's where I start to learn stuff. I also talk with artists. I observe audiences in museums and how they react to images, which is sort of disturbing.

**Ashley Makar:** How so?

**Holland Cotter:** Well, because there's so much drive-by viewing, people cell-phone picture-taking and so forth. People aren't really stopping to look or to read labels. I happen to be one of those people who loves to read labels in exhibitions and in permanent displays. I love information, and you can ignore it if you don't want to read it—that's my view of it. People don't seem to be reading. I'm talking with museum curators who are asking me, "Do you see any solution to the situation? Do you see any way we can be doing exhibitions that would draw people in in a way that they're not being drawn in now?" And you know, honestly, I don't have an answer for that. There doesn't seem to be any guaranteed way to do it. I was talking yesterday with somebody about this; Chinese museums have found a sort of solution. They're still at the starting point with forming museums on an international model and their balance of education and entertainment is very interesting. It's one that we kind of react in horror to, but, in fact, I think it's really working. People go there and are getting immersed in museum culture that's brand new to them. They're putting it on their itineraries. Partly they're getting history; they're also getting films, and they're getting all this ethnological museology that most of our art museums reject.

**Ashley Makar:** Because of the division between fine art and "primitive" art?

**Holland Cotter:** Exactly, that kind of thing. We've had a few people in our time, in New York City in particular, who would try to do the same thing and did so extremely successfully for a short period of time, but it seems to have gone out of fashion. I'm specifically thinking of Susan Vogel at the Museum for African Art. She came from the MET, started that museum on the Upper East Side, moved it to SoHo. She did these very, very—to me—revolutionary museum shows, which drew in audiences that had never been into museums before. She and Bob Thompson at Yale did a show called "Face of the Gods."<sup>2</sup> That was a remarkable thing. I talked with them before it opened, and they were both just so nervous it was going to be a failure. It worked beautifully.

**Ashley Makar:** I understand people were actually making offerings at the altars?

**Holland Cotter:** They were, they were.



Mai Jocelinha, Altar to Ogum and to the hunter gods Logunedede and Oxossi, Cosme de Farias, Bahia, Brazil, 1983

**Ashley Makar:** How do you think the ways that they curated it or arranged the space made people feel comfortable doing that?

**Holland Cotter:** What they did is they created contemporary altars. They didn't necessarily put them aside as artifacts or cast them historically. They just said: "Here are altars of a kind that are currently being made in the Caribbean, in Brazil, in different parts of Latin America, and we're doing this, too." And they had experts come in—religious experts, priests, I mean.

**Ashley Makar:** Wow, so they were sort of consecrated objects.

**Holland Cotter:** They were consecrated objects in this museum's space. The word got out and people came. It was remarkable.

**Ashley Makar:** One thing that I found very interesting, you mentioned that you work a lot on Buddhist and South Asian art and you said that, writing about non-Western art, you can't not talk about religion.<sup>3</sup> Can you elaborate on that a bit? You do speak about how there's a comparable way in which Western art is similarly alive. Why do you think people don't engage in the same way?



Altar to Exu Abre-Cancelas (Exu Who Opens the Gates), Surburbana, Bahia, Brazil, 1989

**Holland Cotter:** With Western art?

**Ashley Makar:** Yes.

**Holland Cotter:** When I'm talking about "non-Western art" (and I put that in quotes, "non-Western art," because it's a weird term) partly there's an exoticism factor, I think, that helps people to view "non-Western art" in a religious way: It's the other. It's over there. It's not really us. We can see it that way. In some ways quote "non-Western cultures" have had to fight that. For example, I think Latino artists have to constantly fight the idea that theirs is strictly religious art and work to resist that spiritual view of it. But the Buddhist art and the Hindu art and so forth I'm talking about is historical art, so it was,

I think, primarily religious in motivation and purpose. You get into a different territory when you get into Modernism.

