# EXHIBITING GOD

# THE CURATORIAL AS THEOLOGICAL METHOD

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ABSTRACT

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Daniel A. Siedell

*Exhibiting God* proposes *museal theology* as a constructive framework for academic theology in a post-Christian, post-secular world. Its central argument is that academic theology is best understood as the museal afterlife of Christendom and Christian faith, a discourse that has always arrived late, at a distance, after the faith and practice that generated it. Rather than mourn this condition of lateness and distance, *Exhibiting God* follows a Proustian logic: it is in the afterlife of artifacts, separated from their original contexts and re-displayed in the museum that new creative and theological possibilities emerge.

The art museum serves as both conceptual metaphor and methodological resource in this project. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's claim that the museification of the world is an accomplished fact and Donald Preziosi's argument that the museum is modernity's pre-eminent epistemological technology predicated on a latent secular theologism, the project argues that theology and the museum share a fundamental structural identity. Both manage the conditions under which artifacts, ideas, and beliefs become visible, legible, and credible. Both are defined by their lateness relative to the living practices they preserve and interpret. And both rely on and generate belief rather than merely display or present it. *Exhibiting God* thus borrows its organizing metaphors from the mechanisms by which art museums manage what is visible and invisible, present and absent, intimate and distant, such as vitrines, lighting, juxtaposition, conservation, documentation, reproduction, and installation.

This project develops *curating* as an appropriate theological method for this museological situation—a practice of display, juxtaposition, and interpretive framing through which meaning emerges from the charged space and friction between artifacts rather than from any single authoritative source. *Exhibiting God* suggests that in a museified world, theology *is* a museological discourse, sharing the museum's fundamental concern with managing visibility, invisibility, and belief, where theology's constitutive lateness becomes the condition of its continued creative vitality in a world in which the museification of art, religion, politics, and nature are, as Agamben claims, "an accomplished fact."

# DEDICATION

To the memory of my father, Barry (1942-2025), my mother, Linda, and my sister, Angie.

You have always supported me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....viii

Prologue: Afterlives, New Lives, Other Lives.....1

PART ONE

Staging the Project.....23

Aim and Research Questions.....26
Previous Research.....27
Research Methods.....32
Curating.....43
Excursus: *Deus sive Natura*.....68
Secular Sweden.....74

Theory and Method: Voids, Veils and Vitrines.....85

Religion.....94
Creativity.....98
Faith-Belief.....103
What is Theology? Who is a Theologian?.....109
Excursus: Dust.....120

Curating Decay: Theology as Museology.....137

The Figure of the Cathedral in Swedish Theology.....146
Mattias Martinson.....148
Excursus: Sacrament, Auditorium, Bible Study.....167
Petra Carlsson Redell.....172
Excursus: Proust's Village Church.....191
Conclusion.....193

PART TWO

Cusa's *Sensibile Experimentum* and Benjamin's Exhibition Value.....196

A Fifteenth-Century Theological Text.....197
The Artwork Essay.....218
Conclusion.....240

The Mystic Lamb's Face: Conservation, Theology, Display.....243

The Mystic Lamb Gets a Twitter Account.....244
Origins, Historical Context and Iconography.....245
Museum vs. Cathedral.....263
The Apocalypse of the Mystic Lamb.....271
Mystic Lamb through the Shroud.....286
Pilgrim, Tourist, Mystic.....295

Afterlives in Hanover and Barjac.....306

*Gesamtkunstwerk*.....306
*Merzbau* in Hanover, Germany.....313
La Ribaute in Barjac.....337
Conclusion.....363

Conclusion: Afterlives in Sweden.....366

The White Cube in Bromma.....369
Palliative Theology in Södermalm.....375
Bees in Visby.....383

Bibliography.....388

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*Exhibiting God* is an experiment in curatorial method and so my experience teaching in the M.A. Curating program at Stockholm University and in the M.A. Curating program at Aarhus University in Denmark have both played an important role as I have developed curatorial theory and practice might serve as a theological method and a platform for transdisciplinary collaboration.

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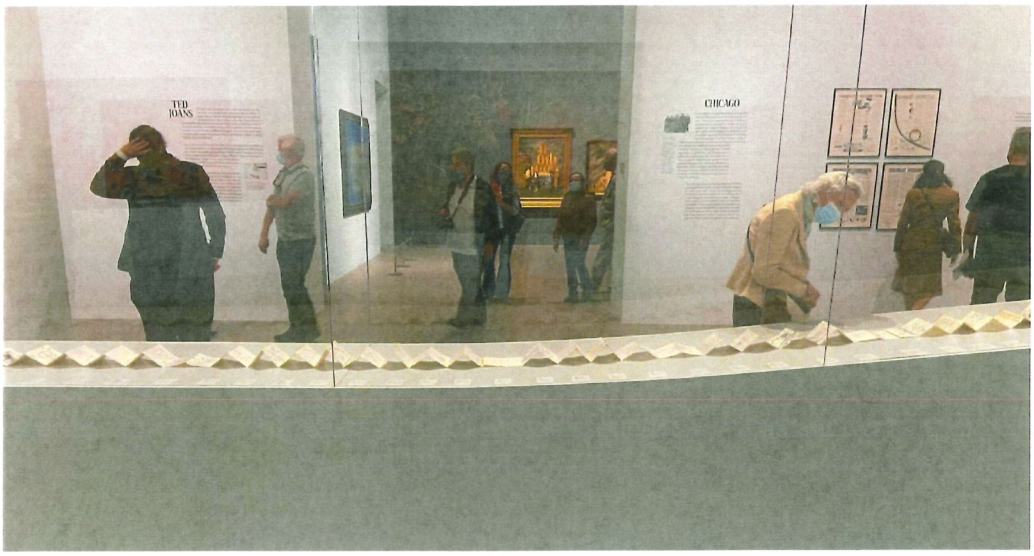
# PROLOGUE

## AFTERLIVES, NEW LIVES, OTHER LIVES




And He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"
—Ezekiel 37: 3

From 11 Oct 2021-30 Jan 2022, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City presented *Surrealism Beyond Borders*. It consists of exhibition of over one-hundred works of art from 45 countries that documented the global influence of Surrealism, the art and literary movement founded by the poet André Breton in Paris in the late 1920s. One work attracted considerable attention from the critics as well as the viewing public, which theorist and art historian Hal Foster called the "centerpiece" of the exhibition.[1] It is a drawing composed by a Surrealist method of creation, a game called *cadaver exquis* or "exquisite corpse," in which participants contribute a drawing or piece of writing

[1]Hal Foster, "Surrealism beyond Borders," *London Review of Books* 44/10 (26 May 2022).

unaware of the previous contributions. The result strings together images and words that rely on chance and random juxtaposition to produce a collective work without a singular creative intention. The work stretches over eleven meters long, includes 132 contributors from all over Africa, Europe, Mexico, and the United States and spanning thirty years. Started in 1976, its last contribution was in 2005, two years *after* Joans's death. The artist, Ted Joans, called the work *Long Distance*, and its contributors his "dream people," friends and creative collaborators that he met during the last twenty-five years of life. To call Joans the maker of *Long Distance*, however, is deceptive. He conceived of the work and it accompanied him on his travels and he invited others to contribute to it. But he was not responsible for *any* of the drawings. A painter, musician, poet, and Black activist, Joans famously claimed that "jazz is my religion, surrealism is my point of view." Born in 1928 in Cairo, Illinois (the southernmost tip of Illinois—closer to Kentucky than Chicago), Joans grew up in Louisville and Fort Wayne, Indiana, graduating from Indiana University. He spent most of his life, however, outside the United States, living in Paris primarily, but also in Copenhagen, Vancouver, Timbuktu, Algiers, and traveling throughout Africa.[2] He brought the thirty-seven-foot-long perforated dot-matrix printing paper along with him on his travels, carefully folded and protected in packages, which he called "skins." The contributors commemorate his travels and his relationships—old and new friends—including musicians, painters, poets, such as Allen Ginsberg, Octavio Paz, Dorothea Tanning, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William Burroughs, Robert Creeley, Dick Higgins, and Allison Knowles. Joans described the work as a "continuous idea of a

[2]See Joanna Pawlik, "Ted Joans: Overseas Surrealism," in *Surrealism Beyond Borders* (Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University, 2021), 160-67; Steven Belletoo, "Coda: Atmospheric Rivers," in *Black Surrealist: The Legend of Ted Joans* (London: Bloomsbury, 2025), 395-400.

collective or collaborative authorship, in which an ongoing composite image is producing its own meaning undetermined by a single participant."

The last person to contribute to *Long Distance* during his lifetime was the artist David Hammons, who agreed to add a drawing if he could film the process, which he did on 8 Sept, 2001 in New York City. Not long after Hammons contributed to and filmed Joans unfolding and discussing *Long Distance*, Joans presented it to his partner Laura Corsiglia in 2001 as a gift with the request that after he died, she could contribute the final drawing and conclude the work. Corsiglia did so in 2005, two years after Joans's death.

The work had been exhibited publicly just once, in 2019, as part of David Hammons's presentation of his film on the work, *Ted Joans: Exquisite Corpse* (2001) at Lumiar Cité, a project space in Lisbon, Portugal. In the press release for the exhibition, Corsiglia described it as a "treasure map of friendship expanding through time, space, and disciplines."[3] Corsiglia agreed to lend this "treasure map of friendship" and precious personal gift from her partner to the *Surrealism Beyond Borders* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was displayed unfolded on a custom-designed pedestal and protected by a Plexiglas vitrine and a separate pedestal that presented the packaging that protected and transported the artifact that enabled viewers to imagine its previous life as it accompanied the artist on his travels as part of the work's "historical context."

The artifact was installed among a constellation of other artifacts organized around three exhibition themes: one called *Ted Joans*, which featured paintings, collages, and other artifacts by the artist; another was *Chicago*, which focused on the Chicago

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[3]Press Release, 26 Feb, 2019.

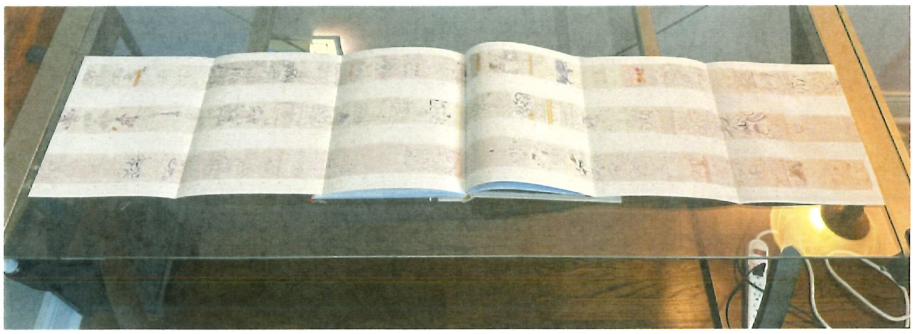
Surrealist Group in which Joans was involved and helped shape the political activist and arts scene that defined the city in the 1960s; and finally, a wall called *Revolution, First and Always*, which focused on personal transformation and social liberation as crucial values for Surrealism as a means for achieving political and existential emancipation. The works displayed throughout this constellation of themes weaves *Long Distance* into a particular time, place, and artistic intention, which enables it to be interpreted as and in relation to other works of art that create resonance and shared concerns with other works.



Installation view of the exhibition, *Vital Signs: Artists and the Body*, Museum of Modern Art. Photograph by Jonathan Muzikar.

After the exhibition closed in January 2022, the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired *Long Distance* from Corsiglia and in 2024 it was featured in another exhibition for which it served a different purpose. Called *Vital Signs: Artists and the Body* (Nov 2024-Feb 2025), which included over 100 works by 65 artists that sought to offer an "expanded account of abstraction in the 20th century by exploring the work of artists

for whom the bodily and the abstract are deeply intertwined."[4] The work was again stretched out but presented in and protected by a slightly different version of a vitrine that positioned and presented each "page" in a more formal manner, focusing more detailed attention on each of the panels than the display at the Met a few years earlier. It was exhibited among works by Anna Mendieta, Sandra Payne, Suzanne Jackson, and Cecilia Vicuña, among others, however, without its "skins"—thus making less visible its previous life as Joans's personal traveling companion. It was presented in a spacious room dedicated to a theme called *Multitudes*, which explored different iterations of seriality, collectivity, and the multiplicities that constitute human presence and experience in both subject and format. In addition, the catalogue produced in association with the exhibition offered an elaborate and detailed fold-out of the work, including a photograph of its packaging, the handwritten names of the contributors as well as a more detailed-type set list of those contributors with their own biographical information.[5]



[4]Press Release, MoMA, 6 June 2024.

[5]Lanka Tattersall, *Vital Signs: Arts and the Body* (New York: MoMA, 2024).

*Surrealism Beyond Borders* at the Met and *Vital Signs* at MoMA changed *Long Distance* by making less visible its previous life. *It turned it into a work of art*. Not that it wasn't "art" to begin with—a creative practice that resulted in a particular material artifact that could be experienced aesthetically and interpreted—but both exhibitions could be said to have *museified* the work through the mechanisms, frameworks, and apparatuses at the disposal of the museum that made it visible and thus legible as an artifact of art history, that is, as interpretable through the themes and concepts of the discipline. The result was that the personal, biographical, and idiosyncratic nature of *Long Distance* receded into the background as *art history*. This transformation that the museum accomplished did not erase the personal dimension of *Long Distance*. Rather, its identity as a museum art work was *overlayed* on top of its previous life as a travel companion—his personal "map of friendship"—and then through its dormancy in storage with Corsiglia. The result was that it made its original life secondary to this art historical and museal overlay and thus *less visible*, or, rather, visible in a specific way—as *background information*. Its documentation, research, and interpretation that was produced in the exhibition's catalogues and then the critical attention *Long Distance* received in reviews of the exhibitions further established and entrenched this new life, a different life, one shaped by the museum and its multiple apparatuses of display, reproduction, documentation, and interpretation.

The capacity of art museums to give works of art new lives while reducing the visibility of their previous, or original life, has troubled commentators and theorists since the emergence of the art museum in the early nineteenth century. T.W. Adorno addressed

one characteristic of this capacity in an essay entitled, "Valéry Proust Museum (1955)."[6] As Adorno observes, "Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art. They testify to the neutralization of culture."[7] This "neutralization" transforms them into objects that can be preserved, observed, studied, and interpreted. But in this process, the art museum strips them of the living cultural energy—including their artistic intentionality, liveliness, and authority—that generated them in the first place. But Adorno observes that works of art by their very nature decompose and decay, that they inevitably will outlive the cultural moment from which they emerge. Adorno introduces two responses to the reality of a work of art's "mortality" that the art museum makes visible: one by the poet Paul Valéry and the other by novelist Marcel Proust. Valéry mourns the work of art as a lifeless relic in the art museum since it is deprived of the vitality that the artist's studio provides and broader cultural context to which it responds. Proust, however, according to Adorno, begins where Valéry ends, "with the afterlife of works of art." For Proust "it is only the death of the work of art in the museum which brings it to life. When severed from the living order in which it functioned… its true spontaneity is released."

Art historian Amy Knight Powell calls this "true spontaneity" the work's "promiscuity." She writes, "form is too promiscuous to remain faithful to its author's intentions....The decontextualizing and recontextualizing space of the museum merely

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[6]T.W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum" in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967), 175-85.

[7]T.W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum,175.

facilitates what was, one way or another, bound to happen."[8] The art museum is the quintessential location to activate such promiscuity, surrounded by other objects and the desire of viewers to connect with, to become other than merely remnants of the past. On display they appear strangely alive, or, at least not dead, serving as agents (or, as Bruno Latour would call them, *actants*) for generating new ideas, concepts, and experiences in the present. Museums are not responsible for killing the work of art, they simply make its mortality *visible* and thus its afterlife possible. Powell goes even further, however, and claims that art museums reveal that artifacts *were never alive in the first place*, which gives them, according to Knight, only the impression of having "afterlives," to either mourn (Valéry) or to celebrate (Proust). Powell's aesthetic atheism goes beyond than what I am willing to claim, which is agnostic about whether such objects had such lives in the first place.

It was the contrast between its two lives that characterized my experience of *Long Distance* when I saw it in person at the *Surrealism Beyond Borders* exhibition. But I did not experience this contrast as a contradiction per se but as friction that generated creative and imaginative heat. Indeed, the work was presented as an historical artifact, and as such, it testified to a previous life, even a miraculous life, as a companion to Joans and memento for Corsiglia that the museum succeeded in making *more distant*. Yet its display presented it as something other than an historical artifact. Through the apparatus of the museum exhibition, it transformed it not only into a work of art but also into a *relic*, a material artifact that "still carries with it the dark shadow of its origin," a dark shadow

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[8]Amy Knight Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (New York: Zone Books, 2012).

that connects the present materially to this past.[9] Its display suggested the possibility of continued vitality in the present, a kind of power and promiscuity that might appear as if alive or as a medium for life through its transformation from its previous life as a personal "map of friendship" to a public work of art that made itself available for viewers to experience and thus able to live on in new ways. The art museum exhibition accomplished this transformation by managing distance and intimacy, absence and presence, through coordinating what becomes visible and invisible, seen and unseen. And this management includes not only the presentation and juxtaposition of works of art on display in the exhibition space but also the supporting components, like didactic wall labels, archival materials, and reproductions and photographic installations in gallery guides and exhibition catalogues—all of the materials that participate in such museal management. From gallery lighting and promotional material, the art museum apparatus not only presents the works on display, but it also generates images, both visible and invisible, that can be—to introduce here a theologically-charged concept entangled with sight—*believed.*

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This study thinks with such works of art and other material artifacts like *Long Distance* and their afterlives that the art museum facilitates as a means to think differently about theology and its future, or, rather, its own possible afterlives. Academic theology has developed a robust tradition of worrying about its future. It does so by idealizing and venerating its past, mourning its marginal status among the humanities and in the

[9]Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* quoted in Ed Simon, *Relics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 16.

academy more generally, and trying to distinguish itself from adjacent, and at times, rival disciplines or fields of study, particularly religious studies, philosophy, and even worldview studies.[10] Yet there seems to be an increased concern with its viability, even with whether it has any kind of future. As theologian Shelly Rambo has for a different context claimed, "The death of a certain kind of theology has already happened…we're living in the relic or residue of it."[11] Theology has thus made a habit of mourning its own irrelevance, powerlessness, and immanent death because of historical circumstances, the effects of modern secularism, late modern post-secularism, and the decay of Christendom. But this tendency to see theology in decline, on its deathbed, is due also to its *inherent* lateness, that by *its very nature* is a discourse that shows up late, like Hegel's owl of Minerva, which takes flight only at dusk. To what does the theological owl show up late? It shows up late to the practice of Christian faith, *after* its spontaneity, vitality, and unselfconsciousness has departed, experience and meaning separated. In addition, theology, especially theology as it has been practiced in the academy and in the church since the twentieth century, has also *shown up late to its own discourse*. In other words, theology itself, as a spontaneous and vital expression of *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding).

*Exhibiting God* takes this perception of distance and lateness seriously as a constitutive feature of theological discourse, inherent in the Christian tradition yet

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[10]For an example of worldview studies, which is a substantial field in the more secular Scandinavian countries, see Mikael Stenmark, *Contemporary Worldviews: A Comparative Study* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2026).

[11]Quoted in Beatrice Marovich, "Is Theology Dying? Doing Hospice Care for an Academic Discipline," *The Other Journal* 39 (Spring 2025). See also, Sean Larsen, *The Syndicate Report on the State of Theology* (March 2019); and the research project at Vrije Universiteit, *The Future of Academic Theology* (FOAT), 2023-2028.

intensified and transformed through modernity and post-modernity. But rather than explore strategies for theology to arrive on time, to recover its lost intimacy and spontaneity, this project works with this distance and lateness and it does so by staging its experiments *in the metaphorical image and analogical space of the museum*. By bringing theology into the museum, that space that generates the afterlife of cultural artifacts, it creates a break between its past and future use, what Walter Benjamin called "fore-history" and "after-history."[12] By conceiving of theology as a museum artifact, how it is experienced in the present through the concept of the museal afterlife, transforms this distance and lateness into creative potential.

