

PREFACE

I have long used the category “disenchantment” when teaching and writing about the modern condition. In this, I am not unusual. This interpretation of modernity has been dominant for many years. To be modern, it claims, is to share in the disenchantment of the world. This is not just a thesis about the state of our psyche or the condition of human being; it does not just say that we moderns (those moderns?) are jaded or bored, lacking in ideals or commitment, frustrated or disappointed—in short, that we are (they are?) a disenchanted lot. It is also a thesis about the world itself. In the diagnosis of modern disenchantment is contained a decision about the nature, or lack thereof, of the world and what counts as real. It is as much a concern of cosmology as of anthropology.

This book addresses these cosmologies and anthropologies, and even the theologies of modern disenchantment. It is motivated by my own disenchantment with modern disenchantment—my sense that the models of modern disenchantment are no longer enough and that we need new models of human being, the world, and the relation of each to the other. On the basis of intimate encounters with particular works of art, *Arts of Wonder* therefore poses, without embarrassment, far-reaching questions regarding the nature, or lack thereof, of humanity, the world, and even God in the wake of modern disenchantment.

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“Disenchantment” as a diagnosis of modernity was employed most famously by Max Weber in his classic essay “Science as a Vocation.” There Weber wrote, “The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and above all by ‘the disenchantment of the world.’” The increasing intellectualization and rationalization of the age means, he continued, that “principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, mas-

ter all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted.” Mysteries having been banished, the world that remains is one we can *count on*, reliably and predictably, precisely because it is one we can *count up*, measure and compute in a calculative science. In such a world, “one need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service.”¹ Thanks to the ever increasing calculative capabilities of knowledge and science, and owing to ever more effective technologies, we have the power to order and organize, make and manipulate, the world in accordance with reasons of our own.

Following Weber, disenchantment is not simply a matter of the death of God or of the gods, demons, and spirits; it is not simply a challenge to theology or religion. Rather, it concerns the dismissal of the very notion of “mystery” from our encounter with the world and with ourselves. Disenchantment, then, is a signal of healthy-minded autonomy. A good modern, the story goes, is disenchanted: he does not come under the spell of mysteries, nor is he held in thrall by the charm of unspeakable wonders. He lets his actions and decisions be organized as methodic and systematic means in pursuit of known ends, and he can, precisely because he calculates means to pursue ends “controlled by the intellect,” offer a reasonable account of all he does.

And yet, however empowering the project of disenchantment and demystification might be, many today have grown disenchanted with modern disenchantment and are seeking a new story to tell about it. They sense the lovelessness of the world fostered by the calculative thinking that dominates modern economic, scientific, and philosophical logic. They feel the absence of charm and wonder as deeply enervating. And they suspect another truth, one in which the world might come to light in a far more wonderful way.

Can the spell of modern disenchantment be broken?

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Taking its point of departure from Weber’s thesis, *Arts of Wonder* looks to significant artwork of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to stage intimate encounters with modern disenchantment. The works of art I encounter are most often thought to be representative of secular modernity and therefore to share in the disenchantment of the world, but listening to the appeal of these appealing works, I was surprised to find myself invoking a vocabulary that I had long kept at a distance. These works of art work, I found, make places where we might encounter mystery and

wonder, hopes for redemption and revelation, transcendence and creation—longings traditionally cultivated and addressed in religious traditions, but that, when developed through the encounter with these works of art, are nevertheless crucial aspects of enchanting secularity.

By exploring these themes through encounters with cutting-edge works of art, *Arts of Wonder* suggests that one need not look only to traditional religion or religious traditions for refuge from the vicissitudes of human being in the world set up by modern disenchantment. A “secular” response to these challenges can also be cultivated, without fleeing the modern condition. But, having been trained in theology, I understand, too, that it is the task of religion, as much as of art, to help us creatively affirm our worlds (or not). Religion does this by offering an interpretation of the world that lets us see a god revealed in or through it—which implies that it elaborates for us an image of a god so that we might find it (or not) in the worlds where we dwell. I try in this book to do both.