**Ashley Makar:** Modernism in Buddhist and Hindu art?

**Holland Cotter:** Yes, in Buddhist and Hindu art. But also I think we're so Modernist-oriented in our thinking—I, in my thinking—from the start that I'm inclined to think of Modernism as secular, and everything else as religious. I have to be careful about how I, where I, take that religious thing. I'm nervous when I get into nineteenth-century Western art and twentieth-century religious content and stuff like that. It's just part of the culture.

**Ashley Makar:** What makes you nervous about that?

**Holland Cotter:** Well, it's residual nervousness. I was educated when I was a younger person to believe that Modernism doesn't include a spiritual component, that "spiritual" was a dirty word in academia. Now, I hope, things have changed, but I don't know that for a fact.

**Ashley Makar:** It seems that it has.

**Holland Cotter:** I think so. I think so, too.

**Ashley Makar:** You speak early in your remarks about religion as a cultural impulse.<sup>4</sup> How do you think artistic work can engage religion as a cultural impulse?<sup>5</sup> Or engage audiences for whom religion is a cultural impulse?

**Holland Cotter:** Are we talking contemporary work, or something else?

**Ashley Makar:** Whatever context you think is most relevant.

**Holland Cotter:** It's a big question.

**Ashley Makar:** Right, contemporary work would be quite interesting to think about.

**Holland Cotter:** Well, you know, ok. This just pops to mind because his name came to me recently, but there's a guy named Peter Schumann, and Peter Schumann founded something called Bread and Puppet Theater in the 1960s. Peter's background is German. He came to America, to the East Village and started to do political street theater, a lot of which was based on European processional theater in the—going way, way back. Peter was doing these works that basically had a religious source, but they were being put to a political end. As time went on, the division between the politics and the religion there just vanished. By the time the seventies came around, he was doing things like, he did this thing called "Washerwoman Nativity," which is such a beautiful piece. It was about working-class people and poverty and suffering, but according to his context of Christianity, in this case pretty non-denominational Christianity.



Peter Schumann, founder of Bread and Puppet Theater

**Ashley Makar:** The Nativity, like the very popular image of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus kind of nativity?

**Holland Cotter:** Exactly, that. But surrounding that with all these other components. And, of course, you would take this thing to the street. So everybody who happened to be walking down that sidewalk that day would be seeing Peter and his performers doing this extraordinary performance. They would perform it in theaters, too, but basically this was street theater. What a wonderful thing, you know? So that's one way I think it can be brought into the popular realm.

**Ashley Makar:** Perhaps whatever it is that's engaging spiritually in its original context can engage that feeling—however it is for the people that don't identify it as a religious encounter.

**Holland Cotter:** Sure. It's just human. It's human emotion: hopes and fears. All the things that are just essential. Birth and mortality, and all the things we think about all the time.

**Ashley Makar:** In your work as an art critic, do you think of ways of engaging religion as a cultural impulse among your readers, especially at the Times? As a New York Times art critic, you're addressing broad, broad audiences. How do you think about audience in

terms of your writing about art?

**Holland Cotter:** It's pretty broad. The Times audience is, I think, basically a well-educated, middle class, probably culture-oriented audience. I think that most of my readers come to me because they already know something about art and want to know more, and they want to keep up on what's going on with it. So there's a lot of groundwork I don't have to do, that if I were writing for another newspaper I would have to do. So, I don't have to say, you know, "Michelangelo, the Italian painter ..."

**Ashley Makar:** Right.

**Holland Cotter:** I can assume some knowledge, but I can't assume a tremendous amount of specialized knowledge. My first responsibility is to my readers. Before my responsibility to artists, or museums, or art, it's to my readers. My first responsibility to them is to give a reading experience, before, even, I give them an art explanation. So language is an important component of what I do. Putting it across persuasively and entertainingly—that's what I try for. I love language. The next thing I want is to convey the art experience I've had to them. To convey my sense of enthusiasm or engagement with the stuff to them. Why they might also consider it interesting, even if they never had before: What is here, in this stuff, that I'm looking at? I'm this, you know, non-academic person out here looking hard. I'm encouraging them to look hard. What is the human component here that you can relate to? I try to put that across, right across the board, no matter what the subject is I'm talking about.