Of course, afterlife is itself a theological concept, one bound up with death and resurrection, a heavenly, redemptive life beyond this mortal one, a life—an everlasting life—that transcends death. This project, however, is agnostic about that afterlife but believes in the afterlives of cultural artifacts, like *Long Distance*, and even aspects of Christian theology. *Exhibiting God* is, among many other things, an extended theological reflection on the processes of museification and the afterlives it generates.

Like *Long Distance*, Christian theology has enjoyed a past life, where it developed with a particular vitality in and through the church, serving the project of establishing orthodoxy and erecting the scaffolding of Christendom. *Exhibiting God* will argue that academic theology can be conceived of as the museal afterlife of this theology. And like the afterlife of *Long Distance*, the afterlife of Christian theology as academic theology, marks a separation from its original ecclesial context. This study explores a way, through the mechanisms of the museum, for academic theology to embrace and thus

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[12]Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), [N7a,1], 470.

work more imaginatively and creatively with the artifacts of this past *through* its lateness, its distance. *Exhibiting God* will argue that the example of works of art and academic discourses like art history, museology, and heritage studies offer important resources for such a practice. This experiment thus enacts a Proustian approach to academic theology—it is the afterlife of the work of art that is most important, most salient, most effective for the negotiation of contemporary life. Significantly, the art museum, however, does not erase *Long Distance*'s past; it accompanies the work, yet at a distance, which can still be creatively accessed and made visible in new ways. So too with a museal theology, a theology of the museum, in which its past life, as past, accompanies it and can be creatively engaged.

*Exhibiting God* is not merely interested in the museification of artifacts and the afterlives such process generates. It is concerned to make visible the apparatuses and mechanisms of display, preservation, juxtaposition, and interpretation that the art museum uses to manage distance and intimacy, absence and presence, the visible and invisible. This project argues that such museological apparatuses and mechanisms of display warrant theological reflection. *Exhibiting God* thus explores the potential for approaching theological discourse museologically, that is, by deploying the museum's means for managing and coordinating visibilities and invisibilities. Moreover, what will become apparent as this project develops is that theological discourse works in ways that are strikingly similar to the museum, with its own mechanisms of display that manage and coordinate what are visible and invisible. The affinities between the structure of theology and the mechanisms of the museum will become increasingly apparent as theological concepts are smuggled into discourses like museum studies, conservation, art

history, and heritage studies. *Exhibiting God* explores this mutual relationship between the museum and theology, a relationship that at times shifts the perspective of *what is shedding light on what*, that is, is theology illuminating the museum or is the museum illuminating theology? Or, put still another way, is theology *museological* or is the museum *theological*? As this project unfolds, it will become evident that it is both.

Theology and the museum might at first glance appear to be unrelated, since one deals with ideas and concepts in written texts and the other with material artifacts. And yet this project claims that both share a fundamental structure. For theorist Giorgio Agamben, whose work is theologically attuned, the transformations that the museum accomplishes throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is not limited to works of art and other material artifacts but includes discourses, concepts, and practices. He claims that the "museification of the world is an accomplished fact."[13] He continues,

> One by one, the spiritual potentialities that defined the people's lives: art, religion, philosophy, the idea of nature, even politics—have docilely withdrawn into the Museum. "Museum" here is not a given physical space or place but the separate dimension to which what was once—but no longer—felt as true and decisive has moved.[14]

*Exhibiting God* follows Agamben's lead and places theology in this conceptual "Museum," a place where "what was once—but no longer—felt as true and decisive has moved" and thus subjects it to the museal apparatus that manages and coordinates the conditions of how and in what ways artifacts become works of art and assume an afterlife in the museum, as museum artifacts. Museum theorist Donald Preziosi calls the museum the "paradigmatic artifice" of modernity and its pre-eminent "epistemological

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[13]Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 83.

[14]Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, 83.

technology" and even suggests that art history and museology, the primary academic discourses of the art museum, are predicated on a "secular theologism."[15] He goes so far as to say, "once through the museum, the rest of the world is a vitrine, and everything in the world a maquette of every thing in the world."[16] Given Agamben's and Preziosi's observations, putting theology and museology into conversation may not be as anachronistic and idiosyncratic as it might first appear.

This project deploys the mechanisms that the museum uses to manage visibilities and invisibilities, what is seen and unseen in order to experiment with new ways to think about and practice theology in a volatile, precarious, post-Christian, post-secular, pluralistic world. It is a world awash in multiple global catastrophes of climate change, racial and economic injustice, and fascist political regimes that mobilize theological concepts and ideas to fan the flames of nationalism and xenophobia. Can Christian theology respond to these challenges? Some theologians and theorists, like Clayton Crockett, have answered in the negative, convinced that Christian theology itself is the problem, that it is inherently and hopelessly ideological, choosing rather to pursue research that reveals its many dangers through less belief-entangled discourses, like the philosophy of religion or religious studies, or to attempt to redefine it as a political discourse and a subject for cultural critique.[17] Others, by contrast, have doubled-down on academic theological orthodoxy, as it were, affirming not only its importance but claiming for it a pre-eminent status among humanistic disciplines. And still others work

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[15]Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 35.

[16]Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body*, 53.

[17]Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics after Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

from the foundation of Christian orthodoxy that presume that theology's relevance lies in its traditional role of *fides quaerens intellectum*, thus working *from* faith to explain it intellectually.

*Exhibiting God* experiments with a different path, one that not only scavenges from these differing responses, whether it is secular and atheistic, confessional, and the variations in between, but also brings them into the museum. It affirms the importance and continued relevance for Christian theology—especially academic theology—as an important participant in academic research in the humanities. But it argues that its importance is predicated on its refusal to consolidate and hoard its resources or become pre-occupied with what counts as theology. Rather, it attempts to cultivate a creative and porous multi-and trans-disciplinarity that is improvisational, imaginative, and collaborative that risks not even being recognized by the academy *as Theology*. In the case of this study, theology collaborates with discourses that interpret material artifacts, like art history, museology, and cultural heritage studies, and does so in ways that expand its reach throughout the humanities and social sciences. While it is not a work of confessional theology, *Exhibiting God* works from a definition of theology that will be elaborated in the following chapters that takes faith and belief seriously as crucial ingredients to theological practice, even for a theological practice that emerges from or enters the museum *afterwards*, a bit too late for belief.

*Exhibiting God* will also argue that theological discourse is itself a kind of museification process, that like the museum, its apparatuses and mechanisms manage what is visible and invisible, seen and unseen. So, this study will argue that not only does academic theology operate through a museified afterlife, *theology itself is a museological*

*discourse*. Put another way, Christian theology in all its variations belongs in the museum. This in no way marginalizes or relegates it to irrelevance. Rather, Christian theology, by embracing the implications of its museological situation, is free to open up new ways to think theologically in a *museified* world. For, as theologian Mattias Martinson observes, "In the museum you are only a museum visitor, but in the church, you are [also] a museum visitor as well."[18] *Exhibiting God* will experiment with the museum and its apparatuses as productive images and metaphors for assembling a post-Christian and post-secular theology. Perhaps one way forward will be to welcome, not mourn, a museified theology that makes visible and viable a belief that accepts its distance, its lateness, its impossibility. To embrace this situation, however, offers the potential for a different kind of intimacy, presence, and timeliness. In short, a *museified theology* might make possible something like a *museified belief*, even a *museal* faith seeking *museal* understanding.

This project takes seriously the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's slightly less than serious question that he once put to Lutheran theologian Dorothee Soelle: "theology—how do you do that?"[19] I take Buber's question as an opportunity to expand its scope and to consider what theology could be as well as what conditions enable a discourse to appear or become visible *as theology*. *Exhibiting God* experiments with doing theology in the museum, in Agamben's museified world full of artifacts of disuse, pastness, and lateness, which testify to a past lost life of spontaneous use (whether or not

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[18]Mattias Martinson, *Katedralen mitt i staden: om ateism och teologi* (Arcus, 2010), 172. "På museet är man endast museibesökare, i kyrkan är man även museibesökare. I naturvetenskapens laboratorier är man bara vetenskapsman, på teologiska fakulteten är man både teolog och religionsvetare." English translations of the Swedish throughout this study are mine in consultation with the author.

[19]Quoted in Dorothee Soelle, *Thinking About God*, trans. J. Bowden. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1990), 2.

such spontaneity ever existed in the first place). It might thus offer a fresh approach with new conversation partners, new concepts, as well as a new method through which to think theologically and creatively in and through the museum. And that new method is *curating*.

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*Exhibiting God* is divided into two parts. The first introduces the argument, locates the project and distinguishes it within and distinguishes it from a diverse landscape of previous research and theological approaches, and presents its research aim and research questions. It will also unpack the theories and research methods that it will utilize throughout as the experiment unfolds. However, this project is also about exploring new methods and experimenting with new theoretical frameworks so I pay considerable attention to introducing and developing this constellation of practices, which I call the *curatorial*. Since this project treats theology as a museological phenomenon, curatorial practices and curatorial theory are crucial dimensions of the *exhibition*, which is the primary medium of the museum, and so also, I suggest, a productive method for practicing a *museal theology*. Moreover, what becomes evident is that curating has always, in some form or another, been a part of theological discourse, even if it did not recognize it as such. I introduce curating and the curatorial in Chapter One *before* I introduce theology, which I do later, in Chapter Two. I do this for two reasons. First, curating has, over the past decade or so, become a prevalent cultural phenomenon, from curating playlists and menus to social media accounts and conferences and so it is important that from the outset of this project the reader has a more detailed and nuanced image of curating and the curator. Second, *Exhibiting God* does not *begin* as theology, but

*becomes* theological as the curatorial experiment unfolds. It is curatorial practice that enables theology to become visible in the museum, and as a museological phenomenon. However, as I introduce curating and the curator, theology and the theologian will also appear occasionally, further reiterating the close relationship between the curatorial and the theological. In *Exhibiting God*, the theological is never far from the curatorial and the museological.

Part One also develops the theoretical framework for thinking about the relationship of religion, creativity, and belief through the work of three Lacanian theorists who offer ways to think about the relationship of "God" and "world," which opens up the possibility to consider the ecological implications imbedded in *Exhibiting God*. These theorists offer assistance in my introduction of the concepts of the void, the veil, and the vitrine that will make frequent appearances throughout this study. In addition, the first part also reflects on the relationship of materiality and time, both of which play a crucial, if less than obvious role in the project and thus worth its own "dusty" excursus. With the curatorial and the curator as a backdrop, I will define how theology will be used and what it means, in this experiment, to be a theologian. The first part also introduces the cultural and social influence of Sweden on this project and reflects on its contribution to my argument, from its distinctive secularism and its heritagization of Christianity to the particularly tenuous location of theology in the context of the academic research in the humanities. This unique shape of the secular and the role that heritage studies and museology have played in the preservation and interpretation of Christianity in Sweden have been important to the development of this project. *Exhibiting God* leans heavily on the work of two Swedish theologians, Mattias Martinson and Petra Carlsson Redell, each

of whom offer important resources for the development of a theology of the museum. I suggest that the museological management and coordination of visibilities and invisibilities, presence and absence, intimacy and distance, makes the photograph an important metaphor for the museal theology this project develops. Theologian Catherine Keller also appears at crucial moments throughout this project, especially in the service of drawing out the apophatic dimension implicit in this experiment as well as reminding us that the "void" is not empty, but quite *full*, the turbulent too-muchness of what the Hebrew scriptures describe as *tehomic*.

The second part of *Exhibiting* God features three case studies which approach material artifacts—works of art, texts, concepts, images, and sites—through which I develop and experiment with a museal theology, a theology that is sensitive to the display mechanisms that manage what is visible and invisible. The first case study features two texts that are displayed next to one another, one by the fifteenth-century theologian and bishop, Nicholas of Cusa, and the other by the twentieth-century theorist and cultural critic, Walter Benjamin, who makes frequent appearances throughout the study in different guises and for different purposes. I place Cusa's text next to Benjamin's and I read Cusa's curatorially and Benjamin's theologically. I also introduce Marie-José Mondzain's theory of the image as a curatorial practice that manages the relationship between what is visible and invisible in order to deepen the conversation between Cusa and Benjamin and extend its relevance to my museological experiment.

The second case study addresses Jan & Hubert van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* (1432), which explores the theological implications of a fifteen-year conservation project that began in 2012 and the means by which St. Bavo's Cathedral manages how the

altarpiece is viewed for tourists and cultural pilgrims. I also focus attention on a particular patch of restoration on one of the panels and I consider the theological implications of conservation and preservation and how it, like theology, or *as* theology manages what is seen and unseen. My theological analysis also extends to include photographic documentation and the uses to which the church puts them. *The Shroud of Turn* will also arrive in order to assist this discussion of the role of the photograph in generating and sustaining belief in images, one of the more important responsibilities of both theology and the museum.

The third and final case presents two locations, an apartment Waldhausenstrasse 5 in Hannover, Germany and an artist's studio La Ribaute, in Barjac, France. The former, which was destroyed during the war, was the location of artist Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* (1919-1937) and the latter, which was Anselm Kiefer's studio from 1992 to 2007, now functions as a museum and foundation. Both sites offer unique opportunities to develop a museum theology, a theology that shows up *afterward*. Through a museified site and a work that no longer exists, I explore the theological implications of Schwitters' *Merzbau* and, after its destruction in 1943, its theological afterlives through a handful of photographs and a model. And through a site that was a working studio for fifteen years and has been transformed by the artist himself into a museum, I explore Kiefer's recent work as a *curatorial* practice that embraced his own museification.

These case studies function like three separate but connected rooms in a sprawling exhibition. Each of the rooms are curated to offer the opportunity to make connections with works in other rooms, Cusa's *sensibile experimentum* may inform an approach to the lamb's face in the *Ghent Altarpiece* or Benjamin's concept of distraction may relate to

Schwitter's *Merzbau*, or a concept introduced for one work may address another work in another room, perhaps one featuring a work by Marcel Duchamp, Paul Klee, Ted Joans, or an Yves Klein. However, like any exhibition, the connections and relationships that can be made between works is endless, far surpassing the intentions of the curator, as the viewer moves back and forth throughout the rooms. These case studies—and the project as a whole—function in a similar way. To curate is to open the possibility to find relationships and to make distinctions. The reader is thus invited to find their own connections among the artifacts, concepts, and images.

*Exhibiting God* begins in New York City at the Metropolitan Museum of Art but concludes in Sweden, first in a seminar room in Bromma, a suburb of Stockholm, then at Benhuset, a former ossuary turned public art space on the cemetery grounds of a seventeenth-century church located in an upscale neighborhood in Stockholm. *Long Distance* returns to assist our reflection on Benhuset and museal theology as palliative care. This encounter recapitulates the multiple transformations, migrations, disappearances and appearances, visible and invisible, that characterize a theology that always, by definition, shows up *after* faith, "what was once—but no longer—felt as true" as Agamben observes, and, like this conclusion, *after* the experiment has been abandoned. *Exhibiting God* concludes in Visby, on the island of Gotland of the east coast of Sweden, as I walk amongst the many 11th and 12th century church ruins that fill the town. Deleuze claims that what we need is not faith in another world or a world to come, but faith in this one, here, at this time.[20] Perhaps it is enough that it is a faith that has arrived late, emerges from the museum, itself a museal artifact, with its own afterlife.

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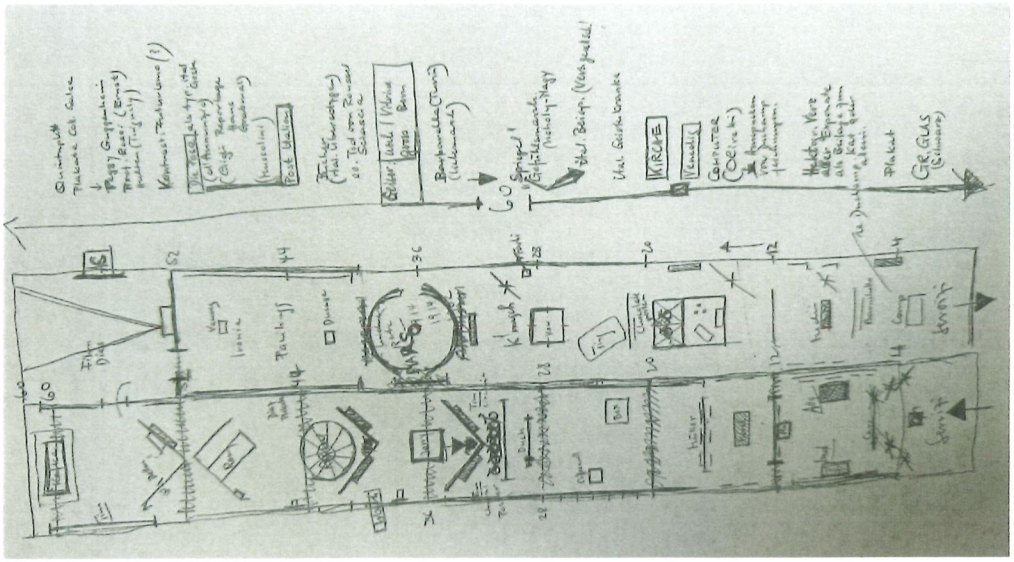
[20]Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson & Robert Galeta (1985; University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 173.

**A Note About Illustrations**

The images included in this study do not serve as illustrations. Rather they function as visual references, a visual scrapbook, of sorts. Many of them are photographs I have taken and do more to establish an atmosphere or visual environment than tools with which to make arguments. Therefore, most do not have captions but the reader will be able to locate their referent from the text.

# CHAPTER ONE

## STAGING THE PROJECT



Harald Seemann's floor plan sketch for the installation of "The Bachelor Machines," Venice, ca. 1975.

> Some people love to divide and classify, while others are bridge-makers—weaving relations that turn a divide into a living contrast, one whose power is to affect, to produce thinking and feeling.
>
> But bridge-making is a situated practice....
> —Isabelle Stengers, "Reclaiming Animism" (2012)

Swiss curator Harald Szeemann once said that a curator is responsible for all things, "from vision to nail"—which meant that the curator had to be involved in every detail "from conceptualizing the project to hanging the work."[1] Curating involves realizing ideas through material means—paintings hung on nails on a wall, sculptures

[1]Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, (Geneva: JRP Editions, 2009), 88.

sitting on pedestals, lighting, signage—the mechanisms and apparatuses of display that make an exhibition visible, that stage a curator's ideas through the material artifacts they present. A floor plan, usually sketched out in the curator's own hand, represents the first iterations of the transition from the immaterial to the material, from the abstract to the concrete. It is the earliest materialization, or rather, incarnation of the project. It is often sloppy, a bit chaotic; yet the contours of form, of order, of a curatorial thesis become visible. If there is an artifact that embodies a middle ground between the invisible and the visible, it is the curator's floor plan.

This chapter is the floor plan for *Exhibiting God*. It includes the aim and research questions that will guide the inquiry, the previous research from which it emerges, and to which it will respond. It also introduces the methods this project uses and how they relate to the works of art and material artifacts it discusses. I also offer a comprehensive introduction to the concept of curating in order to set the stage for its *theological* use. In addition, I interrupt myself—sketching in another small room in the floor plan—for a brief excursus on how this project understands the relationship of God to the world. I then finish the floor plan with yet another addition, which introduces the significant role that the cultural context of Sweden has played in the development of this project and why it matters.

*Exhibiting God* is a theological experiment that treats theology as an artifact of the museum. It thus works through and with academic discourses, such as art history, museology, and heritage studies that are concerned with the study, display, and preservation of material artifacts and applies them to theology while at the same time it searches out theological implications lodged within them. These museal discourses share

a concern not only for the interpretation and analysis of material artifacts and how they are displayed, presented, or situated spatially, but also how and under what conditions they become visible, legible, and meaningful (and thus believable). The museum exemplifies this relationship between the material artifact and its spatial location. This project will be guided by the images and metaphors of the museum and the means by which they manage what is seen and unseen, what is experienced as intimate and present and what is experienced as distant or absent. The result of this process is the constitution of a subject that sees.

