Far too often, religiously themed exhibitions result in a fine collection of pious, sentimental, and modestly crafted pieces brought together for a festival of religious and artistic mediocrity. It is right to approach such events with cautious skepticism. But, with regards to *100 Artists See God*, it is worth swallowing that initial swelling of pretense in order to experience the varied strengths of the works included.

This exhibition opened in the spring of 2004 at San Francisco’s Contemporary Jewish Museum. The show is traveling nationally over the next two years, and is also available as a print catalogue. Sponsored by Independent Curators International (ICI), art world veterans John Baldessari and Meg Cranston have assembled a rare confluence of artists dealing with subject matter that is typically shied away from in contemporary galleries. But as the curators point out, the world is profoundly influenced by concepts of God, concepts held by believers and unbelievers alike, and especially in our current political climate. As Baldessari describes in the pitch for the show, “God is news” (*100 Artists* 6). With this in mind, the show asks a natural question: as voices of expression in our culture, what do artists have to say about God? The answer is a mixture of the irreverent, irrelevant, silly, serious, pious, considered, and possibly revelatory.

Just over a hundred artists were approached and asked to create new work, or submit existing work, in response to the theme “artists see God.” The curators were quite clear that this was about representing God, not about their own belief. And so, the artists were chosen not according to their own faiths or lack thereof, but because the curators knew and respected their work.

Many of the people involved have impressive résumés: Chris Burden, Andreas Gursky, Damien Hirst, Roy Lichtenstein, Paul McCarthy, Gerhard Richter, and Ed Ruscha. The list of over one hundred artists is filled with quite a few recognizable names. Interestingly enough, a great many of the prominent artists who often use religious iconography are absent: Andreas Serrano, Robert Gober, Bill Viola, to name a few. While a single art show cannot be all-inclusive, one does suspect that there may have been some attempt to draw representations of God from people who are not likely to offer them up on their own. While
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denying that any conscious attempt was made in this direction, Baldessari did confess that such a motive was implicit in the request made of the artists. “It was a bit like fishing... to see if they would take the bait” (Baldessari, Personal Interview). Maybe it takes something like this to get these artists to speak on this touchy and unfashionable subject.

Before examining the particular works in the show, there is one more curatorial issue to be addressed. Alongside each of the images, in an unfortunately large font on the wall label, is a category to which each piece has been assigned. They follow a set form, “Artists see God as—,” with the blanks filled in with such categories as Architect, Everywhere, Ineffable, Light, Love, Tyrant, and the Extraordinary Force of Nature. It is nearly impossible to look at the works without these categories looming large. Baldessari confided that neither he nor Cranston wanted to pigeonhole the work, but ICI and the exhibiting venues requested this parsing of the exhibit (Baldessari, Personal Interview). Purportedly these groupings are there for the benefit of the viewer, to help them grapple with and assimilate the work. But the categorization does little more than spoil it. And, even more dumbfoundingly, some of the works do not seem to make any real sense in relation to their assigned category. Must it be that the devout are too dull to understand art, and the artistically erudite are too heathen to understand the transcendent? In the catalogue, these categories appear as chapter headings, and are slightly less invasive. After turning the page of the chapter introduction, the reader no longer has to be reminded of the ways in which she is asked to classify the pieces. Even if the categorization was done with the best of intentions, it is insulting, and has a nasty tendency to force or limit interpretations of the works. The heavy hand of the curator should have left more to the subtler hand of the creator and the discerning eye of the viewer.

If we manage to look past the labels, we see very little work that borders on the pious and sentimental. Although a couple of pieces do tread lightly into that territory, even if only to defuse it. Simon Patterson’s Landskip (2000), where shafts of light filter through trees and colored mist that turns out to be an army gas grenade test, is a good example of this. There are also works that, quite frankly, appear to have been chosen as a random response to the theme of the show, exhibiting no coherent relationship to “seeing God.” Some of these seemingly desultory works can be better understood by reading the artist statements, but these statements are only found in the catalogue, and are not present in the exhibition. The most common revelation is that the work is an allusion to some sort of pantheism or panentheism. While these