**Ashley Makar:** How do you encourage viewers to look hard, in the context of the problem you spoke of a few minutes ago about how people are taking pictures with their cell phones, walking through and...

**Holland Cotter:** Well, just by the analysis of the objects that are on view there. You know, so if you're going to go to the Brooklyn Museum to see a show on South Asian art. Well, ok, you may know a little bit about dancing Shiva or you may have never seen the dancing Shiva. Here's some more information about that. And isn't dancing a fabulous thing? That we all do? That kind of thing.

**Ashley Makar:** And perhaps looking at it not as a stone figure, but as a dancing Shiva.

**Holland Cotter:** Exactly, that this is worshiped, and the people who made it relate to it very, very interactively. That's an important thing to know, that they do darshan. There's this exchange of energy between the sculpture and you, the worshiper.

**Ashley Makar:** And darshan involves eyes—eye contact.

**Holland Cotter:** Eye contact. It does, it does. The god sees you. You see the god, but the god sees you. So there's this definite energy being passed back and forth. A lot of art, pre-modern art, is based on a similar exchange of energy. Buddhist art, Hindu art, African art, my heavens! So much of it, the whole concept of what art was for was very



Shiva Nataraja, 14th-15th century

different. I mean, I said a little about this in that thing you read,<sup>6</sup> but the idea that you're meant to engage with it, not just stand in front of it and look at it, but that you're actually a part of its experience, and that it's going to change you. Being in its vicinity is going to change you, if you approach it in the right frame of mine. I feel that's true of a lot of art. I feel that's true of Mondrian. I feel that's true of a lot of abstraction, Western abstraction. You know, Josef Albers was a guy who was very intently involved in meditation. Very few people know this about him, because he didn't want them to know about it. He considered it too personal. Now for a lot of people, Westerners, art historians, I think this would invalidate his art to some degree, that it was, possibly, intended to be meditational.

**Ashley Makar:** Because that was part of his creative process?

**Holland Cotter:** Because meditation isn't cool. Art that's functional, meditation that's functional like that isn't cool. There's got to be some intellectually removed, theoretical context for it that explains it. But to say, "No, you know, Josef really, he looked at all this tantric stuff all the time, and he really loved it, and when he was looking at colors he was



thinking tantric.” People don’t go for it. Now, maybe more, but when I was younger, they didn’t.

**Ashley Makar:** Right. There was more of a perceived rigid sacred/secular division.

**Holland Cotter:** Yes, exactly. Yes.

**Ashley Makar:** I’ve heard people criticize the Rubin Museum for presenting devotional objects in a sort of Western-museum kind of way. I’d be interested to get your feedback on the role played by museums (I guess, contemporary American museums) in their presentation of objects, of art?

**Holland Cotter:** I think the general idea is to secularize it, no matter what it is, and to evoke an aesthetic response to it. We’re trained that way and we view our set-up that way. It’s a funny thing, though, because they’re also set up a bit like secular church spaces where this stuff is all elevated, in some ... not to religion. Not to get rid of religion, but to infuse it with aesthetics and make aesthetics the new higher power, force. I think museums, like the MET, do that, and the Rubin does it, too. But they can be very smart about stuff. I’m trying to think of an example.

**Ashley Makar:** Did you happen to see the Rubin’s “Remember That You Will Die” exhibit?

**Holland Cotter:** Yes, remarkable, remarkable. To me, something like that is so important, to set up that very basic argument, or theme, and then interpret art through it, that’s the way it should be. That was what it was meant for, and the way it was viewed. That seems to be a very good example. Thank you.

**Ashley Makar:** Yes, I was thinking of that in terms of—to sit there and look at the objects in the show and think, this was a meditation on death for people.

**Holland Cotter:** Yes, and a meditation we all should have, will have, do, should have, in our lives. That was so valuable, to do that. You’re not going to find that at the MET. They’re just not going to do it. It’s too—I don’t know what. It just makes them nervous to do it.