The *museum* in this study also operates in relation to the image and metaphor of the *cathedral*. This study presumes that the lines distinguishing the museum from the cathedral, art from religion, aesthetic from spiritual, sacred from secular are not as clear as is often assumed, even by the researchers themselves, whether religious scholars, art historians, conservators, or museologists. As Donald Preziosi provocatively suggests, art might be dead religion, just as religion might be dead art.[2] *Exhibiting God* suggests that theology lurks about wherever such museal artifacts as dead religion or dead art are to be found. Furthermore, it claims that one way forward for academic theology is to embrace and cultivate its museal situation and identity. And what precisely is this museal situation and identity? It tends to show up late—*after* the liturgy, *after* faith, *after* Christendom, *after* art, *after* religion. It appears on the scene after the spontaneity of an unselfconscious faith, an integrated practice, what Agamben describes as "what was once—but no longer—felt as true." Yet to treat religion as dead, or art as dead—as museum artifacts—

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[2] Donald Preziosi, *Art, Religion, Amnesia: The Enchantments of Credulity* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 12.

is to give them an opportunity for other life in another way, another context, and that life can also offer space for something like a faith of or from the museum. *Exhibiting God* attempts to curate such an opportunity, "from vision to nail."

## AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this project is to cut a fresh path through art and religion, secular and sacred, church and the academy, and the images that sustain these distinctions and make them visible and believable. These complex relationships are often made most visible through the museum and its exhibitions. And so, this project attempts to cut this fresh path through the museum so as to put theology into conversation with other academic discourses and research fields in the humanities and social sciences, like museology, heritage studies and preservation, art and cultural history, all of which work with material artifacts. And perhaps these conversations could offer different ways for academic theology to participate in new multi-disciplinary collaborative arrangements that expands our understanding of the theological nature and function of the museum in the public sphere while suggesting that it can serve as a new site for thinking theologically. As one of the most important and influential epistemological technologies of the modern world, the museum need not be a place where art and religion are sequestered or cordoned off from life, but can serve as a metaphorical site that may offer new models for re-thinking the role of theology in the academy and in the public sphere.[3]

This project asks two research questions:

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[3]Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Barbara Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

First, *what would a museal theology look like and how would it behave?* And related to this are two sub-questions, 1) *how does such a museal theology differ or distinguish itself from other theological discourses*? And finally, 2) *what features do a museal theology offer that make it useful for the present moment?*

The second research question is, *can curating serve as a useful theological method for such a project?* And related to this is the sub-question, *how would curating as method contribute to how theological discourse is practiced?*

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

This project does not intend to fill a gap in the research of a clearly-circumscribed theological field. Rather, it is a theological project that moves across fields, offering another path for theology to take. It does so, however, *from* two quite different trajectories in academic theology and it is important to situate it in relation to them, even if the study does not intend to work *within* them. First, *Exhibiting God* begins from a constellation of approaches called radical theology and theopoetics, each of which relate either to the death of the God theologies of Thomas J.J. Altizer and Mark C. Taylor or work in conversation with Jacques Derrida, Alfred North Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze, and New Materialism.[4] This discourse emerges from and remains connected to philosophy and contemporary theory and is also adjacent to the philosophy of religion, especially

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[4]See Daniel J. Peterson, ed. *Resurrecting the Death of God: The Origins, Influences, and Return of Radical Theology* (New York: SUNY Press 2015). Catherine Keller & Mary-Jane Rubenstein, eds. *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017). John Caputo, *In Search of Radical Theology: Expositions, Explorations, Exhortations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020). Catherine Keller, *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017). Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). Petra Carlsson Redell, *Foucault, Art, and Radical Theology: The Mystery of Things Seen* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

after the so-called religious turn in continental philosophy. It is an academic discourse that operates quite clearly and distinctly outside the church and confessional and creedal doctrine and the theological discourses that work from it yet it does so with Christian texts and concepts.[5] Moreover, these trajectories emphasize theology as a discourse of immanence, materiality, and creativity, one that takes seriously its status as a provisional, even improvisational discourse. John Caputo writes

> What I call theology is possible only under the condition that it might not—perhaps—be theology, that it might be impossible for it to be theology, that it might be impossible, plain and simple.[6]

This study bears the influence of these approaches through its attempt to think theologically beyond the limits of orthodox, confessional Nicene Christianity and its theological discourses that orient themselves around "a self-constituted, self-identical self" and God as an "absolute object of thought."[7] Moreover, this experiment emphasizes the immanence of theological discourse, that its concern is *this* life, and any afterlife is an afterlife within and for the limits of this life.[8] And also, this project claims that theology is ultimately a creative, poetic, and imaginative discourse, perhaps *the* pre-eminently creative discourse in the humanities, an argument that will become apparent as this project develops.

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[5]John Caputo's recent work consists of defining a "radical theology" as the conscience of both confessional theology and the philosophy of religion.

[6]John Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013).

[7]Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Deconstruction, and Theology After Ontotheology," *Modern Theology* 19/3 (July 2003).

[8]See Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2019).

This project, however, does not share radical theology's focus on close readings and commentary on philosophical texts; it reads them closely enough to scavenge them for concepts and images. This project experiments with doing theology that begins with the encounter of material artifacts in space, and more specifically, through the mechanisms and apparatuses of display that make them appear to our experience. In this way it is part of what is an interdisciplinary response that moves from linguistic and textual approaches and toward things and their affects, what is often called the "spatial turn" and the "tangible turn."[9] *Exhibiting God* engages with texts, but it does so in order to find and smuggle in concepts to deploy in the museum space and in response to and in conversation with works of art. It follows the advice of Brian Massumi in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, "lift a dynamism out of the book entirely, and incarnate it in a foreign medium."[10] I will do that with each of the theologians and theorists I engage throughout *Exhibiting God*, lifting their dynamism, and extracting and smuggling concepts and then plugging them into a museum to see how they work, what they illuminate, what shadows they might cast.

The second theological trajectory that this study relates to has come to be called "theology and the arts," an emergent interdisciplinary field, not to be confused with the more established field of theological aesthetics. It explores the relationships between Christianity, biblical studies, theology, and the arts—in my particular case, the visual arts.

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[9]Bjørnar Olsen, Mats Burström, Caitlin DeSilvey, Póra Pétursdóttir eds. *After Discourse: Things, Affects, Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2020). See Ivan Gaskell, et al, eds. *Tangible Things: Making History Through Objects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). Kim Knott, "Religion, Space, and Place: The Spatial Turn in Research on Religion," *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 1 (2010): 29-43.

[10]Brian Massumi, "Translator's Forward," in Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

Unlike the radical theology-theopoetics trajectory, most of the researchers working in this field come from more traditional iterations of religious studies, like biblical studies and confessional theology, which are applied as a hermeneutic method to the arts. In addition, many work closely with art historical discourses and with art museums, a few are even trained as art historians and work as curators in art museums.[11] This study resonates with this trajectory primarily in its use of material artifacts, works of art, and other visual images in their theological research and its openness to art historical discourses. However, most research within this trajectory tends to apply theology as a hermeneutic to interpret images and works of art and operates with the guiding assumption that there is religious or theological meaning in those artifacts that other discourses overlook. In contrast, this study thinks theologically with and uses works of art and visual images as well as *the contexts of their display and the apparatuses that make them visible* in order to develop new ways to do theology or think theologically.[12] A third area of research, which, although less relevant, operates perhaps in parallel to *Exhibiting God*, is a field of *art and religion* that is shaped by religious studies researchers, most of whom share an interest in material culture in some form, like David Morgan, James Elkins, Sally

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[11]C.A Strine, Mark McInroy, Alexis Torrance, eds. *Image As Theology: The Power of Art in Shaping Christian Thought, Devotion, and Imagination* (London: Brepols, 2022). Judith Wolfe, *The Theological Imagination: Perception and Interpretation in Art, Life, and Faith* (Cambridge, 2024). Ben Quash & Chloë Reddaway, eds. *Theology, Modernity, and the Visual Arts* (London: Brepols, 2024). Jonathan A. Anderson, *The Invisibility of Religion in Contemporary Art* (Notre Dame University Press, 2025). Jason Goroncy, Rod Pattenden, eds. *Imagination in an Age of Crisis: Soundings from the Arts and Theology* (Pickwick, 2022). Ronald R. Bernier & Rachel Hostetter Smith, eds. *Religion and Contemporary art: A Strange Accord* (Routledge, 2023). Jonathan Koestlé-Cate, *Art and the Church: A Fractious Embrace: Ecclesiastical Encounters with Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2016). Lexi Eikelboom & David Newheiser, eds. *Art-Making as Spiritual Practice: Rituals of Embodied Understanding* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025).

[12]See my "Invisibilities in Art & Theology," *Religious Studies Review* 52/1 (March, 2026) and "The Right Eyes: Curating a Theology of Modernist Painting," *Theology, Modernity, and the Visual Arts*, eds. Ben Quash & Chloë Reddaway (London: Brepols, 2024).

Promey, Jeffrey L. Kosky, Mark C. Taylor, S. Brent Plate, Aaron Rosen, and Taylor Worley. Their work engages modern and contemporary art from the perspective of religious studies, not exclusively Christian theology, with their interest in demonstrating the religiously inflected nature of the visual arts.[13]

By contrast, *Exhibiting God* is a theological project, although it often behaves like art history or museology. In fact, this project *could* be interpreted as an extended theological reflection on Donald Preziosi's view that museological discourses "constitute a kind of secular or secularized theology, or a kind of theologism…."[14] The project thus offers theological reflection on how religion is presented in museums and how Christianity is "heritagized" and "museified" in ways that affirm secularism, which marginalizes key aspects of Christian belief and practice.[15] This study approaches the heritagization and museification of Christianity differently. Rather than consider it simply to be a victim of secularism and its aggressive decontextualization, this project considers the experience of lateness, pastness, fissure, and break to be a potentially productive way

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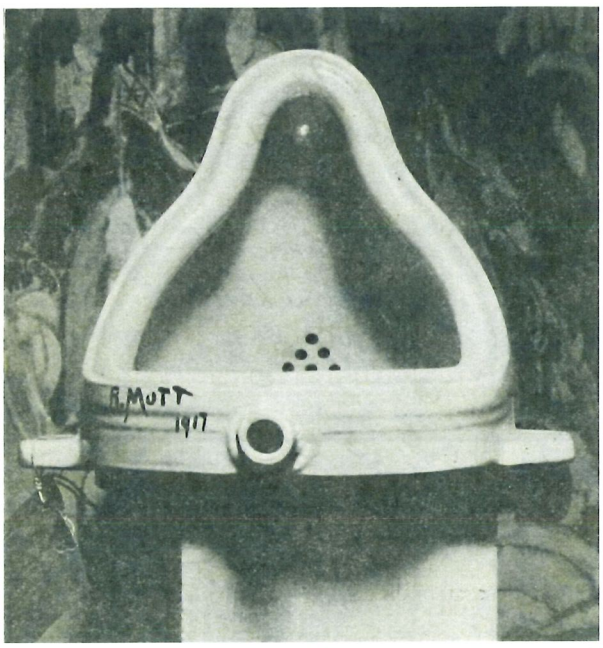
[13]James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Arts of Wonder: Enchanting Secularity—Walter De Maria, Diller + Scofidio, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworthy* (University of Chicago Press, 2012). Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 1992). Taylor Worley, *Memento Mori in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2021). David Morgan & James Elkins, eds. *Re-Enchantment Seminar* (New York: Routledge, 2008). Sally Promey & David Morgan, eds. *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (University of California Press, 2001). Aaron Rosen, *Art & Religion in the 21st Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015).

[14]Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body*, 35.

[15]Crispin Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (New York: Routledge, 2013). Lieke Wijna & James Bielo, eds. Museums as Ritual Sites: Civilizing Rituals Reconsidered (New York: Routledge, 2025). Lieke Wijna, *Resonating Sacralities: Dynamics Between the Religion and the Arts in Postsecular Netherlands* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022). Helena Wagefeld Ström, *Lighting candles before a headless Jesus: sacred heritage, heritagized sacredness, and the many journeys between categories* (PhD diss., Umeå University, 2022). Gretchen Buggeln, Crispin Paine, S. Brent Plate, eds. *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017). Caitlyn Disilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

to think theologically about religious belief and practice that offers its artifacts and relics, including theology and belief themselves, the potential for an afterlife in a museified world. Moreover, this project also considers the experience of lateness and distance to be an inherent aspect of Christianity, which has haunted it from its beginnings. But, while it works with the secular through the museum, this project also regards the secular to be as museified as Christianity. In other words, in Agamben's museified world, the secular is also a museum artifact. This project suggests that academic theology arrives late to *both* Christianity and secularism.

## RESEARCH METHODS




Alfred Stieglitz, Photograph of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917).

This project follows Brian Massumi's recommendation for reading *A Thousand Plateaus*: "lift a dynamism out of the book entirely, and incarnate it in a foreign

medium."[16] At times in *Exhibiting God*, this dynamism is theological and the foreign medium is museology or art history; at other times, the dynamism is art history and the foreign medium is theology. But the practice of displacement and replacement from one context to another that constitutes this project's method is derived from the studio practice of artist Marcel Duchamp when he exhibited ordinary objects, like a shovel, a urinal, a bottle rack, and a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool in art exhibitions.[17] Called "readymades," Duchamp's practice of presenting these objects in art spaces accomplished two things. First, it revealed that "art" was the product of an institutional framework and a collection of apparatuses through which artifacts, events, and gestures *become visible and thus meaningful* as works of art. For most objects, like photographs, sculptures, paintings, and the like, this framework and its mechanisms remain *invisible*. Yet for certain more radical gestures, like Duchamp's, these mechanisms become *visible*.[18] Duchamp's readymades—of which *Fountain* (1917) is the most influential and decisive—revealed that anything could be considered art *provided it is presented under certain conditions and circumstances*. This studio practice, which art historian Elena Filipovic calls *curation*, meant that Duchamp did not simply proclaim non-art objects to be *art* by sovereign fiat, but that he had to utilize and deploy all of the mechanisms and apparatuses of the art world, including the exhibition space, interpretation, and even photographic reproduction in order to create those certain conditions and circumstances.

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[16]See 5n.

[17]This account of Duchamp and his curatorial activities are from Elena Filipovic, *The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

[18]See the following for institutional definitions of art: Arthur Danto, "The Artworld" (1964), George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Cornell, 1974). Robert Yanal, ed. *Institutions of Art: Reconsiderations of George Dickie's Philosophy* (University of Penn State Press, 1993).

*It was also a curatorial process that took several decades* and included countless collaborators. Duchamp's creative curatorial practice managed how ordinary objects, like a urinal, became visible as a work of art through the friction it generated *over time*. It did so by passing through the apparatus of the art world and its attendant mechanisms, and institutions, from art galleries, museums, arts journalism, including *photographic reproduction*, which documented it and played a crucial role in making it gradually visible as a work of art. Photographic reproduction will likewise make frequent appearances in this project as a means to facilitate and actualize the dynamic between presence and absence, immediacy and distance, past and present that is crucial for the development of museal theology.

Duchamp's practice of radical displacement and insertion is similar to the exchange that the late nineteenth-century French sculptor, Auguste Rodin, made while reading one of the classic books of Christian mystical theology, Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*. As recounted by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, Rodin told him that

> I learnt sculpture and I knew very well that it was something great. I remember now that in the *Imitation of Christ*, particularly in the third book, I once put sculpture everywhere in place of God, and it was right and gave the right meaning—[19]

Similar to placing an ordinary object on display in an art exhibition, Rodin inserts *sculpture* in place of *God* to create friction that becomes meaningful, suggesting a way to portray the importance and sovereignty of art for Rodin. Put differently, he experiments with the theological potential of sculpture by displaying it in a theological context to see what would happen. *Exhibiting God* follows Rodin's example and practices a similar kind of exchange with concepts and contexts, treating non-theological concepts theologically

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[19]Rodin to Rilke, *Auguste Rodin*, (Part I, 1903; Part II, 1907; New York: Dover, 1967), p. 60

and theological contexts museologically and thus curatorially, which is the practice of making meaning through relationships and juxtapositions.



Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920. Oil transfer drawing and watercolor on paper on engraving on cardboard. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

In addition to Duchamp's *Fountain*—a work which will reappear periodically throughout this project—Paul Klee's watercolor, entitled *Angelus Novus* (1920), also plays an important role in the context of this project's methodological approach to the works of art it addresses. This work has become a ubiquitous image in critical theory. Art historian O.K. Werkmeister has called it "a composite literary icon for left-wing intellectuals" and has become a "symbolic figure for the contradiction-laden alignment of life, art, and politics to which left-wing intellectuals have tended to aspire…"[20] Since

[20]O.K. Werckmeister, "Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, or the Transfiguration of the Revolutionary into the Historian," *Critical Inquiry* 22/2 (Winter 1996).

Werckmeister's observations in the mid-1990s, *Angelus Novus* has only become more ubiquitous in the visual culture of critical theory, cultural studies, and political as it serves as an illustration on countless book covers, frontispieces, book chapters, and journal articles. How this happened is worth recounting. This highly unusual circumstance is due to its connection with Walter Benjamin's authorship and its role as inspiration for one of his most well-known and influential texts, "Theses on the Concept of History" (1940). Thesis IX consists of the following, which begins with a citation from Scholem:

> My wing is ready to fly
> I would rather turn back
> For had I stayed mortal time
> I would have had little luck.
> – Gerhard Scholem, "Angelic Greetings"

> There is a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair [*verweilen*: a reference to Goethe's Faust], to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.[21]

Klee's painting has become entirely identified with the highly evocative concept of the "Angel of History" as it is developed in Benjamin's fragment. The identification is so complete that the name that first comes to mind when one sees this image is not *Klee* but

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[21] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (1940), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 4: 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). The scholarship on this text and on the so-called "Angel of History" thesis is vast.

*Benjamin*. Yet instead of illustrating the concept, the picture *generated* the concept and Benjamin's relationship to it. Klee's painting was the catalyst that *provoked* Benjamin's philosophical creation. The image, then, comes first. Or, to be more precise, Benjamin's *companionship* with the painting comes first, making the concept possible. Benjamin thinks with the work because he *lives with it*. Sigrid Weigel describes it this way:

> It is thus not the case that in working with an expanded, comprehensive concept of the image he includes different modes of linguistic, painted, imaginary, and other images; rather, his epistemic concept of the image is informed by works of visual art.[22]

Therefore, Klee's *Angelus Novus* is the medium and the reflective image for Benjamin's written image, for the creation of a thought image on the concept of history.

This collaboration between thinker and painting, human subject and non-human artifact, what Weigel describes as a "partner in an inner dialogue," does find expression in a "thought image," or *Denkbild*, which generates other such concepts and literary artifacts during Benjamin's and Klee's twenty-year relationship. [23] But it also does something more by becoming a thinking companion and catalyst that insinuates itself into nearly every aspect of Benjamin's authorship. Gershom Scholem recalled that for Benjamin Klee's painting served as "a picture for meditation and as a momento of a spiritual vocation."[24] Weigel writes that

> The picture had an almost magical significance for the friendship between the two distinct and dissimilar intellectuals, serving as a kind of guarantee of concurrence between them, something all too often sorely put to the test.[25]

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[22]Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, trans Chadwick Truscott Smith (2008; University of Stanford Press, 2013), 234.

[23]Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, 217.

[24]Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin and His Angel" (1970), in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, Gary Smith, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 62.

[25]Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, 215.

