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## **Mix My Religion**

The Work of Ina Wudtke

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One person's liberation can mean insecurity for another. We live in an era of inequality and discrepancies that are both created by modern society and the focus of its attentions. There is a need to acknowledge that constellation in order to reflect on how behavior patterns, role models and even laws are constituted. Ina Wudtke uses her work to address the issue of role models and their institutional place in a modern, democratic society. The artist references not only handed-down traditions, often characterized these days as fundamentalist or folkloric, but also on reasonable ways to counter them interpretively.

Wudtke calls her work research. It's clear why when you look at "Believe", which she created between 2001 and 2004. "Believe" is a series of photographic portraits assigned to three groups. "Jewish Orthodox Believers" are portraits of Jewish Orthodox men from New York; "Benedict Monks" shows Benedictine monks in Germany and "Orthodox Muslim Believers" are orthodox Muslims in Istanbul. All of the people portrayed in the piece have one thing in common: they can be classified as members of a patriarchal, monotheistic religion – Judaism, Christianity or Islam.

Her fundamental interest in these portrait studies is the fact that even current, modern legal systems that characterize themselves as neutral are clearly prefigured by religious systems. A look at marriage laws makes this explicit. For a concise analysis of power systems, it makes sense to focus initially on the role patterns of religious communities. So in the first version, "Believe – Original", Wudtke's portrait groups follow an historical course. They are organized into three arrow shapes in a row, so they look like an oversized fast forward symbol. If one assumes an historical, linear passage of time, then you could say that Judaism appeared first, then Christianity and then the much more recent religion of Islam.

Her stories are often accompanied by geographic, political and cultural battles that also serve endow each side with its own identity. So Wudtke's particular form of intensification and concentration is a graphic illustration not only of how solidly anchored religion's power complex, and therefore also the patriarchal power complex, is in global society, but also how they mutually reinforce each other by their relationship.

Given the conditions of the secular modern age, however, this should actually appear contradictory to us and needs to be exposed as a recurring pattern. But even the "Enlighten-

ment” project didn’t succeed in doing that. It’s true that a secular point of view disallows a religious perspective. Nonetheless, even the European Enlightenment can be categorized as a model of the search for truth that was never entirely free of religious tendencies. Only the staunch return of experiencing and analyzing a world that constantly renegotiates what constitutes reason tackles the state of modern society. In that framework, art – with its anthropological and social links – acquires a specific significance.

So regardless of religious orientation, Wudtke uses her position as an artist to draw attention to those blind spots in the legal and religious systems. She portrays their allocation of role models for women and men, their concealed influence on the laws of secular legal systems and their share in the processes of democratization. Wudtke exhibited her work “Believe” several times, using varying media for key elements.

As part of the 2005 exhibition “Focus Istanbul”, the photographs were presented on three screens as slide shows, titled “Remix #1”. A fourth screen showed an interview where two female theologians and political scientists discussed how powerful the influence of the various patriarchal religions is on marriage law and the legal rights of women and men. While we can undoubtedly see differences within the various legal systems and differing perceptions of those rights, we nonetheless recognize how they permeate each of the subject cultures. In this way, Wudtke proves how powerfully local religions have influenced modern, secular and positivist law, even in Western cultures.

In the Meerrettich Gallery, situated in a glass pavilion near the Volksbühne Theater in Berlin, Wudtke mounted the material in a new context with the title “Remix #2”. She turned the gallery into a Turkish tea pavilion. Wudtke was referencing a well-known Berlin club called SO36 that for the last few years has hosted the Gay Hane Turkish-gay dance evenings. Among other things, Wudtke used the textiles that decorate the club. On the exhibition’s opening night, visitors were greeting with tea in an atmosphere most resembling a lounge. Thus her photographs, which were shown as projections, were linked with a club night organized by gay Turks, which has become very popular with Berlin club-goers and functions as a meeting spot for a public that is particularly despised in Islamic cultures. The synergetic exhibition drew attention to an existing Turkish culture that, in Istanbul, is often met with human rights violations by police.