**Ashley Makar:** Meaning curators?

**Holland Cotter:** Curators, yes. The whole structure is unlikely to do something like that. But what Susan was doing at the Museum for African Art. She was actually taking a theme—

**Ashley Makar:** She did the altars?

**Holland Cotter:** The altars, yes. Bob Thompson actually did it, but it was Susan’s museum. And she did many other shows in a similar vein, where she wanted to convey, in a Western secular situation, the fact that you’re looking at art that was seen as a living

thing, a living thing that mattered to your life, that affected your life, that affected your mood, that put you in touch with the past, your living past, ancestors. None of this is theoretical. This is all actual life that you lived daily. You lived in an animated world, a world animated by—I don't want to otherize this by making it sound like a cartoon. I really don't. But there is this component to it that was very real, and it's still alive. It has not died. It's still alive—in Africa, in Asia, many places, where it's not blotted out by noise. I don't want to sound like an old fogey, either, but they want electronic noise, you're putting this bubble of secondary images and projected TV images, and they're projected from who-knows-where, and it's not necessarily true in India or in Africa. For a museum to convey that is such a wonderful thing. It just really happened.

**Ashley Makar:** Yes, and it seems from your essay that your awakening to that “living-thing” quality of art was largely through looking at African masks. You talked about how, at the time when you were studying in Boston, you had seen a documentary film of African masquerade.<sup>7</sup>

**Holland Cotter:** It was in my class, actually. I was seventeen or something like that. It was the teaching assistant who was running the class. He was an Africanist, and he'd just been to Africa, and spent two summers there filming masquerades in Mali—I think in Ivory Coast and Mali. He was working on a dissertation. He had all this raw footage that was going to be part of his dissertation presentation, so he was just kind of giving it to us. Seeing how we reacted to it, and you know, “Gee, do you think I should cut that?” That kind of stuff.

**Ashley Makar:** Oh, that's great.

**Holland Cotter:** It was great. It was a work-in-progress for him, and we were just riveted. We would walk out and we were right across from the Ethnology Museum, and so we'd walk out, and he'd say, “The Dogon stuff's over there.” We'd just seen these Dogon masquerades being performed. “Those are the Dogon masks over there. Go take a look.” So we'd go take a look, and we just made the connection—it was all alive. It was great.

**Ashley Makar:** That's wonderful. You mentioned that you think Western European art, or Western art, is comparably alive. Can you give some examples of that? Or ways in which your awareness of that “living” quality of art you encountered, or became awakened to, in African art and religion translates into your appreciation of Western art?

**Holland Cotter:** If I go into churches and I see people worshipping the Madonnas or saints inside chapels and churches in America? Yes, absolutely, and in Europe, of course I'd see it there. I'd see—well, you know, that statue there is a plaster painted statue of the Virgin Mary, but it's not very different, actually, from the same statues that are in the Cloisters Museum of the Metropolitan Museum of Art that were made in the eleventh century. The feelings being projected toward it are the same as were being projected in the eleventh century. Its purpose is the same; it's just its form that is a little different. The line for me between art and popular culture vanished a long time ago. It's all part of the same thing, really. This thing in the Cloisters happens to be an image that I can see



Dogon Culture, Mask representing an antelope (Walu), 19th century

why it got saved because it's so beautifully made and so tender, and I'm sure people just looked at it and said, "ooh, that's extra special," and so it got saved. Probably, a lot of others that weren't quite as extra special didn't get saved. So people felt very tender toward it. There's that, there's the visual thing, but people go to a Roman Catholic church, and day after day after day they look at this shrine of somebody, Francis of Assisi maybe, or the Virgin, that is equally loved by them. This embodiment of that figure is a very living thing. I find churches to be vital places—vitality in inspiring places. I like the live-ness about that.

**Ashley Makar:** You spoke quite a bit at the beginning of your remarks about how, as a child in Concord, Massachusetts, you were steeped in the legacy of nineteenth-century transcendentalism. I'm curious as to how you think that might have shaped your aesthetic and/or spiritual sensibilities.