The picture came to assume many different roles for each of them. Benjamin deployed the work in numerous ways as his authorship unfolded. Weigel calls the painting the "third party" in the friendship between Scholem and Benjamin. It was not merely mentioned in their correspondence. *It had agency*, often addressing the other, as it did in Scholem's birthday greeting poem to Benjamin on July 15, 1921 which begins, "I hang nobly on the wall/looking at no one at all."[26] A few years earlier, when they were studying at the University of Bern and living next door to each other for a three-month period, they invented a fictional university as a context for their conversations in response to the lack of intellectual energy they were experiencing in their studies. The "University of Muri," which consisted of Benjamin serving as the Rector and Scholem serving as Beadle of the Dept of Religion and Philosophy, produced official documents, including a course list that they added to over the years. Klee's picture served as the "guardian angel of the university." And when Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht collaborated on the development of a critical literary journal, which was never realized, they intended to call it *Angelus Novus*.[27]

But perhaps the most personal and enigmatic artifacts of thought that Klee's painting generated was "Agesilaus Santander," a text that exists in two quite different

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[26] *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, 101; *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940*, eds Gershom Scholem & T.W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson & Evelyn M. Jacobson (1974; University of Chicago Press, 1994), 134.

[27] "Announcement of the Journal *Angelus Novus*" (1922), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 1, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 292-296. For a more detailed exploration of this journal and the role that the picture had in its conception, see also Annie Bourneuf, *Behind the Angel of History: The* Angelus Novus *and Its Interleaf* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

versions that Benjamin wrote on consecutive days in the summer of 1933 when he was in Ibiza, Spain.[28] Both versions feature an angel influenced by the Talmudic tradition, which are generated to offer praises of honor to God before immediately passing away as well as the existence of secret names that become evident over time. Scholem observes that "[i]n the course of the years, Benjamin associated very diverse conceptions with the angel." Scholem contines:

> Does he bring news from Above? News about the Self of him who views him and about his fate? Or perhaps news about what is occurring in the world of history, as it finally appeared to Benjamin, when he recognized the angel of history in the *Angelus Novus*?[29]

As Scholem argues, this Angel, entangled with the Talmudic and Midrash traditions in Judaism, with its appearing and disappearing, its associations with light and dark, God and Satan, its associations with what has been lost, appears in these two texts at a time in Benjamin's life in which he has become a refugee, "removed from those who were close to him. At a distance they have taken on something of the angel, who, after all, is also no longer with him." But Scholem goes on,

> It was precisely in the things he possesses in his room in Berlin and toward which he had attuned a deep contemplative relation that the angel had settled. By entering into these objects he made them transparent, and behind the surface of these things, which he remembers with a lively imagination.

And so, for Scholem, the presence and then absence of Klee's picture in Benjamin's life becomes associated with the presences and absences of his friends, of what he has given up in Berlin for Ibiza. Benjamin's "lively imagination" enables the picture to

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[28]*Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 2 part 2, 1931-1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 712-716.

[29]Scholem, "Walter Benjamin and His Angel." It is important that Scholem's in-depth discussion of the picture by Klee is initiated as part of his analysis of the two versions of his "hermetic" and "mystical" text.

serve as an image for aspects of his personal life, weaving it through lost and hoped for relationships, lost possessions, and, in the case of the picture itself, became visible as an image of absence. Since at the time he wrote these texts, he and Scholem were separated.

Benjamin's engagement with *Angelus Novus* was not one predicated on art history, theory, hermeneutics, or connoisseurship, but on a constellation of elements, only a fraction of them known or even articulated, but predicated on a lived companionship that was a creatively fertile one for Benjamin in which the picture served to open up imaginative space for developing new artifacts of thought.

Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* has become an icon for Benjamin's thought not because he chose it as an illustration for his ideas or as the result of scouring the world of art and images for the "perfect" example or his ability to offer a compelling interpretation. It was particular circumstances that brought Benjamin and the picture into material contact along with its yeast-like presence in his intellectual and emotional development. He was in Munich at a particular time and in a particular frame of mind, just happened to visit an art gallery, and *Angelus Novus* was one of the works on view—it could have been any number of other works that captured Benjamin's attention. *Angelus Novus*, then, grew into this collaborative relationship as Benjamin used it and the emotions and feelings it stirred to create vibrant concepts and images.

Benjamin's writings about *Angelus Novus* are peculiar and idiosyncratic. Many commentators—especially art historians—have observed that he does not interpret the work and it appears that he does not look at it very closely. Werckmeister observes that Benjamin "has invested Klee's image with aggressive and destructive traits absent in the

original."[30] Moreover, Benjamin's interpretation of the image differs, often dramatically, depending on how it is used in his writing. Weigel suggests, "For Benjamin, artworks are mnemonic images that in the process of perception remind us of *something* that cannot yet be expressed in language."[31] Benjamin's idiosyncratic, inconsistent, and varying description of the work have led some commentators to claim that he was a poor observer and interpreter of the *Angelus Novus*, or, at the very least, had misremembered its details, since he was often separated from the picture. Yet art historian Annie Bourneuf offers a different interpretation. She argues, "In its very veering away from the picture, Benjamin's writing around it might on another level be seen as responsible to it."[32] Perhaps it is in its curious "veering away from the picture" that makes Benjamin's writing with the work *theological*, since it is not operating empirically, descriptively, logically, or analytically, but through belief in an invisible image of what the work could do, could say.

This project works with artworks and other material artifacts, like churches, museums, and art spaces, in ways that resemble Benjamin's use of *Angelus Novus*. Whether it is Ted Joans's *Long Distance*, Duchamp's *Fountain*, the *Ghent Altarpiece*, the Shroud of Turin, Yves Klein's *Le Vide*, Anselm's Kiefer's studio, the church ruins in Visby, or Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*, each serves as catalysts for thinking theologically. They come to function as companions, partners, and collaborators. *Exhibiting God* does

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[30]O.K. Werckmeister, "Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, or the Transfiguration of the Revolutionary into the Historian," *Critical Inquiry* 22/2 (Winter 1996).

[31]Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, 217.

[32]Annie Bourneuf, *Behind the Angel of History: The* Angelus Novus *and Its Interleaf* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

not apply theology as a hermeneutic to interpret these artifacts in order to produce "thick descriptions." Rather, this project puts them into relationships with theological concepts, inserting them into theological contexts. It is the friction that emerges from these staged through juxtapositions, these encounters that enables a new path to be cleared between art and theology, one that addresses the mechanisms of display and the apparatuses that manage what is visible and invisible, present and absent, and the images that they generate.

The research method that guides *Exhibiting God* follows Massumi's instructions, Duchamp's readymades, Rodin's idolatrous exchange, and Benjamin's relationship with a Klee watercolor. It follows a process of displacement, replacement, juxtaposition, and insertion, which creates productive friction by stressing and mobilizing the mechanisms and apparatuses that manage what is visible and legible which is modeled after the museum. It inserts theological concepts into non-theological contexts and attempts to treat non-theological texts in theological ways. Following Duchamp's practice with the readymades, it explores the possibility that anything can be theology, *provided it is presented under certain conditions and circumstances*. Moreover, these experimental gestures of displacement, insertion, and juxtaposition are *temporary and contingent*. Not all urinals are transformed into works of art, only those presented under certain conditions and circumstances. The method that this project utilizes approaches material artifacts not as objects to be interpreted but as *collaborators*, artifacts and images with and from which to think theologically. So too with the theological and museological experiments that constitute *Exhibiting God*, in which what becomes theology does so in a

site-specific, improvised, temporary, and provisionary manner, and in collaboration with works of art.

Moreover, the constellation of methods that guide this project, the methods of juxtaposition, exchange, insertion, and companionship are methods associated with *curatorial practice*. For theology in *Exhibiting God* is not only museological, it is also curatorial. And so, it is the *curating* as a practice and as a way of thinking from the situation of the museum that will be developed as a theological method. And so, it is to curating and the curatorial that we must turn.

## CURATING

If theology is a museum discourse, a discourse of Agamben's museified world, a late discourse, after faith, and a discourse of the afterlife, then curating might be a means by which this museal theology can be practiced. This section introduces the medium of the exhibition, the practice of curating in the art world, and then develops a curatorial theory—a curatorial thinking or a thinking that is curatorial—that could be a useful theory and method for theological discourse.

### The Exhibition

The public exhibition is an apparatus through which the museum manages what is visible and invisible, present and absent, and from which images are generated that can be believed. Both *Long Distance* and *Fountain* rely on its exhibition in different ways for its meaning and significance. To refer to the exhibition and display as an apparatus in the present context is already to recognize its theological (as well as curatorial) implications.

In "What is an Apparatus?" Giorgio Agamben argues that the term emerged from pre-Nicene and Byzantine theological discourse that separated God's being from God's action, God's ontology from God's work in the world, or in the language of the Byzantine theologians, God's essence from God's energies. The theological separation enabled a curatorial practice of relating energies to essence.

> The term "apparatus" designates that in which, and through which, one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. This is the reason why apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject.[33]

Theologians sought to distinguish God's being from God's work in the world, beginning with the Incarnation of the Son and its relationship to the divine plan of redemption and salvation, this plan was called *Oikonomia*, that is,

> [A] set of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures, and institutions that aim to manage, govern, control, and orient—in a way that purports to be useful—the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings.[34]

The apparatus that was invented to produce the Nicene theological *Oikonomia*, viewed through Agamben's analysis, appears to be curatorial—a practice of relation, juxtaposition, distinction. The definition of the exhibition that Peter Weibel and Bruno Latour develop resonates with Agamben's concept of the apparatus as both a theological

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[33]Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik & Stefan Pedatella (University of Stanford Press, 2009).

[34]Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik & Stefan Pedatella (University of Stanford Press 2009). Theorist of the image Marie-José Mondzain focuses considerable attention on the economy as a central concept in the development of the Byzantine theory of the icon. Mondzain's work, which plays an important role in the chapters that follow, reveals that the development of the theology of the icon and image was a *curatorial practice* as theologians sought creative ways to relate the invisible image to the visible. See, especially *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, Rico Franses, trans (1996; University of Stanford Press, 2005).

*and* curatorial concept, or theological *because* it is curatorial. They observe that museum exhibitions are "deeply unrealistic," and thus artificial structures. They continue:

> [i]t is a highly artificial assemblage of objects, installations, people and arguments, which could not reasonably be gathered anywhere else. In an exhibition the usual constraints of time, space, and realism are suspended. This means that it is an ideal medium for experimentation; and especially for addressing the current crisis of representation....[35]

Through the relationships and juxtapositions it generates spatially, museum exhibitions can enable the displayed artifacts to behave in new ways not possible outside this "highly artificial assemblage." This is what makes the museum one of the "premier epistemological technologies of the Enlightenment."[36] Museums, through their exhibitions, are thus

> a key force in the fabrication and maintenance of modern identity. More than a genre, and more than simply one institution on a par with others, museums are essential sites for the fabrication and perpetuation of our conception of ourselves as autonomous individuals with unique subjectivities.[37]

But what exactly is an exhibition? It is a selection of artifacts (and texts) that are displayed for public viewing in a designated space or room. However, as Elena Filipovic reminds us, it is not what an exhibition is "as a category/genre/object, but what it *does*...how they [exhibitions] participate in the construction and administration of the experience of the items they present."[38] What the exhibition *does* is activate the

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[35]Peter Weibel and Bruno Latour, "Experimenting with Representation: *Iconoclash* and *Making Things Public*," in *Exhibition Experiments*, Sharon Macdonald, Paul Basu, eds. (London: Blackwell, 2007).

[36]Donald Preziosi, "Collecting/Museums," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, Richard Shiff & Robert Nelson, eds (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[37]Donald Preziosi & Claire Farago, "General Introduction: What are Museums for? in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, eds. Preziosi & Farago (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[38]Elena Filipovic, "What is an Exhibition?" in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, Jens Hoffmann, ed. (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2010).

spatial dimension of knowledge and experience, putting artifacts, images, concepts, and texts into relationships that defy linear progression or "readings." What they offer experientially, creatively, is greater than the sum of their individual parts. Rather than being enlisted to serve a constant and continuous argument or a logical progression of thought, an exhibition activates the relationships *between* and *among* specific concepts, ideas, texts, and artifacts, opening up different ways to experience them as embodiments in space and time, even *generating* particular iterations of space and time, indeed, in some cases, as Preziosi observes, "a place where you could walk through time by walking through space."[39] The exhibition disengages artifacts from their previous contexts or situations of origin. They "work" *because* they have been liberated from those contexts or situations and put into new relationships. While the exhibition offers a type of argument, embodies or enacts a thesis, it simultaneously offers multiple ways to interact with its constellation of artifacts since the experience it generates is not unfolded through reading but through the active and selective visual attention of the viewer. For example, the absorptive or contemplative reader sits at a desk alone, hunches over a book, following an argument through a linear sequence, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, page by page, chapter by chapter in a temporal rather than spatial register. In contrast, the exhibition viewer moves *with and among* others in a space filled with artifacts, as their gaze moves across, through, around, even *past* clusters of works, exercising their freedom and agency to attend to what catches their (visual) interest. This kind of viewing as a "side-way glancing

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[39]Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body, Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 50.

dialogism," as museum theorist Tony Bennett calls it, in which the "roles of viewing, speaking, and listening [are] mingled complexly with one another."[40] This distinctive mode of viewing-speaking-listening is a fundamental feature of the curatorial event.

Filipovic suggests that this spatial dynamism makes the exhibition an especially productive means for generating new experiences, provoking new forms of critique and activism—even new iterations of knowledge and understanding. Filipovic observes,

> At their best, exhibitions venture out on a limb, allowing all of the strange and wondrous incommensurability of the artwork to provoke its own terms of engagement. Such an endeavor could only be subjective in the extreme, and, as a result, fallible, inexhaustive, potentially contradictory, and provisional…[41]

For Filipovic it is its fragmentary, transitory, and even "potentially contradictory" nature that characterizes the impact of the exhibition. While the exhibition is one of the ways that museums manage and coordinate what is visible and invisible, it cannot *control* such experiences, which makes the exhibition a potentially liberative medium, since the promiscuity of artifacts and the psychic activity of imaginative viewers cannot help but generate new connections, relationships, and juxtapositions.

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[40] Tony Bennett, "Pedagogic Objects, Clean eyes, and Popular Instruction: On Sensory Regimes and Museum Didactics," *Configurations* 6/3 (Sept 1998).

[41] Elena Filipovic, "What is an Exhibition?" in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, Jens Hoffmann, ed. (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2013), 76.

Curating as Theory and Practice

But who is the agent responsible for producing these exhibitions? The maker of such installations is the *curator*. So, it is worth considering the figure of the curator in more detail, whose creative practice offers rich resources for a museal theology in a post-Christian and post-secular society that is nevertheless saturated with theological images and concepts. As curatorial theorist and philosopher Jean-Paul Martinon observes, "curating is an attempt at ordering an ever-increasing range of symbolic cultural excesses." The curator thereby "gives value to things in a world of excess." And that includes, following Martinon's logic, an excess of theological concepts and images.[42]

What is a "Curator?"

The role of the curator has migrated from the art world into the broader cultural domain. As a *New York Times* article suggested in 2020, "everyone's a curator now, from social media feeds and playlists to meals and vacations.[43] It has become a primary metaphor through which we express our creative autonomy, celebrate our individuality. We are personal curators because we "design" our lives around our own preferences. In this increasingly prevalent view, the curator is pressed into the shape of the myths of sovereign artist, master of his [*sic*] opinions, tastes, judgments (and neo-liberal consumer subject) in the service of friction-free experiences that confirm our pre-existing ideas about the world by plastering over its gaps, cracks, and fissures as we

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[42]Jean-Paul Martinon, "A Note Towards Curatorial Anarchy," *Curatography* 15 (2025).

[43]Lou Stoppard, "Everyone's a Curator Now," *New York Times* (March 3, 2020). See also David Balzar, *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else* (London: Pluto Press, 2015); Michael Bhaskar, *Curation: The Power of Selection in a World of Excess* (London: Piatkus Books, 2016).

surround ourselves only with our own selections, our own choices, presenting those selections publicly (usually virtually) through playlists, selfies, and rankings. To curate in this context is to eliminate the friction from our lives through the selection of artifacts from a staggering surplus.

But curatorial practice is always more than the collection and consumption of preferences, exercising choices and making selections from the stuff that overwhelm us. This privatized and individualistic use of the term ignores important ethical dimensions that is at the heart of curatorial practice. What about those artifacts that provoke our imagination, ignite or creativity? What do we as curators owe *them*? In contrast to these popular images, in which curating becomes an extension of selective consumption based on taste, the role of the curator in the art world is much more complex. Its responsibilities are three-fold. She serves as a custodian, a "curate" who cares for works of art in her custody. She cares for them by conserving them, and also by presenting them, and putting them in relation to others, which facilitates connections and relationships among them. These conversations are tenuously and temporarily formed assemblages that include multiple works of art and other material artifacts. They are material products *of others'* creativity, which are called *exhibitions* in which these assemblages are presented *for others*. And it is this assemblage—this contraption made of dozens of material artifacts-things-objects that is the primary, if not exclusive means through which we experience works of art in person.[44] That the work of art actually *survives*, survives vandalism and mistreatment, survives wars, survives inevitable

[44]Most of our experiences of works of art (specialists included) takes place through reproductions, photographs, etc. The interaction between in-person experiences, those through reproductions, and then those recalled in memory is a relationship that needs to be explored theologically.

deterioration, and just plain loss or destruction has much to do with curators who have preserved these vulnerable and fragile artifacts, caring for them, showing concern for them, and thus giving them a future of potential creative promiscuity.

The curator also collaborates with artists on such exhibitions, cultivating and encouraging artistic practices by presenting the results in gallery spaces for a viewing public. The curator, then, is an advocate, using their creativity and imagination in the service of another's. And they are a facilitator, realizing a creative project not possible without their stewardship and management of the multiple institutional dimensions, even though the "work" in the exhibition is not theirs, they are responsible for the very existence of the *exhibition-assemblage*, from securing funding and necessary institutional resources, to installation and programming. The curator is everywhere present, but nowhere seen. In this way, the curator is also one of the component parts of the apparatus that the museum uses to manage what is visible and invisible and the images that the exhibition generates. The curator's invisible practice consists in operating these management machines, pulling levers, pushing buttons, "from vision to nail."

Yet the most important dimension of the curator is the one most easily overlooked because it is invisible to viewers of an exhibition, since what is on display—what is visible—is the artist's work *not the curator's*. The latter works to facilitate the work of the former. And while the artist operates within the modern mythologies of the autonomous artist as singular creator, creating *ex nihilo* in their studio or performing the artist-genius in public (e.g., Marcel Duchamp), the curator is less visible, more porous, connecting and working with countless collaborators in an effort to realize a public

project.[45] The curator must navigate the most problematic and unseemly (as well as banal) aspects of the art world machine. They negotiate with museum administration, work with donors, collectors, advocate for artists to advisory boards, work with teams of educators, and representatives of diverse and often competing audience constituencies within and beyond the museum, taking ultimate responsibility for the works of art on display—even on occasion arguing with the museum's security staff. Advocating for the artist's freedom while also defending and protecting those interests of her employers even if those interests are at odds with her commitment to the artist. This means that her work consists also of compromise, even uncomfortable compromise with the mechanisms of the museum. The curator must negotiate, navigate, and even at times *circumvent* the very art world and economic systems and structures that make art (and their salary) possible.

And yet, these systems and structures can easily obscure the art exhibition's radical potential, reducing it to the means by which the wealthy and powerful decorate their lives and launder their money and reputations as they deploy art and museums as instruments for increasing their cultural capital, further materializing their power and extending their influence. The result is that the curator's work (wittingly or unwittingly) can conspire to generate and reproduce representations and images of this world that further entrench injustice, class hierarchy, wealth inequality, and racial violence through the veil of culture and the arts.[46]

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[45]Artists like Duchamp, for example, often play the role of the curator and they do so by transforming themselves into porous collaborators who concern themselves with more than making their work but those non-visible and invisible decisions and elements that make their work visible.

[46]For a case-study of such a fraught and complicated curatorial relationship and its potential relevance for contemporary theology, see my "Curating Futures: The Curatorial as a Theological Concept," in *Assembling Futures: Economy, Ecology, Democracy, and Religion*, Jennifer Quigley and Catherine Keller, eds. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2024), 106-126.