Wudtke, known in Berlin’s club scene as “T-Ina Darling”, was alluding to her work as a DJ. The term “remix” stems from the DJ’s practice of mixing up a new version of whatever elements of an original piece of music are appropriate to the specific venue (dance club, bar-lounge, radio). In a certain respect, Wudtke uses that method in her work as an artist too. Within a given context, her works evoke a different sense of empathy that relates to the experiences and analyses of the location and its specifics. She takes into account forms of improvisation that are familiar to us from Afro-American culture, which creates culture using far more hybridization and differential thinking than in the European tradition.

That understanding is relevant to other works by Wudtke. The video and sound installation “Vinyl Soundscape” was created together with Inga Svala Thorsdottir. Five video monitors show various album covers for music that is pretty clearly white, German pop music from the 1950s. In performance clips, Thorsdottir pulverizes the covers and records, while Wudtke remixes the sounds of the destruction into an audio collage. The piece makes the complex-

ity of a real remix clear on various levels. As “workers” and DJs, they deconstruct the image of women in music videos; they deconstruct the inventory of white, mainstream culture not only materially, but also at the audio level. And the two artists function as a small engineering machine, recycling the refuse of the pop culture industry.

Wudtke is, however, capable of respecting the sensitive area of symbolic identification. Her work “LOVE”, which comprises a large number of portraits of boy-group fans, brings precise clarity to the stereotypical model of a fan. Young girls attending concerts by ‘N Sync and The Back Street Boys show off. Their gaudy make-up and handmade signs are proof of their reverence and admiration. But this quality of esthetic experience is juxtaposed with the stereotypical identification with a mass media cultural product. To make this paradox absolutely clear, Wudtke has assembled the pictures to spell out letters that distill the unilateral aspect of this love – the individual and group portraits spell out an enormous L.O.V.E.

Her work “Heal and Destroy”, structured as a polarity, juxtaposes the role of men as soldiers and women as nurses. It contains formal methods that take on even the ornamental in all its perfection. The portrait series shows soldiers from the ceremonial troops of the German armed forces. The chosen personnel work at ceremonial state events. On the other hand, there are pictures of German nurses. Wudtke is exploring the allegedly neutral role of women as war nurses, usually working for organizations like the Red Cross, which however are often subordinate to the various ideologically assertive institutions, making them handmaidens of war, accomplices of the troops. The exhibition of the work breaks through the polarization by having the presentation follow certain formal rules. The portraits are hung linearly, leading one beginning at the left to expect alternating 1:1 portraits of the men and women. But instead they build structures that possess their own rhythm, with blank spaces next to new beginnings. But even the horizontal orientation is, in the end, reflected back so that the dualistic allocation of roles is turned in on itself. So, like sound waves, the images allow for an analysis that lets us view the roles and their “naturalness” in full ornamentation.

Ina Wudtke has been working on issues of gender theory and gender policy since 1992, including co-founding the magazine “Neid” (Envy) with Heiko Wichmann and Claudia Reinhardt. Wudtke considers the magazine a joint art project, with a constantly-changing constellation of international writers, performers, musicians, artists, photographers and so on meeting and working on concerted themes. Creative work, especially from the perspective of mass culture and the art market, needs new societal contexts and networks, with publications, thought and art criticism working under changed conditions toward their realization

Wudtke’s work “Gaps in Berlin” addresses the issue of networks. Wudtke traces the network of Jewish life in Berlin that was destroyed by the Nazi regime and later architecturally “re-touched” with post-war construction policies. When the Berlin wall fell and triggered a re-historicization of a unified Germany, it became clear how old bricks and mortar traces were re-occupied and thus erased from memory. Wudtke visited the various locations, making a kind of artistic archive available that shows the interface of social, ethical and esthetic memory.

In all her work, Wudtke focuses on the critical function of art. Above and beyond the potential availability of art, she asks us to view art in its modern incarnation as a tool that can serve to stimulate the viewer and therefore society to self-examination. Her working methods pose questions to society within the scope of art and further creative reflection within the scope of society.