**Holland Cotter:** My own religious background in my family was equal parts New England Protestants and Catholics, Roman Catholics, but, by the time it came around to my



Chalkware sculpture of Our Lady of Grace, mid 20th century

parents, there was no religious practice at all. We didn't go to church or any of that kind of stuff, but what my mother did do was that she read me poetry as a kid. One of the poets she read me a lot was Emily Dickinson. You can't read Emily Dickinson without getting a sense of the spiritual content in the world. And then the Transcendentalists, Thoreau particularly, it was the same thing. It was Emily and Thoreau, looking at the world through spiritual eyes—not religious eyes, but through spiritual eyes, and particularly nature. I was immersed in nature as a kid. I was a big bird watcher and I liked to do anything you could do by yourself, that didn't involve other kids. I was a big reader, a huge reader. A lot of that was in the natural setting of Walden Pond. I biked over to Walden all the time. I guess I picked up on the idea of nature as a spiritual state. That lasted for me for a long time. That's what the Transcendentalists were doing. Emerson, looking at the universe through the "[transparent] eyeball"—it's a wonderful phrase he had. What it ended up being was—Louise Bourgeois once described herself,

religiously speaking, by saying “I’m an atheist. I’m a non-believer, but I have a religious temperament.” That made total sense to me. I completely understood that, and I think that Emily Dickinson was the same basically. So that has always been the way I’ve thought of myself. Where did the religious temperament come from? Where does temperament come from? I don’t know. It came from that poetry when I was a kid, from wanting to be alone when I was a kid—you have to draw on your own resources. You want to draw on your own resources. It just becomes who you are.

**Ashley Makar:** I’m glad you brought up your interest in poetry and the fact that you’ve read a lot of poetry. I noticed on your bio that you’re actually working on some of your own poetry.

**Holland Cotter:** I do, yes.

**Ashley Makar:** I’m curious about the relationship between your affinity for poetry and your affinity for visual art.

**Holland Cotter:** I think they’re interrelated, in ways that’s a little hard to describe. There’s a tradition in art criticism, actually, of poets being art critics. It goes back a bit. In my generation, Frank O’Hara, who was a curator at the Museum of Modern Art and an art critic was also a poet. Peter Shelton, who wrote for *The New Yorker*, began as a poet and may still be a poet, but he’s also an art critic. There’s a tradition of that, at least in New



Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 1999

York City. I feel like I fit into that tradition. Where that intersection comes exactly, I'm not sure. I've always assumed it was because I had that early MFA experience, plus the early experience of poetry when I was a kid. They've always been sort of linked in me, because of that early start. I love them both equally, so I can't separate them out.

**Ashley Makar:** And in writing art criticism you're using your poetic voice. You said you try to engage audiences first as a reading experience.

**Holland Cotter:** Yes, absolutely.

**Ashley Makar:** I'm interested in poetry also, and write some of my own poetry, too. That's helped me so much in journalism and vice versa.

**Holland Cotter:** Yes, really? I think so, too. Language and rhythm. Don't you find that? I do, very much. I actually find sometimes I'm writing in a certain, a poetic rhythm.

**Ashley Makar:** I think as a reading experience it's really important.

**Holland Cotter:** I think so, too.

**Ashley Makar:** You speak about the convergence of liberation politics and rituals in the sixties. How have your encounters with protest marches, street theater, and political violence shaped the ways that you approach artistic work? You can reformulate the question in ways that are more germane to what you want to speak about.

**Holland Cotter:** Well, I'm going to sort of wing it here, but I do always think of art in a political context; I almost never don't, I think. Either what it's saying or what it's not saying. What it's excluding or focusing on. I come back, of course, to Peter Schumann and Bread and Puppet, because in 1981 or 1982 they did a huge, unforgettable anti-nuclear march, up Fifth Avenue, with 10-foot-high puppets. It was amazing, amazing. But that's a rare thing to happen.<sup>8</sup>

**Ashley Makar:** I also wanted to ask you—you spoke about your work after college at a community hospital in Boston. You said that you have an affinity for art that engages with life and death, particularly the art that emerged from the AIDS epidemic.<sup>9</sup> You spoke of this as a type of responsive art. I'm curious what you think this type of responsive art does with regard to audiences' engagement with life and death, or with being responsive to political situations.<sup>10</sup>