Curatorial practice is fraught with compromise and complicity with structures of power in ways that can often overshadow or even obscure its critical and emancipatory implications. "It's a parasitical activity in the end," observes curator and museum director Charles Esche, in which

> the ability to manage, negotiate and compromise is generally the most prized of assets. A clever curator has constantly to trim and modify to try to ensure that something approximating a curatorial vision remains visible through the tangle of financial and other interests that shape the ground rules of a given project… Curating may well have its famous personalities and its attempt at a canonical history but there's still something essentially secondary about it…or maybe it's better to say that it has aspirations to philosophical or aesthetic coherence but is so often compromised by the expectations of patrons and bureaucracies that the agency of the curatorial is rarely fully deployed.[47]

The compromised, complicit, limited agency of curatorial practice, a kind of "weak" creative or "middle-voiced" creative activity that privileges limited-hindered-hampered agency, making do with what's available where failure is always lurking—an epitome of what Walter Benjamin called the "left-handed blows" of "improvisation."[48] Those that attend the exhibition do not realize how close it came to being cancelled—the pleading, deal-making, and strategizing that the curator had to deploy to convince a reluctant collector or museum to lend this or that work of art; the long list of favors that the curator both calls and the debts that the accrue, the relationships they forged, and those they relied on in the process of pulling off the exhibition.

Esche addresses these challenges when he writes that "the moment of public exhibition, while essential, is only an element in how curatorial agency might be

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[47]Charles Esche, "Coda: The Curatorial," in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 241.

[48]Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street* (1928; Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016).

exercised. Indeed, it is arguable that the opening and public viewing is not even the most significant moment."[49] For Esche, the significance of any one exhibition reveals itself only in retrospect, when the "critical surplus," as he calls it, can be articulated and extracted. Esche continues,

> For me, as a curator guilty of all the sins of complicity and self-regard I have discussed above, it is this possibility of this retrospective analysis that still just about saves the day.... The task we have in front of us is, I believe to focus on how to deliver critical surplus over the longer term.[50]

The paradox with which curatorial practice works is that it finds its ultimacy, not in the presentation of the exhibition and the eight to twelve weeks that it is open to a public, but its own salient and often invisible *afterlife*, the life the exhibition lives *after* the exhibition closes, after the works are taken off the walls and pedestals, re-crated, and sent back to their homes; the gallery walls repainted and the machinery of the museum mobilized for the next exhibition. The ultimacy of curatorial practice is located in its salvaging, protecting, and cultivating this "critical surplus" that responds to the "creative surplus" of the exhibition or public project, a practice that can create and curate new images and visions from these previously used artifacts in the past, and repurposing them in new curatorial contexts that suggest and if the world *could* be otherwise, it can do so through the resources it has already left behind, discarded, or consigned to the museum. Is it possible to curate theology in ways that offer such retroactive reflection, that can produce such critical-creative surpluses? A museal theology, a theology of the museum, that arrives on the scene late, surrounded by previously used artifacts and concepts that

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[49]Charles Esche, "Coda: The Curatorial," 243.

[50]Charles Esche, "Coda: The Curatorial," 244.

survived their maker, might be in a helpful position to curate new installations from what was left behind and to put them to new uses. A museal theologian will thus curate from the excesses and surpluses of surviving (and perhaps even discarded) theological concepts, texts, and images and will collaborate, advocate, scavenge, facilitate all the while acknowledging their own compromised and fragile yet potentially useful location on the margins in the academy, the church, and culture. And if images of the theologian have emerged while reading the section on the curator, it suggests that the similarities between the curator and the theologian are already evident, which will only grow stronger and more evocative.

Bureaucrat, Socialite, Priest

In order more fully to explore the potential of the figure of the curator for theological discourse, it might be helpful to start with a fable concerning Cura from Latin poet Hygenius. Cura, a personification of "care," "concern," or "curiosity," once crossed a river.[51]

> In crossing a river, Cura gathered clay and, engrossed in thought, began to mold it. When she was thinking about what she had already made, Jove arrived on the scene. Cura asked him to grant it *spiritus*, "breath" or "spirit." He grants her request readily, but when she also asked to give her creation her own name, he forbade it, insisting that it had to carry his name. While the two were arguing, Tellus (Earth) arose and wanted it to have her name because she had made her body available for it. The judgment is finally rendered by Saturn. He determines that since the *spiritus* was granted by Jove, he should have it in death; Tellus, or Earth, would receive the body she had given; because Cura, or Care, had been the creator, she would keep her creation as long as it lived. To resolve the debate, *homo*, "human being," would be the name, because it was made from *humus*, earth.

[51] Why Cura crosses the river in the first place is never addressed. However, Hans Blumenberg directs particular attention to this mysterious gap in the fable. See Blumenberg, *Care Crosses the River,* trans. Paul Fleming (1987; University of Stanford Press, 2010).

This story attracted the attention of Martin Heidegger, "The double sense of *Cura* refers to care for something as concern, absorption in the world, but also care in the sense of devotion." Heidegger regards the fable as a "naive interpretation" of the philosophical concept that he terms Dasein, "being-in-the-world" in Section 42 of *Being and Time*.[52] Heidegger's use of this fable in casting the female *Cura* as creator has been seen as an inversion of the equivalent Christian myth, in which woman is created last, with the centrality of *Cura* as a challenge to the Western concept of self-sufficiency and "atomization" of the individual. It is *Cura's* caring act of creation and her *concern* that are crucial sources for exploring the ethical implications of curatorial practice and its potential as a resource for other forms of practice and theory, including theological discourse. It also embodies a distinctively "curatorial," collaborative manner of creation which offers alternatives to monotheistic accounts of a creation *ex nihilo*, a creation that is patriarchal, heterosexual, and sovereign. As Catherine Keller argues, the Genesis texts offer no accounts of such creation "from nothing." But rather, to focus attention on creation *de profundis* and *de chaosmos* (James Joyce) out of the depths and chaotic matter.[53] In the context of Keller's theological argument from the Genesis account, God—especially the Whiteheadian God of process thought—is operating more like a curator, more like *Cura*, than as the sovereign artist-master creator of Christendom when Whitehead claims that this God "does not create the world but saves it" and expresses a

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[52]Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (1962; Harper, 2008), 183-86.

[53]See Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), esp. Chapter 3: "'Tears of Achamoth': The fathers' *ex nihilo*."

"tender care that nothing be lost."[54] And from the perspective of the role of religion and theology, to respond to the *tehomic* void and cracks of the symbolic order. Curatorial thinking and practice are important for managing and working with what is always too much.

*Cura* is important for the curator because as feminine, she "creates" from the earth, uses what is at hand, and does so out of "care," "concern," and even "curiosity" while negotiating the imbalanced and gendered power relationship, including the masculine mythology of the sovereign artist.[55] (It is also relevant that while Jupiter and Tellus argue about after whom the creature should be named, *Cura* doesn't. Likewise, the curator shepherds and cultivates the agency and creativity of others, dissolving in the experience of this extended agency and others' creativity and imagination.) Theological reflection on the figure of the curator begins here, with *Cura*, whose concern and curiosity are shown in crossing this river, whose care is manifest through making a being from *humus*, from what is already in existence but unformed (not even raw "depths" or "chaos") and who must collaborate with others to realize her "project," which doesn't even bear her name.

Moreover, the history of the use of the term "curator" also offers an important resource for thinking theologically. According to theorist Stefan Nowotny,

> The first "curators" seem to have appeared, under the name of *curatores rei publicae*, around the year of 100 CE, or about a century after Hyginus had written his fable. These "curators of public affairs" were in fact representatives of the

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[54]A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1927; New York: The Free Press, 1978), 346.

[55]This observation is not intended to claim too much for the curator, or to make a claim other than the curator works with and must navigate imbalanced power relations that gendering the curator as feminine can help reveal.

> Imperial Roman government, whose main task was to maintain public order and look after the finances of the city they were deputed to govern. This name was especially used in more "remote" places such as the African provinces. These first "curators" thus had a well-defined responsibility and, even though their responsibilities were oriented towards the good of the "public" and the "common wealth," were nonetheless travelling agents of a governmental power that wanted to preserve its power even in the most dispersed sites of its implementation.[56]

Nowotny's description of these first "curators" is highly suggestive. First, their responsibilities were directed toward the common good, for the public well-being of the various provinces under their jurisdiction. Second, their responsibilities were underwritten by the Roman Empire, and thus an extension of imperial sovereignty that pushes against concerns for the common good of the provinces. This *curatores rei publicae*, like the museum curator today, is an agent—or diplomat—with multiple loyalties, who must creatively balance those loyalties, responsibilities, entanglements in the expression of care and concern for what can so easily get lost in the process—and in the colonization.

In comparison to the creative freedom and autonomy as well as imaginative promiscuity on the part of the artist, the curator seems parasitic, serving only as a mediator, administrator, limited to merely selecting from the results of artists' creativity. This figure has frustrated and infuriated many artists, like Robert Smithson, who bristled at the curator who "imposes his own limits on an art exhibit," a phenomenon he called "cultural confinement."[57] Moreover, art theorist Hal Foster cautions,

> Such curating suits the postindustrial aspects of an economy in which the appointed task for many people is to consume... We cognitive laborers manipulate

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[56]Stefan Nowotny, "The Curator Crosses the River: A Fabulation," in Jean-Paul Martinon, *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[57]Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Oakland: University of California Press, 1996), 154.

> information, which is to say we curate the given, and this compiling often involves a great deal of complying.[58]

But the figure of the art curator is more than compiling and complying. David Levi Strauss suggests, "Curators have always been a curious mixture of bureaucrat and priest."[59] They are on one hand invisible. They experience the results of their work in exhibitions in art museums and galleries, yet their own creativity metastasizes into the exhibition itself, becoming indistinguishable from the assembled works on view. On the other hand, however, they can be highly visible in elite social gatherings, like cocktail parties with rich art collectors and patrons, with whom they must work closely. The art curator embodies the contradictions that haunt the visual arts and the institutions that preserve and present them. Are they and their images of practice expressions of transformation and liberation, capable of speaking truth to power? Or are they merely instruments of power and wealth, bureaucrats of the court? Are they necessary for human and earthly flourishing or are they irrelevant, merely forms of decoration, distraction, indulgence that aestheticizes oppressive and extractive structures? As priests of the art world, curators perform the liturgies, administer the sacraments, and offer the homilies that sustain faith in the visual arts as a viable means by which we may experience our lives individually and collectively as pulsing with what Paul calls the fruits of the spirit, faith, hope, and love. Or at least, this is my contention. For even if these priests are compromised, their liturgies and the images their practices might still be effective for

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[58]Hal Foster, "Exhibitionists," in *What Comes After Farce? Art and Criticism at a Time of Debacle* (New York: Verso, 2020), 68.

[59]David Levi Strauss, "The Bias of the World: Curating After Szeemann & Hopps," in *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*, ed. Steven Rand and Heather Kouris (New York: Apex Art, 2007).

theological thought, as they elude the limits and intentions of those that perform them.[60] Museum theology acknowledges and embraces the ambivalent, complex, and often contradictory roles of the curator.

This priestly description is a reminder that the curator can trace one branch of its genealogy to the church and to pastoral care. A *curate* is part of the clerical staff and assists the chief priest or rector and usually oversees congregational life in the diocese or parish. Moreover, as Hans Ulrich Obrist points out,

> The art exhibition, in particular, has its roots in the processions of the late Middle Ages, when the flow of people through a city during annual and seasonal festivals provided an opportunity for artisanal craftsmen to display their creations to the passing crowds.[61]

In addition, the installation practice of displaying relics and holy images in church for pilgrims to view and venerate is a reminder that curatorial practices are "deeply rooted in the free circulation of people through a public space, which continues to be perhaps its defining feature."[62] Moreover, this "free circulation of people through a public space" to view sacred artifacts and relics suggests that for much of Christendom the visitor to this or that church already consisted of assuming multiple and simultaneous roles—congregant, tourist, pilgrim, worshiper, seeker of entertainment. Perhaps a museal theology such as the one unfolded in this project is a recovery of some aspects of historic Christianity through the recovery of the curatorial dimension of ecclesial work?

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[60]This situation resembles the Donatist controversy in the Church in the fourth and fifth century CE which addressed the question of whether the sacraments administered by a priest in North Africa who had yielded to the Roman persecution were valid.

[61]Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Ways of Curating* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2014), 26.

[62]Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Ways of Curating*, 26.

The image of the curator and the concept of the curatorial exemplifies a creative practice that is less visible, more modest, and perhaps a bit more easily disentangled from the romantic myths of the singular and autonomous Artist as sovereign Creator *ex nihilo*. However, it is also at the same time more transparently implicated in the very political, economic, and racial structures that have generated the multi-headed crises that face us. Perhaps this theological moment requires a kind of *curation* that enables a *creation* that is more collaborative and predicated on cultivating and improvising with the "creative surplus" of the afterlife of museum artifacts of thought? It is a curation that creative with collectivities and multiplicities, that are *inherently ecological*. Curatorial practice thus requires a creative assembling that does not dismiss but invites and works with those agents, ideas, images, and practices that are complicit, compromised that might be brought into new relationships, new juxtapositions, as we curate theological exhibitions of our possible and impossible futures.[63] Obrist continues, "Curating, after all, produces ephemeral constellations that disappear."[64] *Exhibitions are temporary*. They last for only a few days or weeks and then are dismantled, the objects are returned to their lenders, assume their places on the racks in storage, or they find their way into other exhibitions, in other, new assemblages. The temporary nature of curating also lends to the practice an ethical dimension because such veiling movements resists the temptations to entrench and vitrine such iterations, making them more substantial, permanent, universal than they in reality are.

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[63]See Jean-Paul Martinon, ed. *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[64]Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating* (New York: Sternberg, 2007), 51.

The curated exhibition is always more (and less) than the sum of its parts—individual works of art, particular artifacts hung or projected images on walls or displayed on pedestals. It generates particular relationships that are, however, *always changing* because visitors to the exhibition move through the spaces, galleries, rooms in different ways, different directions, following their own different interests and desires. The exhibition galleries are not linear and so offer multiple ways of moving through them as the "junctions" or juxtapositions of works of art generate and invite connections, conversations, and relationships that would not have emerged otherwise. Moreover, despite the curator's agency in selecting and installing the work, the relationships that emerge cannot be limited to or constrained by curatorial intention. On many occasions, visitors, students, or docents pointed out relationships between works that they presumed that I had intended, but that I had not.

To visit an art museum can be a social experience. It is a bustling—even chaotic—public square humming with multiplicities: bodies, discourses, sounds, experiences, and competing interests that represent the hive of energies that can only be loosely assembled, marshalled, initiated but not restricted by the decisions of a curator or a team of curators. But it can also be a solitary experience as many museums remain virtually empty and therefore offer a retreat from the bustling social world. Empty or crowded, buzzing or silent, museums are full of artifacts, images, and works of art. Yet not all of these artifacts appear equally to the viewer at any one time. We get glimpses or even overlook them entirely—until they emerge seemingly out of nowhere on a return visit while we least expect it. The curatorial dimension of the art museum encourages experiences that are non-linear, imaginative, improvisational, and creative. It generates

the potential for ideas, concepts, artifacts, and images to be put in temporary and loose relation that provoke affects, feelings, emotions, memories, experiences, and concepts that defy logic and rational argument, resist prediction (and mere repetition), description, and explanation as well as the discipline of beliefs and method.

This project takes as a thought experiment Giorgio Agamben's provocative and sweeping claim that the world is *museified,* that the world has become a museum, "One by one," Agamben claims, "the spiritual potentialities that defined the people's lives—art, religion, philosophy, the idea of nature, even politics—have docilely withdrawn into the Museum."[65] These "spiritual potentialities" have entered the museum because they no longer shape lives in the way they once had, according to Agamben, "what was once—but no longer—felt as true." In this world the curator plays an indispensable role since their work consists of finding news uses for these artifacts, presenting new constellations, new exhibitions, new assemblages that give them potential new uses, as they facilitate their afterlives, which also includes producing our past.

## Curatorial Theory

The complexities of curatorial practices described above manifest a particular way of thinking that operates as both theory and method in this study. *Exhibiting God* suggests that in a museified world, to think theologically is also in some way to think museologically and curatorially. Moreover, it suggests that theology is a museum discourse and a curatorial discourse. Donald Preziosi argues that curatorial practice is

[65]Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 84.

the product of a particular way of *thinking*, not just a particular way of arranging and displaying objects. He writes,

> Curating not only precedes and is more fundamental than exhibitions, galleries, collections, and museums; but it is also not unique, nor exclusive, to any of those institutions and professions. In fact, it is not even an "it" at all but is, rather, a way of using things: potentially any things.[66]

For Preziosi, then, curating in Agamben's museum as world, consists of finding "new uses" for things. Swedish curator and writer Maria Lind, developed the concept of the "curatorial" as the theoretical adjunct to the practice of curating. She argues that curating

> is not analogous to curatorial, the 'technical modality' of the work of the curator. It is a methodological impetus, a way of thinking about one's practice that can center on art but also exist beyond it. It is a "a more viral presence consisting of signification processes and relationships between objects, people, places, ideas and so forth, that strives to create friction and push new ideas."[67]

The curatorial is a concept that attempts to gather into itself the energy, intensities, movement, disturbances, and sensations that are provoked through the actual "technical modality" of curatorial practice, that is, the concrete process of conceiving, planning, and installing exhibitions, "from vision to nail" as Swiss curator Harald Szeemann describes it. The theory (and method) of the curatorial, then, is an attempt to think from this assemblage or constellation of effects that curatorial practice generates in order to transfer and apply it to other contexts, discourses, situations.

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[66]Donald Preziosi, "Curatorship as *Bildungsroman*: Or, from Hamlet to Hjelmslev," in *Curatorial Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Contemporary Curating*, eds Malene Vest Hansen, Anne Folke Henningsen, and Anne Gregersen (New York: Routledge, 2019), 11.

[67]Maria Lind, quoted in Jens Hoffmann, "Curating Between the Lines," *Critique d'art* [online] no. 41 (Spring-Summer 2013).

For curatorial theorist and philosopher Jean-Paul Martinon, the concept of the curatorial also borrows from the trans- and poly-disciplinary posture of curating, which draws from not only artistic practice and art history, but cultural studies, material studies, visual culture studies, critical theory, heritage and memory studies, philosophy, intellectual history, philosophy of science, science studies, anthropology: "What is most striking about this list is that no discipline could be understood as being central to the practice of curating."[68] And it is precisely this elusive, decentered, and dislodging radical hybridity that provoked museum theorist Ivan Gaskell to complain that Martinon's edited volume, *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, fell short of offering anything approximating the kind of properly academic philosophy he was expecting.[69] But art historians, cultural historians, and other specialists have criticized curators for their lack of expertise, since curating and the curatorial does not ultimately *serve disciplines*. Martinon admits that curatorial practice, and thus curatorial theory is the "the ultimate scavenger of disciplines" and moreover, that curating "can only be taught in fragments borrowed from other disciplines."[70] Significantly, *it is its amateurishness and at times even lack of expertise that is its chief virtue*, for "curating is really about broken comprehension, ambivalent competence, unhinged knowledge, unsystematic skill, arbitrary proficiency, accidental mastery and casual expertise."[71] It is possible in a post-Christian and post-secular society that academic theologians

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[68]Jean-Paul Martinon, "Edging Disciplines," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 6/2 (Oct 2017): 221-29.

[69]Ivan Gaskell, Reviews," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73/2 (Spring 2015): 208-210.

[70]Jean-Paul Martinon, "Edging Disciplines," 227.

