ENGLISH SUMMARY

ART LIVES: CONTEMPORARY DUTCH VISUAL ARTISTS AND WRITERS EXPRESS THEIR WORLDVIEWS

Chapter one, the introduction, describes the research program “Between Secularization and Religionization” in which I participated. It introduces the research question “In what way do visual artists and writers express themselves about their worldviews?” as well as the subsidiary questions related to it. Concepts such as worldview, secularization, religionization, and spirituality are also examined. I describe in broad outline the qualitative research methods used, which go beyond existing quantitative research. In this discussion, I refer to, elaborate on, and offer criticism of the theories of Robert Wuthnow and Elliot Mishler in particular, because they too have engaged with the issues of worldview, narrativity, and artists.

In chapter two, the central theme is the way in which the thirty artists whom I interviewed tell their life stories. There is also attention given to the methodology that I used in analyzing these stories. Most artists are very capable of luring someone into their world of ideas and imagination. They may be eloquent in discussing their work, life, and worldview. The supposed uniqueness of the worldview of an artist raises a specific fieldwork problem in that the researcher is contaminated by the claim for idiosyncrasy. During my fieldwork, I plunged into these artistic universes. At first, these intense meetings clouded my view of the material collected. Fortunately, I did get a clear view of the data by choosing an interdisciplinary methodology for collecting and analyzing the stories collected, combining both anthropology and literary studies. Whereas anthropologists have thought about the ways people shape their identities, literary scientists help us to discover how artists display these identities in their life stories. When combining these perspectives, we realize that we should take into account the fact that artists who are telling their life stories try to fulfill the image that others – and they themselves as well – have created of
themselves. This image is an idealized image that never corresponds to actual reality.

The artist is more than a literary character, and several sub-identities resonate as well. These sub-identities produce dilemmas, and the way that people deal with these dilemmas provides important information.

Furthermore, it is often assumed that one of the most important goals of telling one’s life story is to persuade others and oneself that the life that one leads is a coherent one. For their life stories, however, being artists means that they can play with circumstances that matter for others but not for them, precisely because such an attitude emphasizes their originality. Artists often do not seek wholeness in a fragmented world, but call attention to the incomprehensiveness or disorderliness of their existence and to their double roles as human beings and artists.

Besides, we should be aware of our influence as interviewer on the narration of this story as well as on the story itself, as I illustrate in section 2.

In *chapter three*, I focus mainly on worldview, religion, and spirituality, and especially on the worldviews of artists. Worldview is considered to be a specific type of the cognitive and affective system for assigning order and meaning to the surrounding world. Religion may be considered a worldview in which answers to these fundamental questions are given by reference to a sacred, otherworldly reality. These definitions of “worldview” and “religion” offer us a handle on the ways in which artists envision their lives. The artistic worldview may be interpreted by some as a form of “believing without belonging”, while others may consider the artistic worldview to be a form of atheism. The opposition of many artists to traditional, authoritative religion can be massive. This, of course, has consequences for the ways in which artists construct their worldviews. For instance, the Bible and other established religious writings are rarely sources for the artist’s worldview. And yet, very often parts of a religious discourse are used when artists try to express their worldviews. For the underlying mechanism, I coined the term “search-and-replace” worldview: artists are apparently searching for a substitute for the religion which they once “received”, and while trying to find a completely new worldview, they nevertheless make implicit use of their “old religion”. Despite the claim to fully authentic uniqueness, the implicit use of “old religion” is a recurring pattern in the construction of the artistic worldview. I was able to group
my respondents in four types. I describe these four types of worldview in chapters four, five, six and seven.

My fieldwork data show that time and again the background of the respondent is the basis on which the current worldview is built. Twenty-four of the thirty artists with whom I spoke grew up in a churchgoing family. There was, however, hardly any discussion about religious beliefs at home. For many respondents, the religion of their younger years is therefore rather devoid of content. I found that artists do not reproduce existing worldview repertoires, but rather pick and choose parts of different worldviews which they then replace with and transform into their own interpretations. I saw this happen on three levels: in the use of sources, in worldview practices, and in language.