Insofar as my engagement with religious texts and practices is not simply critical, I risk being taken by strident defenders of a purely secular and disenchanted modern art as a leftover from a supposedly religious past. Inversely, insofar as my response to our disenchantment with modern disenchantment is elaborated through secular works and not religious traditions, I risk being taken by the traditionally religious or religiously traditional as irrelevant, insignificant, or even profane. Let the reader read, I say. I leave it to him or her to decide: Do these religious considerations deepen and prolong our encounters with the work of art, the best criteria art writing could adopt? Do the works of art let us see an image of the divine in the world we inhabit, the best way religion has of bringing significance to today’s world?

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The book is organized into an introduction and five chapters, each of which revolves around an encounter with a work of art. The majority of the works treated are site-specific; many can be classified as earthworks or land art. This makes the question of place or of sacred places an important subtext of this book. It is organized almost as much around the individual artworks as around the places into which these artworks gathered me.

On the basis of intimate encounters with these places and these works of art, I test the limits and possibilities of disenchantment and enchantment by asking a type of question adopted from Michel Serres and Martin Heidegger, each of whom, in different ways, suspects that we heirs of modern disenchantment have become world-less to the degree that we

don't deal with things, that we no longer experience what it means to dwell as human being to the degree that the things of a world have been reduced to our objective knowledge, representation, or picture of them. My encounters with these works have taught me the importance of this claim, even if I do not accept their theses unquestioningly.

What are the things that appear in a world? What is our model for a thing? Is it the object met in the laboratory, so easily submitted to mastery and control? Or are there richly endowed, wonderful things, provoking experiences other than mastery and control, perhaps even enchanting experiences? These latter are the things with which the artists I engage work: lightning at Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field*; clouds with Diller + Scofidio's *Blur*; the sky and light itself in James Turrell's art; and driftwood and melt, rivers and tides in the work of Andy Goldsworthy. What if we took clouds as our model for what counts as reality, not the carts we crashed together in the high school physics lab? What if we remembered the lightning flash that brought the world momentarily to light, and did not start with the lighthouse that brings ships safely ashore by harnessing and duplicating the power of the sun? The inclusion of these things in the artistic work of creation makes for a world rich with enchanting possibilities, yet one that remains a worldly work of human being in the world.

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This book is the register of my journeys to these places and of my encounters with these works of art. It aims to maintain the striving and uncertainty of an encounter in which you do not always know what you want to say before you say it—very often because the effect the thing has is to give you new and unexpected words. A tentative and probing way—striving and remaining open—this is the way we proceed when we encounter something wonderful. I would like to think this book adopts a corresponding form of literary composition. That style or form is one that leaps between genre and disciplines and ventures tentative thoughts. The holes and loose ends are meant as invitations; sometimes an incomplete thought or word can be the most generous one given to a reader.

It also aims to maintain some of the intimacy of an encounter. I therefore say “I” and share my stories. If this risks putting my I on a stage populated by more abstract issues and texts from philosophy, theology, and cultural theory, it is not without some hesitation and embarrassment that I do so, but it is ultimately important to the work the book wants to do. Telling these stories is not meant to establish the unimpeachable authority of individual identity (my own, in this case) and its extratextual experience. It is rather meant to stage or perform in person, as it were, some

of the conceptual concerns of the texts and theories with which I wrestle with students. On some level, this book is for them: students and former students, not necessarily my own, but anyone who remains studious in their life outside and after the university, still wondering about the world and the human being who inhabits it.

As the expertise we manufacture in the university, even in the humanities where I teach, leads to more and more specialized knowledge, and as the scope and scale of the knowledge that our microscopic specializations produce become more and more gigantic, we risk losing sight of the impact that our knowledge and the concepts we elaborate have on our lives. What does it mean, if anything, or what is it like to experience, or not, this knowledge we transmit? Is the life of the university just an abstract relation to ideas, or is our discussion in the classroom rendered sterile and alienated from itself when cut off from the person or existence of those who meet there?

Through both the records of my own experience and the questioning after things, this book is meant to convey my sense of the urgency of these ill-framed questions. It is therefore a book about clearings and the light, clouds and lightning, driftwood and melting snow, not only a book about God, Self, and World in the condition of modern disenchantment. If the critic suspects a lack of specialization and questions the possibility for expertise in chapters that draw from so many disciplines and genres, each seeming to gloss the other, without ever arriving at one and staying there comfortably, then he has experienced something of what I find wonderful in what comes or can come in the wake of modern disenchantment as it surges on.