[71]Jean-Paul Martinon, "Edging Disciplines," 227.

might need to behave more like the curators—a scavenger of fragments who smuggles, borrows, pilfers, and improvises. Moreover, Martinon suggests that the curatorial, then, "never coheres into a disciplinary narrative and needs other disciplines in order to articulate and justify itself."[72] This need presents itself in part because neither curatorial practice nor the curatorial has any content that is its own to cultivate and preserve. It is a structure, a method, a performative medium all the way down, as it were. Leire Vergara suggests,

> To address the curatorial outside of the proper limits of curating entails expanding its privileged domain of visibility: the exhibition. In order to do so requires that a curatorial practice steps into other fields of knowledge and creates new possibilities for thinking the relationships between objects, bodies, subjects, politics and display.[73]

For Vergara the curatorial takes the exhibition *beyond* the visual but it does so by going *through* it, that is, thinking from what visual attention reveals of the "relationships between objects, bodies, subjects, politics and display." The visual is thus not contrasted or pitted against but *the source* of theoretical reflection. The New Delhi-based artistic-media-curatorial group, Raqs Media Collective, describes the curatorial as a particular *sensibility* that delights in the quivering vibration of instability, even seeking it out.

> The curatorial has an advantage. An edge over other sensibilities. Its ability to privilege a precarious balance of forces and to deploy a flying chorus of terms, images and ideas in the interests of com-batting any effort at aesthetic or epistemic stability gives it the advantage.[74]

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[72]Jean-Paul Martinon, "Edging Disciplines," 226.

[73]Leire Vergara, "An Exhausted Curating," in Jean-Paul Martinon, ed. *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 74.

[74]Raqs Media Collective, "On the Curatorial, From the Trapeze," in Jean-Paul Martinon, ed. *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 17.

They conjure images of juggling or acrobatics with their description of "a flying chorus of terms, images and ideas," multiplicities always on the verge of flying apart. Yet it is this instability—the accusations of a lack of expertise and lack of intellectual rigor from the experts and academic gatekeepers—that the curatorial encounters as it experiments with what *might* work at that particular site of thought and practice. Perhaps it might be better to describe theologians in this museal framework as curators of theological concepts as a means to counter a view of theologians as masters of offering commentary on canonical theological texts? The Collective also describes the capacity of a curatorial sensibility to adapt to the circumstances and the topography of discourse and experience at hand when they describe it as "making a graveyard walkable through inventive gardening."[75] This image affirms the lexical kinship of museum and mausoleum, museum artifacts and bones, relics and memorials, a kinship that will recur throughout the project. By focusing on moving through the landscape (i.e., "inventive gardening") it also resonates with Donna Haraway's influential concept of "situated knowledges," in which she argues for a "mobile positioning" that privileges the "politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating."[76] Curatorial practice and curatorial thinking has the potential to extend and extenuate Haraway's claim for a "mobile positioning" that is attentive to location and the mechanisms by which objects, images, and meaning becomes visible. Whether walking through a graveyard or a museum exhibition, the locality of curatorial practice

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[75]Raqs Media Collective, "On the Curatorial, From the Trapeze," 19.

[76]Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives," *Feminist Studies* 14/3 (1988).

and theology, is among those artifacts and concepts from the past, fragments, relics, ruins. Curating and the curatorial are means by which to reflect on how museums and museal frameworks manage visibilities and invisibilities, intimacy and distance. Preziosi observes,

> I will consider curatorship as a historiographic practice that gives explicit attention to the fabricating, managing, and articulating of both what should be remembered and revealed, and what should be forgotten or hidden.[77]

If, as *Exhibiting God* claims, theology is a museum discourse not only because it arrives late, after faith, *after the spirit of immediacy and spontaneity has departed*, but because it manages what is visible and invisible, seen and unseen, and generates believable images, then curating and the curatorial are helpful concepts for reflecting on the processes of this management in order to reveal its mechanisms. Preziosi argues that

> [c]urating problematizes stable or fixed distinctions between art and religion. It does so by foregrounding the processes of knowledge-formation and under-standing, or what I will call the epistemological technologies of fabricating social truths, by brining to consciousness the "fictions of factual representation;" that is, the artistry or artifice of what is staged as if it were "fact."[78]

Because it smudges the distinctions between art and religion (also, science and religion) by reveal the artifice of this staging of distinctions, curating is inextricably interwoven with theology. Therefore, theology is often what happens behind the curtain, or backstage, as it were. But it is also what happens on stage, in the exhibition, in full view.

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[77]Donald Preziosi, "Curatorship as *Bildungsroman*: Or, from Hamlet to Hjelmslev," 16.

[78] Donald Preziosi, "Curatorship as *Bildungsroman*: Or, from Hamlet to Hjelmslev," 12.

***EXCURSUS—DEUS SIVE NATURA***




Nebraska-based artist Charley Friedman's artistic practice consists of sculpture, photography, video, and performance which he has deployed in a myriad of ways to explore the spiritual, sacred, even religious dimension of secular culture, often through his Jewish heritage. His kinetic sculpture *G-O-D* (1999) offers one of the more direct, simple, yet complex example of such a practice. Moreover, the work embodies the thesis of this project in especially fruitful ways. It consists of three transparent, inflated vinyl letters filled with air which rotate slowly on a simple and prosaic mechanism that declares the persistent yet vulnerable concept of God. In this work, God is a word. Or, put more accurately, three letters that hang together in a wobbly assemblage that spell out "God" while also, depending on the angle, also spell "DOG." Friedman's work is a reminder of what both Nietzsche and Lacan have said about God. "I am afraid,"

Nietzsche admitted, "we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar."[79] And Lacan observes, "as long as things are said, the God hypothesis will persist."[80] Friedman's contribution to this Nietzschean and Lacanian perspective is to realize this word through three awkward, wobbly letters, letters that can just as easily refer to a canine thing as a divine thing. It becomes a material artifact that is slightly silly, even mockable. What is more, this English word, with its potential play of referent, offers another interpretation through Swedish, a language and culture that plays a constitutive role in this project, in which *dog* is the past tense of *dö*, meaning "dead." God remains, because of its presence in language and the symbolic order, but it does so, barely, and not without more than a little bit of humor. Whether dead or not dead, "God" wobbles and rotates on an elaborate contraption.

Friedman's sculpture also offers another way to think about the *experience* of God's presence in the world. Friedman describes the work in this way:

> As the letters spin, they very rarely align to be legibly read, but for a brief moment they come together and the viewer catches a glimpse of its meaning. The cast shadows on the wall reference Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" and the idea that our perception of the divine through sensation of the material world is limited and cannot possibly provide a complete understanding of God.[81]

"God" is not merely a word, a function of language. It is also a material experience—shadows, reflections, movement that slides in and out of visibility, flickering, fluctuating, often seen only at the edges of perception. Friedman's work is an iteration of Karl Ove

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[79]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols: Or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. Duncan Large (London: Oxford's World Classics, 2009).

[80]Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973 (Encore)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 45.

[81]See www.charleyfriedman.com

Knausgaard's observation that "all language casts a shadow."[82] These shadows, glimpses, feelings, and fragments resonate with an understanding of God that emerges in and through the material world and cannot be separated from it, does not stand over against it as its sovereign creator. Rilke too compared his experience of God to a shadow, which made his words "darken and glisten."[83] This immanent view of God is expressed provocatively by Alfred North Whitehead, who, in an effort to incapsulate the inextricable relationship of God to the world, wrote:

> It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World.
>
> It is as true to say that God transcends the World as that the World transcends God.
>
> It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God.[84]

This inextricable relationship of God to the world, a slippage between God and the world, opens up a way to think the relationship ecologically, immanently, and dynamically a relationship that avoids treating the world as merely the product of a sovereign creator who owns it and as a resource to be used for human ends. Moreover, this movement back and forth, from God to world on an immanent plane also means that in this curatorial experiment, art and religion, art theory and theology, church and museum, shift back and forth. As eco-theorist Timothy Morton explains in his interpretation of the Rothko Chapel in Houston. "Religion is turned into something like appreciating art; appreciating art is

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[82]Karl Ove Knausgaard, *Inadvertent*, trans. Ingvild Burkey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 13.

[83]Rainer Maria Rilke, diary entry, Sept 27, 1900.

[84]Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (1927; New York: Free Press, 1978), 348.

turned into something like spiritual contemplation. And those two transformations don't neatly map on to one another."[85] Following in the footsteps of Morton, as well as Rodin's previously mentioned comment about replacing "God" with "sculpture" in a theological text, this project does not attempt to define God, dismiss God, defend God. Nor does it take God or the belief in God as its starting point from which to think theologically. Rather, *God* shows up in the process of thinking theologically and yet God might appear in the guise of a work of art, might show up in the process of cleaning a painting, putting a sculpture on a pedestal, or walking around a museum or entering a church. To think theologically is to think *theopoetically*—conjuring, creating, or curating an experience for which *God* might be an appropriate name for some aspect of it. To exhibit God might therefore mean to create God, or to curate the circumstances from which an experience of or from God *might* (or might not) occur—the letters or their shadows might just as easily be interpreted as *dog* or, in Swedish, *died.*

What this project seeks to avoid, then, is to reify or what Latour calls "freeze-frame" a certain image of what God is (or what God is *not*).[86] Moreover, it also seeks to avoid reifying the "world" as well, transforming the earth into "Nature" by putting it on a pedestal and placing a vitrine over it in order to protect and venerate it. The result of this veneration, what will be introduced in the next chapter as *vitrining*, extract aesthetic and emotional value from the earth while celebrating it as "nature," that is, God's creation, given to human beings to use, and from which it can extract value. While it does not

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[85]Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* (New York: Penguin, 2021).

[86]Bruno Latour. "Thou Shalt Not Freeze-Frame," in *Science, Religion, and Human Experience*. James D. Proctor, ed. (London: University of Oxford Press, 2005).

address ecological concerns directly, this project does offer a way to think ecologically by offering the curatorial as a way to think multiplicities in relationships *that include the curator* and do not exempt them from taking responsibility by making visible the mechanisms and apparatuses through which the human subject (and God) has been separated from the world, from the earth.

This project works from a commitment to the Deleuzian perspective that theology is a particular structure, it is "the form which may be filled with beliefs, but the structure has no need to be filled in order to be called 'theological.'"[87] This structure is theological because it is inflected with belief, with faith. And as Todd McGowan will show in his articulation and explication of Lacanian theory in the next chapter, faith is everywhere in the symbolic order, filling the cracks and fissures of language, through which the void, or the real, seeps. Indeed, it is a psychic energy and social convention and practice that enables language and the symbolic order to work. The implication is that since it is everywhere, what I call a museified *faith-belief* is not an exclusively religious posture. Following Todd McGowan over five hundred years earlier, Martin Luther declares that "faith is not what some people think it is."[88] Luther comes in handy again for his definition of idolatry. He offers a way to think about the many ways and situations that *God* appears to us, or that we build, conjure, curate. For Luther, according to his *Large Catechism*, anything that the "heart relies on, trusts, or fears" or what might be depended on for "ultimate security, meaning, or salvation" constitutes God, or ultimacy for a

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[87]Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (1969; New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 281.

[88]Martin Luther, "Preface to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans" (1522), in *Luther's Works, Vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann, (1960; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999).

person. And so, theological discourse is a discourse that is generated from, explicates, or addresses in some way this ultimacy, what is, in fact, most worth our trust and devotion and which are derived from invisible images. *Exhibiting God* works from the perspective that this God, a function of belief, whether in language and grammar, signification and meaning in general, or in particular iterations of art, politics, religion, and nature, is inflected by Christianity. Therefore, in this project, *Exhibiting God*, the *God* that appears here and there, and the concepts it generates, like grace, faith, hope, love, forgiveness, justification, salvation, redemption, confession, penitence, are *Christianity-shaped.* But it is of secondary importance to the verb in the title of this project. What that implies is that theology is the means by which an artifact, a concept, an image, is made visible, legible, and believable.

Charley Friedman's work returns to offer a visual experience that resonates with the aim of the project. It makes visible the mechanisms and apparatus that makes "God" appear, makes the image and reflection visible. It is the mechanism on which the inflated vinyl letters sit and rotate, and through which the work becomes visible as a work of art. It is the wood beam, the electrical cords, the bolted posts, the lighting that casts the shadow and the back wall that makes the shadow visible, indeed substantial. Theology is the display apparatus that makes the work *work*, makes it visible. It is the *Deus ex machene* of the ancient Greek theatre, the contraption that lowered the divine figure onto the stage and then raised it from the stage.[89] The appearance of God in Friedman's work becomes visible through this mechanistic contraption, an apparatus that must be plugged

[89]See Aaron James Goldman, "Kierkegaard on Faith and Desire: The Limits of Christianity and the Human Heart" (PhD dissertation, Harvard Divinity School, 2021) for a discussion of this theatrical apparatus, called the *deus ex mechane* that Goldman deploys as an artifact that embodies the function of "faith" in Kierkegaard's authorship.

in to work. It is a magic trick that is performed in plain sight, not shrouded or hidden from view. And yet, it invites us to believe the effect it produces. Friedman's *G-O-D* is not an ironic or cynical gesture that dis-enchants, a cynical move that debunks. Rather, by building an elaborate contraption and making the mechanisms visible, it enchants, precisely through not in spite of its precarity, even silliness. God, or the world.

## SECULAR SWEDEN

The most extreme iteration of displacement, juxtaposition, and insertion as a research method is located in the institutional, cultural, and national mechanisms within which this project itself has been conceived and realized, or, to use the concepts unfolded thus far, how this project becomes visible, legible, and meaningful (or believable) *as* a theological project and under what specific conditions. *Exhibiting God* was conceived and shaped initially in the United States, with its particular iteration of the secular, the relationship of distinctive streams of Christianity to public life, and the position of theology as an academic discipline in the academy. And, perhaps most importantly, through my personal and complex lived relationship with Christianity that was responsible in the first place for my interest in art and religion, the aesthetic and the spiritual and their intersection. But this theological experiment takes its final form and is ultimately completed in Sweden, with its quite particular (and peculiar) iteration of the secular, relationship of Christianity to public life, and with academic theology occupying its own distinctive place in the academy. Significantly, it is also a religious environment that did not contribute in any way to forming my relationship to Christianity nor my relationship to religious faith. The friction that this project generates, then, is thus not limited to what takes place with art and theology in the chapters within *Exhibiting God*,

but the project itself as a material artifact that operates in both American and Swedish contexts, which includes distinctive—and even conflicting—expressions of cultural and academic life and the particular roles that the academy, the museum, and the church play in it. If the initial *emotional* impetus for developing the scaffolding for this project was initiated in the midst of the heat of a chaotic, messy, and volatile American religious and cultural life, the *intellectual* process of realizing this project as an artifact of academic research had to pass through the ice-cold waters and crystal-clear environment of Swedish secular, scientific, and categorized culture in order to achieve its present form.[90] The ways in which Sweden differs culturally from the United States generated useful friction that refined its argument in practice through presenting parts of this project in higher seminars in various humanities departments in Sweden. It is thus worth unpacking how the Swedish context has shaped this project.[91]

## Heritagization and Museification of Christianity[92]

Sweden is widely regarded as one of the most secular countries in the world by nearly all metrics, including the World Values Survey, from church membership and attendance to the role that religion plays in public discourse. Religion is considered a

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[90]Henrik Berggren & Lars Trägårdh, *The Swedish Theory of Love: Individualism and Social Trust in Modern Sweden*, trans. Stephen Donovan (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022). Richard F. Tomasson, "How Sweden Became So Secular," *Scandinavian Studies* 74/1 (Spring 2002): 61-88. See also, Daniel A. Siedell, "Letter from Sweden," *Arts + Christianity* 120 (Winter 2024).

[91]What follows does not claim to be authoritative in any way other than how I understand my experience in Sweden and its influence on this project. Its deficiencies only reflect the limits of its author.

[92]Both terms are imported from cultural heritage studies. For a robust study that utilizes both concepts, see Helena Wangefeld Ström, *Lighting Candles Before a Headless Jesus: Sacred Heritage, Heritagized Sacredness, and the Many Journeys Between Categories* (PhD diss, Umeå University, 2022).

strictly private matter, and one that is not relevant to public or social matters, such as politics, social policy, or the arts. And yet, Christian churches fill the landscape and mark the city skyline and the Church calendar regulates the school and work calendars, and baptisms (christening), confirmation, marriages, and funeral remain important Christian rites, even for the most secular.[93]

Despite the significant presence of dissenting and pietistic church traditions, from Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Pentecostals, the Lutheran Church of Sweden, with its medieval and Reformation era churches and cathedrals represents "Christianity" in Sweden. Unlike the U.S.A., religion and religious belief are embodied by the image of the cathedral, as a central authority for matters of faith. Moreover, the Church of Sweden only officially separated from the State in 2000 and even then, the relationship remains entangled in numerous ways. And so, Christianity and religious belief are presumed to be embodied in—and limited to—these grand, immobile, impenetrable, and imposing material artifacts, conceptually, imaginatively, metaphorically, if not literally.

Christianity thus has a significant material presence in secular Sweden, yet this material presence is managed as *cultural heritage*, transforming churches into museums and its artifacts into museum pieces. The predominance of medieval and early modern churches and its various and varied artifacts and the role they play in Sweden's cultural heritage, makes visible Christianity's historical role while rendering invisible its continued life as an active presence and practice. Christianity—its material and

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[93]See José Casanova, "The Two Dimensions, Temporal and Spatial, of the Secular: Comparative Reflections on the Nordic Protestant and Southern Catholic patterns from a Global Perspective," in Rosemarie van den Breemer, José Casanova & Trygve Wyller, eds. *Secular and Sacred? The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 21–33.

immaterial artifacts—is *museified* and thus an object of tourism and academic research. (Agamben's theory of museification might finds its most ideal expression in Sweden.) This project is indelibly marked by the robust presence of heritage studies and museological research in and around Christianity in Sweden.[94] That Christianity is already regarded as a phenomenon of the museum, a collection of historical artifacts that bear witness to the history of Sweden, offers important resources for *Exhibiting God* as it experiments with the museum and its discourses and mechanisms in theological terms.[95] In addition, the image and metaphor of theology as and in relation to the cathedral that is crucial for this project is influenced by the work of Swedish theologian, Mattias Martinson, for whom the cathedral plays an important role as an image and metaphor in his secular theology. *Exhibiting God* will take up Martinson's image of the cathedral and make it more detailed, taking it more literally through engagement with the discourses of heritage studies, art history, and museology.

The heritagization and museification of Christianity in Sweden is an attempt to limit Christianity and its practices and discourses, including theology, in the public area and to restrict it to the distant past and as an artifact of history, that is, as an historical subject suitable for interpretation, research, and education. Yet, as Amy Knight Powell argues, museum artifacts are much more promiscuous (and disobedient) than to be trusted

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[94]See Lieke Wijnia and Todd H. Weir, "Religious Heritage between Scholarship and Practice," in Lieke Wijnia & Todd H. Weir, eds. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Heritage in Contemporary Europe* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2023); Charlotte Hyltén-Cavallius, "Exhibiting Religion—Displaying Religious Heritage in a Post-secular Sweden," trans. Rebecka Charan, *Scandinavian Studies* 90/3 (Fall 2018): 403-435. Helena Wangefelt-Ström, *Lighting Candles Before a Headless Jesus: Sacred heritage, heritagized sacredness, and the many journeys between categories* (PhD dissertation, Umeå, 2022).

[95]Despite its secularism, Sweden has experienced an increase in church membership and so religious faith remains alive, although this study will argue that this faith is a *museological phenomenon*. See Joel Halldorf, "Not So Secular Sweden," *Comment* (January 2026).

to remain on pedestals, under Plexiglas, or hanging on the wall by a nail with didactic wall labels that instructs viewers in how to interpret them. Like Klees's *Angelus Novus*, these works can take up residence in our imaginative, emotional, and intellectual landscapes and inspire new images and ideas in countless ways.