**Holland Cotter:** Well, with the AIDS epidemic, the art that came around in that time had an intensely personal content. It came down to life-and-death issues. That show at the Rubin Museum was a good example of how a lot of AIDS art was about the same thing. I often try to think, well, I lived through that, so I saw that art being made when it was being made. I knew why it was being made, and I knew the people who made it. I knew all that. But will people 50 years from now, a hundred years from now, if somebody

brought together all that material, get that idea still? That it was alive that way, and for those reasons? I think they would. That was very on-the-line stuff. No nonsense about it. It's an emotionally no-frills art. That's the art I love the best, I always respond to the most, the strongest.

**Ashley Makar:** You mean AIDS art, or art that confronts death?

**Holland Cotter:** That confronts death—life and death.

**Ashley Makar:** I think it's fascinating that you say it's like a contemporary—it has affinities with the Rubin Museum kind of thing. Having people confront mortality, but a meditation on that.

**Holland Cotter:** Yes, a meditation. There are so many ways to talk about it, but you've got to talk about it. I mean, you are talking about it, anyway. You just are. Part of our culture



Frank Moore, *Hospital*, 1992

is to distract us from thinking about all kinds of things. Primarily that's what culture is for. Art can cut through that and give you a place to go, where you're allowed to, you're asked to, think about these things. Your life. Time passing and what love means. And so, art, when it's operating in a way that makes no sense to me, is art that's letting me go to that place and think about those things and clear a space for that kind of thinking to happen, which poetry does, too, in my view. That's what you read it for. That's why you read Emily. That's why you're shocked when you read her. Even when I was a kid my mom would read me—the Dickinson she was reading me was the easier Dickinson, the nature poetry, of course. But it was there still. I was still shocked by the language. And then, when I started to read her on my own, and I was very young when I started to read her on my own, and oh, wow, these things she's talking about!

**Ashley Makar:** I took a poetry-writing workshop with J.D. McClatchy—he's done a lot of anthologies.

**Holland Cotter:** Yes, sure.

**Ashley Makar:** One of the most interesting things that he talked about was how titles and punctuation can choreograph the reader's attention. In terms of the way art can be situated, there's a choreographing of viewers' interaction or attention. Is that something that resonates with you?

**Holland Cotter:** Oh, yes. A good curator can really take you through, kind of handhold you, in a good way, through ideas that are in visual terms. Yes, I definitely think so. And prepare you for a culminating answer—temporary—it's their answer, but they would acknowledge that it's just their answer.

**Ashley Makar:** As an art critic, in your writing are you aspiring to choreograph the experience?

**Holland Cotter:** Yes, basically, yes. If I'm in good form that's what I try to do, that's what I'm hoping to do. It doesn't always work.

**Ashley Makar:** Meaning, in good form in terms of your writing, or?

**Holland Cotter:** Yes. If I'm sure of my writing. If I'm in good shape, that's what I'm trying to do. Sometimes those deadlines are killers and you've just got to get stuff out, and you fall back on whatever you know.

**Ashley Makar:** Right, be resourceful.

**Holland Cotter:** Yes, you've got to be resourceful. Sure. You've got to watch out for that, too. You know, you've got to shake yourself up sometimes and realize, boy, you've really fallen into a routine. You know how to do this sort of thing, how to get it up in 1200 words, but you've got to shake this up somehow. Just get rid of that lead. Put another lead in there. Just for yourself, you know.



**Ashley Makar:** Because you're at the level of journalism where you don't have to be formulaic.

**Holland Cotter:** Right, you don't have to be. But the temptation is always to be formulaic.

**Ashley Makar:** Back to the AIDS art that you talked about, I was thinking about what art can do in non-museum settings, such as hospitals.