**Sources**

In the worldviews of artists, books play an important role as sources. Books provide artists with insights related to worldviews. They are particularly fond of books about personal experiences, because these provide artists with suitable ways of shaping their lives. Their choices in books cannot be called mainstream. For example, on their bookshelves we will not find bestsellers about spirituality, but rather alternatives comprising less obvious choices such as fiction or scientific works in the area of psychology or astronomy.

Besides, books are valuable because artists identify not only with their content but equally with the lives of their authors. Artists are also very fond of biographies, and they make use of the life stories of others in shaping their own lives.

**The Practice of Worldview**

In my research it became clear that those who had turned away from traditional religion replaced overtly religious practices with other less explicitly religious ones. Olav van Overbeek (1946) is one of the few respondents who still goes to church, and the practical expressions of his worldview therefore consist of religious activities such as visiting a monastery. The experiences that he has there are then shared with others through his work. The respondents in my study also compare their work process with meditation. Other respondents attempt to express or integrate certain experiences – often worldview-related – in their work and then to share this with the viewers or readers of that work. Often we can see a reflection of
the practical side of their worldviews in the ways in which the respondents structure their daily routines. In this too, they have looked for substitutes for the religion that they grew up with.

**WORLDVIEW LANGUAGE**

Worldview touches on experience and feeling. Usually it is difficult – for artists as well – to find fitting words for this. However, subjects related to worldview can sometimes be captured in sculptures or paintings.

Furthermore, one can distinguish four different worldview narratives in the life stories of the respondents. Of course, worldview-related language is linked with these different narratives. Through their use of language, visual artists and writers can distinguish themselves from others and thus emphasize their own worldviews.

In addition, there is a clear connection between sources and worldview language in that respondents borrow philosophical and ideological terms from books.

In chapters four, five, six, and seven, I describe the four different worldview types that I have distinguished based on the analysis of my data. The backgrounds of the artists, the sources they use, their worldview practices, and their worldview language are the elements that point the way towards charting their worldviews. Taking these elements as guiding criteria, I was able to group my informants into four types. The first type I labeled “worldview à la carte,” the second one I called “on the high board,” the third type is indicated by “and yet I am not alone,” and the fourth type I named “because all this is my religion.” The worldviews designated here should be seen as ideal types. The interesting thing about these four types of worldview is that gender and age play a significant role. Type 1 is represented by the youngest respondents, and from type 2 to type 4 the average age increases.

In chapter four, I present “worldview à la carte” (type 1). This type of worldview is represented by artists who were born in or after 1970. For the most part they grew up in churchgoing families, but they do not cherish this religious background. For them, religion is associated with dogmas, rules, narrow-mindedness, and superficiality.

The representatives of “worldview à la carte” use a variety of sources for the construction of their worldviews, and they mix high and low literature. Insights from Hermann Hesse are combined with quotes from
New Age books by former actress Shirley MacLaine. These artists not only draw on these books but sometimes literally use the terms of these books in their interview statements.

The worldview practices of these artists and writers are especially connected to their way of working. Irene X (1971), for example, thinks that the way her sculptures are created is similar to meditation.

The worldview language of artists that I group around this type can be typified by opposites. “Good” and “evil” (replaced by “trust” and “mistrust” respectively) from the church language that they grew up with seem to be the starting point for this dualist thinking.

In chapter five, “on the high board” (type 2) is described. The representatives of “on the high board” are all female. They feel the urge “to come home”; in other words, they want to return to the religion with which they grew up.

The artists who belong to “on the high board” use poetry to construct their current worldviews. Caren van Herwaarden identified her worldview by explaining to me and analyzing the poem “On the High Board”, written by Dutch poet and writer Willem Jan Otten. The representatives also identify themselves with certain aspects from the lives of the writers they quote. They do not model their own lives after these lives, but rather they look for certain aspects that could help them in difficult circumstances. For these representatives, the Bible is also a source.