Theology and Research in the Humanities in Sweden

While the cathedral is the literal and figurative location of Christianity and its practices, discourses, and where *belief* is found (and to where it is restricted), it is contrasted with the university seminar room, library, or museum where *knowledge* is produced and preserved, through the methods of "science," including and especially "objective," empirical research.[96] As Sweden built its academic research infrastructure throughout the twentieth century under the legislative progressivism of social democracy, the humanities attempted to shed its traditional role as *Bildung*, or intellectual and spiritual formation of the self. Such a view came to be regarded as elitist and part of the aristocratic and pre-modern *ancient régime*, thus an obstacle to social democracy's focus on worker's education and the improvement of society as a popular, or *folk* collective. In the mid-1960s, academic research in the humanities was further isolated when the government detached and separated it from the faculty of social sciences, thus enabling the social sciences to move closer toward technological innovation and in more intimate collaborations with the natural sciences. The humanities responded by re-affirming more

[96]In Swedish, the term academic research is *Vetenskap* but it is often, and misleadingly, translated into English as "science," which betrays its broader usage from its origins in German, *Wissenschaft*, as academic research. See Chad Wellmon, *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research* University (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), esp. 20-44.

fervently its scientific methods and it began to use the language of the natural sciences with its conception of the academic work " knowledge production."[97] The result is that academic research in the humanities in Sweden remains dominated by a research model shaped by the social sciences, with its focus on empirical methods that draw strict distinctions between the researcher and the object of research, usually through quantitative fieldwork, archival research, or the use of certain phenomenological bracketing techniques that further insulate the researcher from being effected by or otherwise seduced by their research subjects.[98]

The case of academic theology or "theological research" further intensifies this restrictive situation of academic research in the humanities. The complicated situation of Swedish secularism with its heritagization and museification of Christianity and its practices and discourses is intensified with academic theology in the Swedish research university given that academic theology enjoyed a privileged position in the Swedish university through the Church of Sweden as an arm of the State. In 1949 analytic philosopher Ingemar Hedenius from Uppsala University published a book entitled *Tro och vetande* ("Belief and knowledge"), which consisted of a collection of essays

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[97]The rhetoric of academic research in the humanities as the production of knowledge and filling gaps in scholarly research not only has its origins in the methods of the natural sciences, it more accurately fits the description of "normal science" that Thomas Kuhn developed in his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. It is a practice that focused on small-scale progress within a larger research paradigm, a kind of *bureaucratization* of academic research that resembled the civil service and was intimately related to the government.

[98]Pauline Mattsson, Eugenia Perez Vico, Linus Salö, eds. *Making Universities Matter, Innovation, Technology, and Knowledge Management* (London: Springer, 2024). Anders Ekström & H. Östh Gustafsson, eds. *The Humanities and the Modern Politics of Knowledge: The Impact and Organization of the Humanities in Sweden, 1850-2022* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020). Sverker Sörlin, "Postdisciplinär humanistisk kunskap," *Kulturella Perspektiv* 22 (2013): 52-55. Sverker Sörlin, "Humanities of transformation: From crisis and critique towards the emerging integrative humanities," *Research Evaluation* (2018): 1-11.

attacking Christianity from scientific, social, and cultural perspectives, a critique which bore the influence of Bertrand Russell's popular anti-Christian polemics.[99] Hedenius's critique was not only leveled against Christian doctrines, but it also attacked the political influence of the Church of Sweden. Theologian Mattias Martinson argued that

> Hedenius's attack on Christianity's irrationality can be interpreted not as a straightforward rationalistic attempt to conquer an irrational enemy, but rather as an attempt to make secular people aware of what he saw as the basically irrational grounds of the old Swedish cultural identity. His attack on Christianity and theology was a blow against the *modus vivendi* between Swedish religion and secular society; an exposure of the alleged irrationality haunting society through its neutralized and secularised state religion. To put it differently, Hedenius wanted to turn people actively against the clerical order that they often did not embrace very actively, but accepted as a fairly uncontroversial part of their own cultural tradition and identity.[100]

When Hedenius engaged in his anti-Christian, anti-clerical, and anti-Church of Sweden attack, Sweden still did not enjoy formal religious freedom, which would not be granted until 1951.[101] And it was not until 1970 that blasphemy laws were stricken from Swedish law, although not before three radio personalities who joked about the Eucharist had been fined earlier that year.

Hedenius argued through the public media that academic theology should be expelled from the modern research university. Distinguished and influential theology faculty members (who also happened to hold high offices in the Church of Sweden) at the two most important and influential universities, Uppsala and Lund, responded

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[99]Anton Jansson, "'A Swedish Voltaire': The Life and Afterlife of Ingemar Hedenius, 20th-Century Atheist," *Secularism and Nonreligion* 7/4 (2018): 1-10.

[100]Mattias Martinson, "Atheism as Culture and Condition: Nietzschean Reflections on the Contemporary Invisibility of Profound Godlessness," *Approaching Religion* 2/1 (June 2012).

[101]Henrik Berggren & Lars Trägårdh, *The Swedish Theory of Love: Individualism and Social Trust in Modern Sweden*, trans. Stephen Donovan (2006; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022), 262-94.

vociferously to defend theology from Hedenius's attacks, academic theology was indelibly affected—even traumatized—by this controversy.[102]

As a result, academic theology in Sweden largely absorbed positivism (and atheism), with its strict distinctions between (private) *faith* and (public) *knowledge*. In addition, it subsequently stresses a "scientific" methodology that maintains a sharp distinction between the researcher and the object of study, whether those objects are theologians or theological texts, like "zoologists studying badgers."[103] This concern to remain "scientific" reflected the Kantian origins of the modern research university in Germany in the early nineteenth century that shapes the culture and tradition of academic research in the humanities in Sweden. It also revealed the dominance of a national church throughout the twentieth century, the same century of nearly uninterrupted social democratic legislation of modern, secular values, has forced theological discourse to defend its scientific status and its capacity to produce knowledge and not simply perpetuate ideologies disguised as personal faith. In short, academic theology, post Hedenius, performed its own form of heritagization, and much if not most theological research in Sweden takes theology as an object of study not as a constructive practice. Theological research in Sweden often functions as a form of *auto-heritagization*.

The concern that the academic researcher could be seduced by their research subject is powerful in academic theology, not only because of its complicity with

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[102]See Arne Rasmussen, "A Century of Swedish Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 21/2 (Summer 2007): 125-162. See also Thomas Girmalm, *Teologi och det moderna universitetet: Perspektiv på polariseringen mellan teologi och religionsvetenskap under svensk 1900-tal* (PhD diss, Umeå University, 2006).

[103]Mårten Björk, "Akademisk teologi som universell kunskapsform," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 98 (2022): 217-245. Mattias Martinson, Provisoriets välsignelse och vetenskapernas drottning," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 100 (2024): 25-39.

religion, especially the Christian church, per se, but because scientific objectivity is a characteristic shared by all academic research in the humanities. The result is a focus on scientific method and a need to bracket or restrict the distortions of the researcher's personal belief, affect, and desire. The result can be that there is little attention paid to the creativity of academic research in the humanities, in general, and especially in theology, where the fear of being accused of unscientific research can be most acute given its entanglement with religious belief and the generational Hedenius-inspired trauma it transmits. As a result, academic theology has often sought alliances with the humanities through philosophy and history of ideas or the social sciences through sociology.

In contrast, religious studies has enjoyed a secure place in academic research through its adoption and assimilation of the scientific methods of anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences, which also enable it to study a plurality of religions and spiritualities, including magic and the occult without the concerns that personal belief would contaminate its research and compromising public knowledge.[104] It has also generated creative research on Swedish secularism, which is not as secular (non-religious) as its advocates and partisans claim. Such research from religious studies has brought to the surface how many in Sweden are what Ann af Burén calls "semi-secular" or practice what David Voas calls "fuzzy fidelity," in which the distinctions between believer and unbeliever, secular and religious church participation are not as clearly defined as is often presumed as the afterlife of Swedish Lutheran Christendom lives on

[104]Clemens Cavallin, "After the State Church: A Reflection on the Relation Between Theology and Religious Studies in Contemporary Sweden," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 10/29 (Summer 2011): 43-63.

through secular practices neither recognized as spiritual nor interpreted as a product of the Christian origins of Swedish secularity.[105]

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The present shape of this project would not have existed without the Swedish intellectual, social, cultural, and academic context to nourish it. The Swedish distinctions between faith and knowledge that produced its particular religious and academic infrastructures is crucial for the kind of museological curation with which this project experiments. This project works with museology and heritage studies to cut a fresh path for theology through the binaries of faith and knowledge, secular and sacred, religion and science, sanctuary and seminar room, art gallery and chapel. And it does so by bringing these binaries *into* the museum in order to make them visible. *Museification* and *heritagization* are often used synonymously in cultural heritage and museum studies as means by which the modern state restricts and relegates Christianity and its practices and artifacts to the past, facilitating secularization by maintaining distinctions between (private) faith and (public) knowledge. Although it is one of the means by which Christianity is *heritagized*, museification in this project does more than confine Christianity and its artifacts, practices, and concepts to the past, limiting its influence in the present to "history." In *Exhibiting God*, following Agamben and Preziosi, in a post-modern, post-Christendom, and post-secular culture, the museum is the state of the western world, a situation in which the secular, the scientific, the objective, the aesthetic,

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[105]See Ann af Burén, *Living Simultaneity: On religion among semi-Secular Swedes* (PhD. dissertation, Södertörn, 2015). Erika Willander, *What Counts as Religion in Sociology? The problem of religiosity in sociological methodology* (PhD. dissertation, Uppsala, 2014). Erika Willander, *The Religious Landscape of Sweden—Affinity, Affiliation and Diversity in the 21st Century* (Stockholm: Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities, 2019). Isabella Kasselsgtrand, "Nonbelievers in the Church: A Study of Cultural Religion in Sweden," *Sociology of Religion* 76/3 (Autumn 2015): 275-294. Jennifer Rebekah Knox, *The State of Swedish Secularity: A Review of the Academic Literature* (Clapham, 2021).

the political, joins the religious in the museum *as museum artifacts*. And so, a museal discourse, which addresses the mechanisms and apparatuses by and through which the museum (and Agamben's Museum) manages what is visible and invisible is a *theological* process. The implications of this project, if not its outright claim, is that a theological discourse that emerges from the museum, that is, from the position of distance, lateness, and absence, nevertheless offers significant resources and potential for a kind of intimacy, timeliness, and presence that only a museal experience can offer. While Sweden and the United States manifest the socio-cultural configurations of the secular in very different ways, a museological understanding of Christianity and a theological discourse that emerges from the museum might be a useful bridge from which to think differently about the particular challenges facing American and Swedish culture and the role that theology might play in responding to their respective challenges and opportunities. This museological practice of forging relationships, building bridges across and creating friction between artifacts, boundaries, and frameworks is a *curatorial practice*, one that works from the perspective of displaying distance and absence while at the same time doing so imaginatively and creatively through curatorial staging. This project suggests that through this curation something like a museal faith-belief might also emerge from something like Friedman's wobbly and rotating contraption.

"To stage," Harald Szeemann once said, "is to love."[106]

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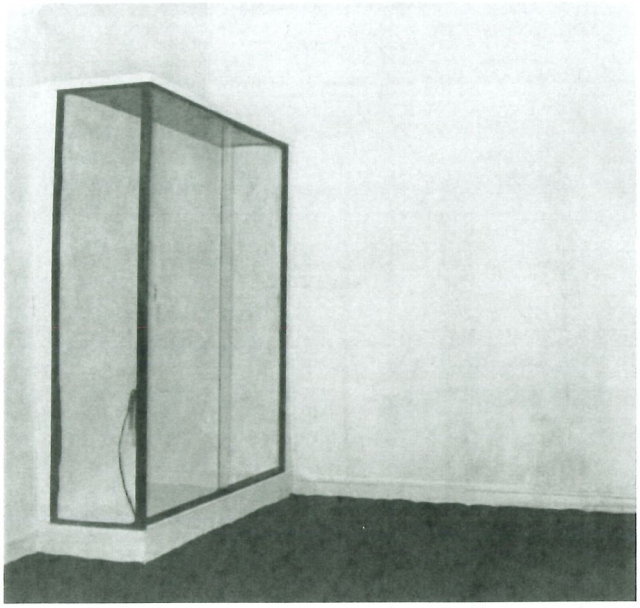
[106]"To Stage is to Love," *Harold Szeemann: Selected Writings*, eds Doris Chon, "To Stage is to Love," (Los Angeles: Getty Institute, 2018), 346.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORY & METHOD—VOIDS, VEILS & VITRINES



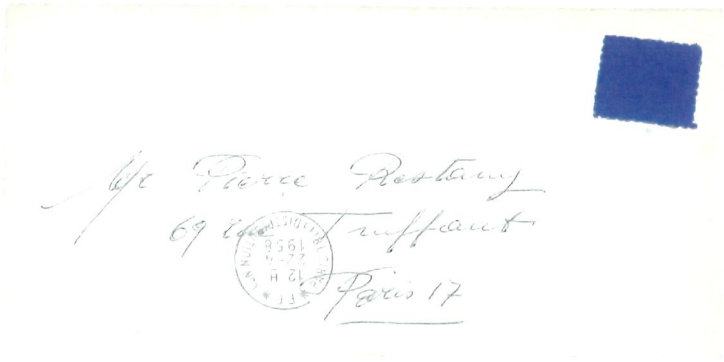
Installation view, Yves Klein, *Le Vide*, 1958, Iris Clert Gallery, Paris.

With the Void, Full of Powers
—Albert Camus, to Yves Klein

On 28 April 1958 a young French artist, Yves Klein, cleared out a small exhibition space at Iris Clert gallery in Paris and repainted the walls white. Art historian Nuit Banai observes, "The few surviving black-and-white photographs show a small empty room with an unfilled vitrine in one corner and a draped doorway in the other."[1] He kept the room empty, including the empty vitrine that was permanently installed onto one of the walls and with only a sole blue fluorescent lightbulb in the ceiling. The title of the exhibition, *La spécialisation de la sensibilité à l'état matière première en sensibilité*

[1]Nuit Banai, *Yves Klein* (London: Reakton Books, 2014), 90.

*picturale stabilize* (The Specialization of Sensibility from the Status of Raw Material into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility), has come to be referred to simply as *Le Vide* (The Void). Klein painted over the only window in the room with what had become his already trademark ultramarine blue paint. He also blocked direct entrance from the street, forcing viewers to enter through a small passageway in the lobby, which he adorned with a large blue theatre curtain.



Klein also developed a formal invitation to the opening night reception, which he sent out to over 3,500 recipients as part of an enormous coordinated publicity effort. The opening reception featured cocktails that turned the guests' urine blue and he recruited members of the Republican guard standing at attention next to the theatre curtain at the entrance. Art historian Nuit Banai writes, "Visitors had to go through a small passageway, which served as both a reception area and a zone of preparation for their upcoming experience" as well as limiting the number of visitors in the room.[2] As the growing crowd coalesced outside the gallery and spilling into the street, the police were called to maintain order and clear the streets. The event generated considerable public interest and curiosity, and

[2]Nuit Banai, "Rayonnement and the Readymade: Yves Klein and the End of Painting," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 51 (Spring 2007): 202-215.

the exhibition had to be extended for another week because of the high attendance. Banai offers a more detailed description of the display apparatus:

> He sealed off the main entrance of the gallery and painted its front window blue. The doorway that adjoined the gallery, normally an entrance for the inhabitants of the building, was swathed with flamboyant blue drapery to clearly direct the visitors through it. Past this doorway a small passageway—approx. 32 square metres—led to the main exhibition space. A blue curtain on the passageway's left wall shielded the doorway into this room while a white curtain hung on its other side. Through it was the empty gallery space whose walls Klein claims to have spent the previous 48 hours whitewashing in seclusion…covered the walls with several coats of pure white lithopane pigment…[3]

Klein thus kept a tight control on the flow of people into the space. In addition to two Republican Guards outside the gallery who checked invitations, he also placed representatives of a Catholic association of which Klein was a member, the Order of Saint-Sebastian, in the passageway to limit the number of visitors in the room to ten. In addition, Klein, who positioned himself in the space because of his concern for potential vandalism, asked visitors to stay for no longer than two or three minutes. Indeed, a young man was caught either drawing or writing on the gallery walls and Klein had the guards performatively but forcefully, throw him out onto the street.

Klein claimed that *Le Vide* was an effort to transcend mediation, to offer a pure experience. In one of his notebooks about the event, Klein wrote:

> I had left the visible, physical blue at the door, outside, in the street. The real blue was inside, the blue of the profundity of space, the blue of my kingdom, of our kingdom!...the immaterialisation of blue, the coloured space that cannot be seen but which we impregnate ourselves with…A space of blue sensibility within the frame of the white walls of the gallery.[4]

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[3]Quoted in Nuit Banai, *Yves Klein*, 92.

[4]*Yves Klein, Selected Writings, 1928-1962*, trans. Barbara Wright (London: Tate Gallery, 1974).

And in a lecture entitled, "The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial," delivered by Klein at the Université Paris-Sorbonne on 3 June, 1959, he had this to say about the exhibition:

> The object of this endeavor: to create, establish, and present to the public a palpable pictorial state in the limits of a picture gallery. In other words, creation of an ambience, a genuine pictorial climate, and, therefore, an invisible one. This invisible pictorial state within the gallery space should be so present and endowed with autonomous life that it should literally be what has hitherto been regarded as the best overall definition of painting: radiance.[5]

Klein's desire to create an "invisible" effect was the result of producing a complex network of material practices which made the work of art visible *as invisible*. Art historian Nuit Banai observes that while Klein desired purity, directness, with no intermediaries, "these claims to pure presence had to be reinforced."[6] Indeed, it was a "highly mediated event." This mediation was necessary for Klein's Duchampian sleight-of-hand.

> It transformed the gallery into a zone for the production and legitimization of aesthetic experience. Art became whatever was placed within the four walls that enclosed the gallery or whatever occurred during a viewer's passage throughout it. It was the institution rather than the object that became the arbiter for the definition of art.[7]

Banai is interested in exploring how Klein's practice was intended to announce the death of modernist abstract painting. In fact, Banai calls *Le Vide*, "abstract painting's tomb, a memorial to an experience of modernism...." And significantly, the gallery space, following Adorno's Valéry, becomes a mausoleum. Banai writes, "To prepare the space

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[5]Quoted in *Overcoming the Problems of Art: The Writings of Yves Klein*, ed. Klaus Ottmann (New York: Spring Publications, 2007).

[6]Nuit Banai, *Artforum* 49/1 (Sept 2010).

[7]Nuit Banai, "Rayonnement and the Readymade: Yves Klein and the End of Painting," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 51 (Spring 2007): 202-215.

for the last rites of abstract painting, Klein shut himself in the gallery for forty-eight hours before the opening of the show."[8] Klein's performative preparation for this funeral liturgy makes evident the important role that the artist himself played in managing the event, curating the creative sleight-of-hand behind the scenes while at the same time claiming purity, presence, directness, which included "his careful management of his artistic property rights." In a review critical of an exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC that seemed to simply perpetuate Klein's own mythology, Banai writes

> The aim is not to catch the artist in acts of deception....Rather, it is to give serious consideration to the strategies through which he mediated his own aesthetic persona even as he decried mediation and insisted on the total fluidity between his art and his life.[9]

These strategies are similar to the ones that Marcel Duchamp deployed, in which the apparatus and mechanisms of the museum, gallery space, and the art world also included the mythic aura of the artist, as imbued with magic power to conjure value, meaning, and experience. Yet those practices, like the formal invitation, charging a substantial entrance fee for those without an invitation, and the opening reception that invited and restricted attendance, are some of the parts of an art institutional apparatus that makes the work—the empty room—*work* as a work of art *without the work of art*.