**Holland Cotter:** Right. Yes. It should be in hospitals and shelters, and it should be everywhere. That's its proper place, really. A friend of many years, an old boyfriend of hers died, from a long time ago. He was a painter and he left a big bunch of paintings behind. They're nice paintings. They're very accessible paintings. They're sort-of readable, figurative; they're kind of mysterious, a little bit surrealistic, a little bit Daliesque. Anybody who looked at them, even if they weren't into art, would kind of be intrigued by what was going on with the thing. So Esther said, "Well, what was I going to do with Don's paintings? He's left them to me, and I don't know what to do." And we figured out what to do—she's given them to nursing homes and hospitals.

**Ashley Makar:** Oh, wow.

**Holland Cotter:** Don would love this. This is exactly what he would love. So that's what we've done. We've just distributed his work in the city, so people can see it. So you've got something to look at there.

**Ashley Makar:** Back to my question about your (sort of) transcendentalist sensibilities, in your description of your appreciation of Thoreau, you said, "absorb everything, disturb nothing."<sup>11</sup> It made me think a lot about the sensory aspect of contemplative experience. It seems like that was a part of your engagement with nature and Thoreau's writing. If you could, what do you think is the sensory aspect of contemplative experience? Or of the experience of encountering art or images or nature?

**Holland Cotter:** Well, for me, being in nature was a really important part of it. It sounds like a cliché, but it makes total sense to me. I love animals, so I like to have animals around me. Being sensitive to weather, because of the wind and changes to weather and light. I always love all that. But it's also what makes going to holy places so meaningful to me. To be in a place that is basically dedicated to spirituality, whether it's a—well, I just recently had this experience in Africa, so that's on my mind—to go to the Great Mosque in Djenné and to go in and be in there, which is this living place where everyday people go to find the center of their lives, and to continue on with their day. It's both ordinary and more than ordinary, and just to be in there was stunning.

**Ashley Makar:** Were you there during prayer time?

**Holland Cotter:** No, I wasn't. I couldn't have been. But it was a great experience, and then I went to Ethiopia and went to Lalibela.<sup>12</sup> I spent a long time there. I went into the



Great Mosque of Djenné

churches, and I end up just touching the wall. It's such a deep spiritual experience. Not religious, but spiritual. Ok, spiritual for me. It's also partly because I've got Ethiopian friends. I've got one very old Ethiopian friend, who came to the United States when she was in college, for political reasons, and she was under a lot of pressure. She's never gone back to Ethiopia, even though the regime changed. She can't bring herself to go back, and so she's never been to Lalibela. She's an intensely religious person.

**Ashley Makar:** Orthodox?

**Holland Cotter:** Intensely. I was making this trip for her, in part. She knew I was going, and I was carrying her with me to this place.

**Ashley Makar:** You mentioned going to mosques and in your statement you said that you had, in graduate school, developed an interest in Islamic material. Mosques, ceramics, textiles, hand-written Qur'an pages.<sup>13</sup> Now that Islam has become a controversial topic of political interest, do you think there's potential for Islamic material to enter into the public conversation? For example, the "clash of civilizations." Can Islamic material have a role in that? What can it do?



Beite Ghiorgis, Lalibela, Ethiopia, 12th century

**Holland Cotter:** I think it definitely can, and it is. But the question is what people's approach to it is going to be. I feel, because of the political position that Islam has assumed over the last few years, that it's my job, my duty, really, to present another side to this. I adore this material. It's not an artificial duty. I came to it loving it. So now I feel like it's my job to convey some of that love for this stuff, to balance out the other view of Islamic culture.

**Ashley Makar:** And more broadly, what do you think art can do with regard to social and political conflict? I know that's a huge question.



Bread and Puppet Theater, Sourdough Circus

**Holland Cotter:** Well, my definition of art is broad. So I'm not necessarily thinking of objects, I'm thinking of acts as well. I tend to think of acts of passive resistance that are carefully planned visually as works of art. You're doing performance when you're doing passive resistance. You've thought of this carefully. You've thought of the visual effect it's having on people. Now, you're not going to call it art, but I'm calling it art, a form of art. And you're hoping to get a certain effect from it, or effects, more than one, actually. I'm thinking again of Peter Schumann, Bread and Puppet. I keep coming back to that because he's my best example, although there are many other examples of street-theater performance art during the time I grew up in the 1960s. Peter just happens to be the one I remember the most because I followed it through. I went up to his farm in New York and I saw the performances. He's an example of many others who have now, unfortunately, been forgotten because they weren't documented. So yes, I think art can have a huge effect, and I think you can think art and think politics simultaneously.