Their way home also influences their worldview practices. Religious elements are thus also found in their work. Van Herwaarden spent half a year as an artist in residence in a monastery. Furthermore, she uses religious images in her work – a former taboo. The title of one of Jacolien de Jong’s (1961) expositions is: “En God dacht dat het goed was” (“And God thought it was good”).

The use that the representatives of “on the high board” make of language is personal. They frequently employ words such as “vulnerable,” “openness,” and “trust.” They also use the words of poets to express their most existential feelings. And they use poetical metaphors to speak about their insights on worldview.

In chapter six, I describe “and yet I am not alone” (type 3). Most of the exclusively male representatives of this type come from non-religious, intel-
lectual backgrounds. The relationship with their parents was often difficult.

The representatives of this type do not combine high and low literature. They quote important writers and thinkers and in this way show their erudition. Furthermore, they are interested in the lives of others. They love to read autobiographies and biographies. These books are used to direct their own lives, because they offer the artists answers to important questions.

The representatives of this type are strongly opposed to religion. They were not raised with a religious practice and therefore are not looking for substitutes.

Painter and writer John Huxley (1951) emphasizes that he does not believe in life after death. He is constantly aware of the final character of life. Painting and writing are his ways of coping with it: “a daily way.” Reading and thinking about life is the worldview practice of these respondents.

The representatives of this type often speak in a critical way about “the other” and about the society they are part of. These artists detest society, although they also speak about it in an ironic way. Their language is influenced by the writers and thinkers they have read and whom they frequently quote.

In chapter seven, I present “because all this is my religion” (type 4). Not all respondents of this type grew up in religious families. In some cases the church was visited incidentally, and in other cases (grand)parents were also interested in other forms of worldview and religion. None of the artists I group around this type are negative about their religious roots. Yet this does not mean that they still go to church. Rather it implies that religion in the most general sense is acknowledged and cherished by the representatives of this type. They find religion everywhere around them.

Poetry, literature, and philosophy are important sources for the construction of their worldview and work. Reading is also an important part of the way they spend their day. It gives them rest, and it offers the opportunity to think about their work and life. The artists see a similarity between the construction of their work and religion. Visual artist Marjolijn van den Assem (1947) thinks that her being an artist is her “signification,” “comfort,” and “religion.”
“The other” plays an important role in the way representatives of this type use language, yet in another way than is the case for “and yet I am not alone.” The representatives of “because all this is my religion” tell about valuable encounters with others. They consider the others as God-sent.

In chapter eight, I present my conclusions, first examining the plausibility of my research. All the respondents can be classified within the four types that I have distinguished. This means that my conclusions in all likelihood will hold for other people as well.

For this research I have relied most of all on the work of Elliot Mishler and Robert Wuthnow. Unlike Wuthnow, who has not worked out exactly what he understands by the terms “religion” and “spirituality,” I have in fact gone into this. We also differ in the area of methodology in that I have given an account of it in the report on my research. Also I show that artists have difficulty in maintaining certain narrative forms or devices consistently, and I am therefore of the opinion that many more subtleties are to be found in the stories of artists than Wuthnow’s work might indicate.

The longing of artists for authenticity and originality is mirrored in the way they have constructed their worldviews. They do not copy already existing repertoires, but rather look for replacements.

These findings are mirrored by their life stories. Because of the interdisciplinary methodology of my research, I was able to point out similarities between the individual life stories, which at first all seemed to be very authentic and personal, and based on these similarities, I was able to distinguish the four types of worldview.

Artists and writers, and the way in which they express themselves about their worldviews, are at the center of this study. During my fieldwork I sketched out worldviews that appeared at first sight to be authentic. However, their original character has to do primarily with how the substitutes that they make use of in realizing their worldviews are filled in, because after thorough analysis of the data it turns out that all of the respondents have the same kind of systematic foundation upon which their worldview takes shape.