**Ashley Makar:** Your talking about non-violent resistance as a performative form of art reminds me of how much you wrote about the Civil Rights Movement in the essay. That seemed to be pretty formative for you.

**Holland Cotter:** And Occupy, by the way. I was stunned when I went to Occupy in Manhattan. I went there day after day after day, just to check it out. The choreography



Day 20 Occupy Wall Street, 10/5/2011, Photo by David Shankbone

was brilliant, and it was art. I don't think anybody there, if you had said to them, "Do you think this is art?" I don't think anybody would have denied that.

**Ashley Makar:** I was struck also by how your first encounters with death seem to have been acts of violence against Africans or African Americans, whether it was the prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the four young women who died in the church bombing in Birmingham, or the murder of the Civil Rights workers who were registering African Americans to vote in Mississippi. What do you make of that, of those being among your first experiences of death? And your appreciation for art that confronts life and death?

**Holland Cotter:** They were the shock experiences for me, and they were in some ways my first political experiences. My initial reaction to the speech of Lumumba<sup>14</sup> was "Wow, this is amazing." I don't know why I thought that, but I did. He was very eloquent (he was talking through a translator). Then to have him killed seemed inexplicable and wrong. Anyway, I don't know how it directly linked up to art. Those were just experiences that sensitized me to a world, in which bad things happened. Evil happens. And so, what do you do—how do you live with that? What do you do about that? Do you just forget about it and take sides? That didn't sound right. That didn't feel right. I guess some people find religion as a way to deal with it, or a rationale for it, or something, but for me, art ended up being that way to deal with that, to understand the gap, that this inexplicable thing happens when it shouldn't. Art seemed to be talking about those

big questions. That's what it was really about. Art seemed to be talking about those big questions without trying to slap an answer on them. It lets you have the questions and it gives you permission to keep those questions going, because they're not going to go away. It wasn't as though I had people to talk to about it. You know, my peers, or with adults. But art is something that—it's you and it's art and it's private—Emily was talking about it all the time. So you go have a talk with Emily Dickinson about this.

**Ashley Makar:** As a way of keeping those questions alive. And that shock.

**Holland Cotter:** And feeling you're not alone with them. You know that other people are right there with you on them.

**Ashley Makar:** Well, thank you so much for spending this time speaking with me.

**Holland Cotter:** Thank you.

© Ashley Makar

## Citation Guide

1. "Holland Cotter: An Art Critic on Art and Religion," by Ashley Makar, Interview, in *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion* (2014), doi:10.22332/con.int.2014.1

"Holland Cotter: An Art Critic on Art and Religion." By Ashley Makar. Interview. In *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion* (2014). doi:10.22332/con.int.2014.1

## Notes

1. In his essay for Religion and the Arts Awards ceremony, Cotter explained, "I've always seen my job as a salaried version of continuing education. And writing for a newspaper is not all that different from doing college coursework."

2. *Face of the Gods: art and altars of Africa and the African Americas* opened at the Museum for African Art in New York City in September 1993. Curated by Yale art historian Robert F. Thompson, the exhibit consisted of approximately 18 altars made of over 100 African and African-American objects. Some of these works are reconstructions of altars, some are historical religious objects that have been displayed in museums, and some are altars created and consecrated by religious leaders from Zaire, Cuba, Brazil, and New York. Based on Thompson's fieldwork in Africa and the Americas, the exhibit draws on two Afro-Atlantic altar traditions: The Yoruba (West African) concept of an altar as a "face of the gods" and the Kongo (Central African) concept of an altar as a

“turning point,” a cross-roads, a threshold to another world. (Robert Farris Thompson, *Face of the Gods: art and altars of Africa and the African Americas* (Museum for African Art: New York, 1993).)