*Le Vide* works like a photographic negative, reversing the usual situation with a work of art, in which the apparatus remains largely invisible while the work of art, as materialized visibility, appears to do *all* the work. In other words, the foreground is the

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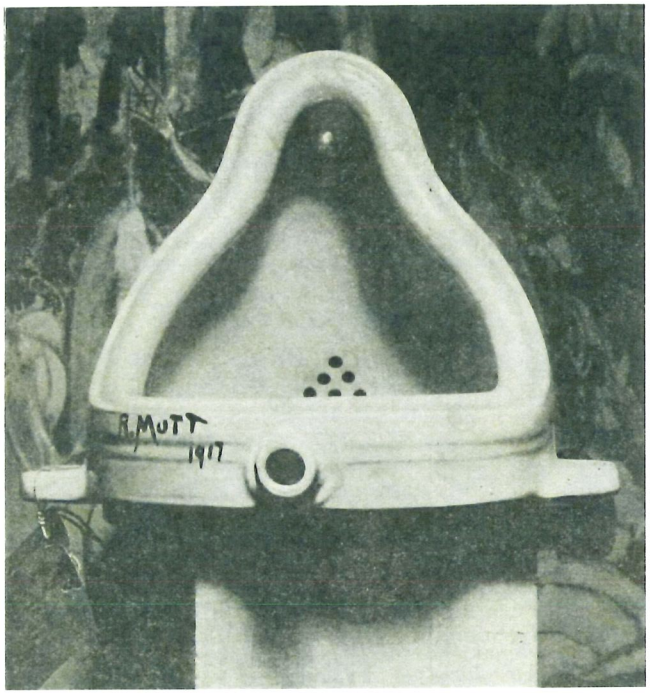
[8]Nuit Banai, "Rayonnement and the Readymade: Yves Klein and the End of Painting," 205.

[9]Nuit Banai, *Artforum* 49/1 (Sept 2010).

work and the background the apparatus. While Duchamp with his readymades, such as *Fountain*, presents a non-art object to activate and make visible the apparatus, *Le Vide* removes the object entirely, leaving the apparatus itself (and the artist working "behind the curtain," to conjure the ambience and climate, that is, what becomes visible and what recedes into invisibility.




Yet there is an important similarity to Duchamp's *Fountain* that is relevant to this chapter's introduction of voids, veils, and vitrines. Duchamp works with the creative potential of absence. And he does so through the photograph. Like Klein, Duchamp orchestrated an art world situation within which the urinal came to function like a work of art by submitting it, under a pseudonym, to a non-juried art exhibition in New York, an exhibition sponsored by the Salon of Independent Artists, of which Duchamp himself was on the board. When the object was rejected from the exhibition, Duchamp wrote a polemic in defense of the artist and the work. The photograph of the object, taken by

modernist photographer Alfred Stieglitz, gives the object gravitas and dignity. Moreover, the urinal disappeared shortly after the photograph was taken. And so, the only evidence of this controversial but lost object is the photograph. The "original" urinal does not exist. And the existing models are copies—an edition of six—authorized by Duchamp himself in the mid-1960s, an edition fabricated *from the photograph itself.*[10] Like the Stieglitz photograph of the missing *Ur*-urinal, the photographs that document Klein's empty room bear witness to and continue to affirm absence through a visual trace of a lost object, that is, the pure, unmediated experience for the visitors. For Klein's *Le Vide*, what is lost in the photographs that have come to represent the exhibition is the audience. As Banai writes, "*The Void* was actually a paradoxical event, both highly exclusive and free...Indeed, without the presence of a public in the gallery, *The Void* would not have existed."[11]

Both Duchamp's *Fountain* and Klein's *Le Vide* can provoke discomfort, in part because their work relies so heavily on the making visible the invisible mechanisms through which all works of art become visible. The result is that it provokes a feeling that their work is a trick, a sham, that we've been fooled into believing in the artistic value of something that has no value. But according to theorist Timothy Morton, this discomfort, this vague gnawing feeling is *precisely* where the "art" of art is located. In fact, he suggests that we as viewers even have to be willing to be duped, to risk being made fools

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[10]Elena Filipovic, *The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

[11]Nuit Banai, "Rayonnement and the Readymade: Yves Klein and the End of Painting," 205.

of, or less dramatically, *willing to be seduced by their gestures*. Modern art theory, Morton claims, developed in order to prevent this situation.

> We want art to make us sure that we aren't being conned or ripped off or pitched to or prostituted or sold to: tuned. But this is exactly what art can't do. Art theory in modernity tends to want to distinguish art from conning or selling or ripping off, and from the dreaded status of "object"; and this results in art's confinement to a tiny experiential region…[12]

Art historians and art theorists reduce and limit the range of a work of art's expressive range and its potential to connect emotionally with the viewer.[13] A crucial part of being willing to be duped, is the risk of belief—of faith. What Duchamp and Klein ask of us is to believe, or, perhaps at the very least, suspend disbelief. And so modern art theory exists to eradicate the necessity of belief or faith in the realm of art. To think about *Le Vide* in the context of belief and unbelief shifts Klein's management of what is visible and invisible, seen and not seen, reveals the resonance of art and museology with religion and theology. Put differently, the operations of certain practices of modern artistic tradition, like Duchamp's and Klein, demonstrate the close kinship between art and religion in their foregrounding of practices that require and manage the risk of belief, which is a commitment to what is unseen, unexplainable, impossible to point to as evidence. To care about art and to care about religion is, in no small measure, to risk being tricked. In addition, both Duchamp and Klein bring out the theological implications of certain traditions of modern artistic practice. To work with absences, with what is seen and unseen, then, *is to work in the realm of the theological.*

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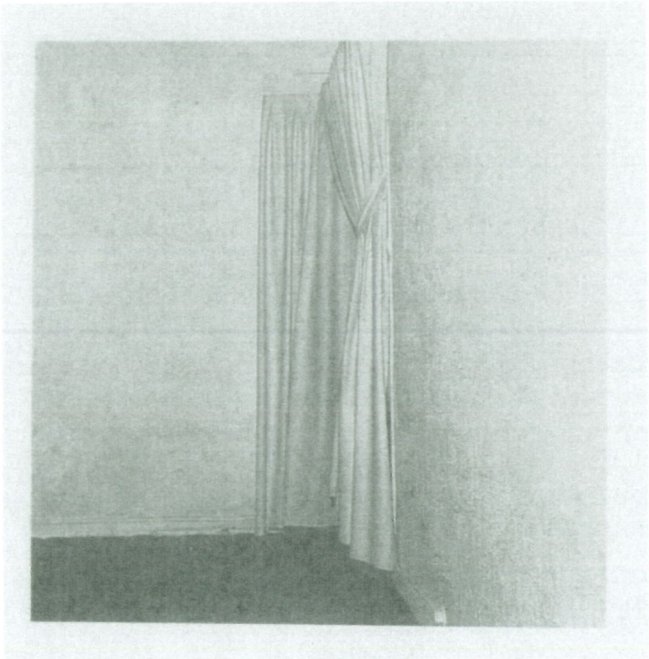
[12]Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* (New York: Penguin, 2021), 85. See also Žižek, "How the Non-Duped Err," *Qui Parle* 4/1 (Fall 1990): 1-20.

[13]Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological*, 85.

Yet, like the historians and theorists of modern art to whom Morton refers, who attempt to render such risk invisible, theologians can also develop ways to insulate themselves and their readers from the sleights of hand and trickery of faith, in short, to assure themselves that they cannot be duped. Art historians who work with Duchamp and Klein, for example, focus on how their practices and strategies, reveal and curate the myths of the artist and the power of art in relationship to capitalism. This project, in contrast, reads *Fountain* and *Le Vide*, which make visible the invisible mechanisms by which works of art become visible and thus believable *as art* to be helpful models to think museologically about religion and theology, which likewise manage visibility and invisibility. And so, it is important to sketch out the broader contours of how this project conceives of religion, creativity, and belief and the roles that they play in a museal theology, a theology of the museum.



Installation view of Yves Klein's *Le Vide*, 1958, Iris Clert Gallery, Paris.

## RELIGION

This project operates from the premise that both art and religion work with and through apparatuses of display and concealment, curating what is visible and invisible, seen and unseen, and generating images that can be believed. *Exhibiting God* argues that these processes can be viewed productively through the lens of the museum that offer new ways to conceive of theological discourse and religious practice, including how belief is conceptualized in a post-Christendom, post-secular, and post-theological world that is nevertheless theologically saturated.

This project works from a view of religion that relies on theorists who engage the contribution of Jacques Lacan, although I do not intend to make a detailed psychoanalytic argument nor will I rely heavily on a detailed Lacanian terminology to develop its argument.[14] The crucial relationship is between what Lacan calls the *symbolic order* and the *real*. The former is the realm of language, of signification and the *signifier*, which mediates reality by making it present and accessible. Yet, this symbolic order "is not perfect; it can't account for everything."[15] What does not fit or what cannot be accommodated by the symbolic order is called the *real*, and it "resists having any signification." The *real* seeps through the gaps, cracks, and failures—the "internal hiccups"—of the symbolic, or what Eric L. Santner calls, "the two muchness of life."[16]

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[14]See Clayton Crockett, *Interstices of the Sublime: Theology and Psychoanalytic Theory* (Fordham, 2007) and *Theology After Lacan*, eds. Creston Davis, Marcus Pound, Clayton Crockett (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

[15]This section relies on the overview of Lacan's thought by Todd McGowan, *The Cambridge Companion to Jacques Lacan* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 64.

[16]Eric L. Santner, *The Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 8.

The *imaginary*, the third concept in Lacan's triad, is the realm of fantasy. It consists of images that produce the illusion of completeness and unity. While it plasters over the fissures, gaps, and cracks in the symbolic order, the imaginary is crucial for us in order to accomplish our projects by generating desire and an "image" that we can move toward, a way to envision what could be possible. Theorist Todd McGowan argues that "whereas the imaginary is visible, the real remains irreducible to the visual field. It is what cannot be seen but nonetheless structures the visual field as a disruptive absence."[17] Moreover, the imaginary is visible (even, as McGowan claims, "too visible") while the symbolic is invisible. Another crucial concept for a museal definition of religion, which consists of mechanisms and apparatuses that manage what is visible and invisible, is *das Ding*, which is the "hollowed-out emptiness within the material world, a blank space that we confront within the world of other things." For theorist Richard Boothby, *das Ding* is the "inaccessible yet potent engine of desire." And it is this emptiness that is the impetus for the development of all religion. Boothby writes,

> I will argue that the core of the religious impulse resides in our relation to what we do not know, that at the most primitive level of human consciousness we remain in thrall to an unencompassable Void. The strangest fact, however, is that this Nothing is far from being merely nothing. On the contrary, relation to the pregnant Void is the most decisive, enabling feature of the human being.[18]

For Boothby, interestingly, while *das Ding* is empty symbolically, the emptiness of this void is *full*, generative, creative. And for that reason, it is dangerously destabilizing. Therefore, it needs to be approached, related to, and interacted with *indirectly*, through

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[17]Todd McGowan, *The Cambridge Companion to Jacques Lacan* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 60.

[18]Richard Boothby, *Embracing the Void: Rethinking the Origin of the Sacred* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2023), 2.

veils, which manage the desire and fear of this unknown void through creative covering and uncovering, obscuring and revealing. For Lacan,

> religion is not a tissue of wishful fantasy that veils the terrifying depths of existence. On the contrary, the door to the religious is opened by an obscure longing for those very depths. The compulsive force of the religious urge emanates from the ecstatic core of the human being, the most primitive ground of subjectivity, which derives from the archaic experience of the Other as a perpetually unsettling enigma.[19]

Therefore, for Lacan, religion is not a resistance to but a move toward those "terrifying depths" of creative emptiness. Boothby is helpful here because he stresses that it is the veil that invites desire, especially in erotic desire, cultivating a relationship to the void, which nevertheless provides the impetus for creative and imaginative life. "It is tempting to suppose that the covering which disallows a direct view actually creates the object of desire that it conceals."[20] Religion in the Lacanian register also offers the human being the resources to shield themselves entirely from the "perpetually unsettling enigma." Yet what religion does, as Lacan argues, is to generate meaning and interpretation, and does so relentlessly.[21] As Boothby suggests, then, religion also "accounts for the massive symptomatic architecture that protects the religious enthusiast from too close an encounter with the dreadful Thing."[22] This protection and insulation can come in many forms, such as hardened artifacts of doctrine, dogma, and orthodoxy, to which adherence is bound by personal belief and a kind of theological discourse that arrives after the fact

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[19]Richard Boothby, *Embracing the Void*, 199.

[20]Richard Boothby, *Embracing the Void*, 39.

[21]Jacques Lacan, *The Triumph of Religion*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Polity, 2015). This is also reminiscent of Deleuze's suggestion that "with God everything is permissible," in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation.* Trans. Daniel W. Smith. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 10.

[22]Richard Boothby, *Embracing the Void*, 199.

to further solidify and entrench. In this more reactive or defensive use of religion, the fluidity and improvisational function of the *veil* is replaced by the *vitrine*, which protects the artifact in a way that obscures access to the creative potential and unknowability of the void, the unknowable and transforms it into an object of veneration and belief. The relevance of *Le Vide* for this project is that Klein makes visible the emptiness—turning inside-out the invisible mechanisms of gallery display—that there is literally nothing in the vitrine, nothing in the gallery space. And yet, this nothing enables the possibility for the fullness of a significant aesthetic experience.

The unknowable and destabilizing real, the abyss, the void, thus glows through the cracks of the symbolic order. This void, or abyss, which is not empty, but creative, even a chaotic fullness of too muchness, resembles how theologian Catherine Keller interprets and explores the creational depths of the second sentence of the Book of Genesis: "And the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep." Keller calls this void *tehom*, which is the Hebrew word for "ocean," and it is from this oceanic, chaotic depths that she explicates an alternative creational theology, one that contradicts the orthodox and Nicene doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. In response, Keller unfolds *creatio de profundis*.[23] This *tehomic* void is nevertheless also structured *within* this symbolic order as a shape, an empty shape, which Lacan calls, *das Ding*. It not only provides access to the real it also is the engine that makes the symbolic order—language—hum, vibrate through desire. It is what Boothby calls

> the *empty frame of fantasy, a void that begs to be filled with content but can never be satisfied.* That insistent void is active even in our experience of everyday physical objects. We cannot avoid anticipating something around the corner,

[23]See Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 213-228.

> something surprising, for example, that might be hidden behind the couch opposite me in the room [emphasis mine].[24]

*Das Ding* is an "empty frame" that needs filling, continually. What is important for this project is that this empty frame or empty vessel can be filled in endless ways. The theological relevance of Duchamp's *Fountain*, Klein's *Le Vide*, Ted Joans's *Long Distance*, Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, and the other material artifacts it addresses is located in the mechanisms that make them visible—that is, the means by which their creative emptiness is given shape within the symbolic order of a public exhibition. For Boothby, religious practices are one of the many practices that both create and fill this empty frame. Religion is thus inherently creative in the sense that it generates an inexhaustible torrent of signifiers, meanings, and interpretations. This play of fullness and emptiness evokes the apophatic dimension of the unknowable that is a crucial dimension of the theological orientation of this project given the dynamic between what is visible and invisible, seen and unseen. Moreover, this project argues that because it manages what is seen and unseen as well as what is believed, theological discourse is a poetic practice. And as a poetic practice, theology has the potential to further cultivate the creativity of religious practice. Given its importance for this project, it is to creativity that we turn our attention.

## CREATIVITY

Religion is rarely considered creative. Quite the opposite. Christianity is often assumed to be the enemy of creativity, as it is often considered to have at its core a conservative and reactionary energy given its claim to preserving the truth that been

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[24]Richard Boothby, *Embracing the Void*, 200.

revealed once for all. Moreover, religious practitioners are also wary of creativity, fearing that in its deviation from traditional forms through the desire for new iterations, it departs from universal truths that have been handed down ("traditioned") from generation to generation. But this view of Christianity obscures its profound creativity. Political theorist Stathis Gourgouris, an insightful cultural critic of religion, observes, "As a human creation, religion is basically a social practice of encountering and concealing the abyss of existence. It does not annul the abyss; it takes place within the abyss."[25] This approach to the *inherent* creativity of religion is influenced in part by Greek-French philosopher and radical democratic activist Cornelius Castoriadis, whose work influenced Gourgouris's. His atheistic cosmology "partakes of a pre-Socratic cosmological language and which posits an abyssal and infinite chaos as the generative pool of a cosmos that comes to be formed by virtue of the ineluctable exigency of time, as a finite but ever renewable world of meaning and being."[26] This *tehomic* chaos or abyss, or what Boothby calls the real, is the material through which meaning and signification is created, even and especially those figures or forms of meaning and signification that are subsequently claimed to come from beyond this chaos, as "Ultimate Meaning and source of all meaning," of which religion is one of the most prevalent and powerful. For Gourgouris, Castoriadis, and for Boothby, religion, at its best, cultivates the freedom to manifest a radical imagination and creativity that continuously makes and re-makes new images, figures, meanings, and concepts from this fertile yet formless and groundless void. The young man who attended the opening of Klein's *Le Vide* and began writing on the walls

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[25]Stathis Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism* (New York: Fordham University Pres, 2013), 8.

[26]Stathis Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism*, 9.

testifies to this creative and sometimes transgressive urge to fill the empty spaces around or within us. Gourgouris writes

> But indeed, to imagine gods presiding over the universe is one of the most extraordinary acts of human creation, an ordering of the universe by an agency that hereby makes itself conspicuously and conveniently absent.[27]

And theology, as a particular discourse that creates at least in part from and in relation to religious practices and languages, is therefore a creative and imaginative practice as well, whether or not it intends to be so. Gourgouris observes,

> Any mode of giving form to chaos—not as reproduction of instituted forms but as creation of new forms—must be simultaneously a process of uncovering chaos, of making chaos visible as the generative background of which human being's poetic force is enacted.[28]

An important part of the creative imagination that produces or generates new forms is that it cannot be separated from its potential destructiveness because it destabilizes the subject by revealing the *tehomic* chaos, the groundlessness of the cosmos, the real. Moreover, it also reveals to the subject the radical contingency of the meaning of forms—whether those forms are works of art, relics, doctrines, dogmas, or other material artifacts or practices. Faced with this destabilization, religious practices and theological discourses that collaborate with them can retreat from such risky proximity to the uncertainty, unknowability of the void into the more comfortable realm of certainties, substantialities, foundations.

Lacanian theorist Mari Ruti, whose work is premised on cultivating the value and necessity of creativity, even while acknowledging its risks, defines it as the "subject's

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[27]Stathis Gourgouris, "Prohibition and Idolatrous Iconoclasm," in *The Perils of the One* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). 22.

[28]Stathis Gourgouris, "All Religion is Idolatry," in *The Perils of the One*, 23.

capacity to take advantage of its status as a symbolic being."[29] Ruti does not regard creativity to be limited to artists, poets, musicians, and the like, but, following Nietzsche, considers it an inherent part of being human, in which we have the capacity to generate new meanings and values, which we often forget because we "tend to overlook the fundamentally metaphoric nature of existence."[30] This metaphoric nature of existence means that we can participate in creating new metaphors, that is, for Ruti, *new signifiers*.

> Creative agency is therefore a matter of being able to dynamically participate in the construction of the meanings and values that govern the world rather than simply submitting to the familiar and often quite convenient guidelines of the collectivity.[31]

Moreover, for Ruti, this creativity, can only arise from discontinuity and lack, from the *tehomic* void that characterizes our psychic reality, through our participation in the realm of signification, which generates connection, presence, and meaning while at the same time affirming our discontinuity, our lack. (Significantly the cracks and fissures "out there" in social signification are also "in here," within our own self.) This is why, following Julia Kristeva, Ruti suggests that creativity is stitched together with melancholy, with loss. And it is this lack or discontinuity that provides the erotic energy necessary for creativity.

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke amplifies this approach to creativity and religion, for whom religion and the relationship to God required creativity and imagination, even if most religious practitioners failed to exercise them and the religious institutions feared

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[29]Mari Ruti, *The Singularity of Being: Lacan and the Immortal Within* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 38.

[30]Mari Ruti, *The Singularity of Being*, 38.

[31]Mari Ruti, *The Singularity of Being*, 26.

them. "Religion is art for those who are not creative," Rilke writes in a letter in 1921. He explains further, however, "They [religious believers] become productive in prayer: they form their love and their gratitude and their longing and thus gain freedom...."[32] Rilke's claim is much less critical of religion than it at first appears. His argument is that art is a more profound form of creativity than religion, not that religion is not creative, per se, but that it is a kind of creativity for those who do not live with and through the arts. And it is through prayer that their imagination can be liberated from dogma. Yet for Rilke, religious practice, what he calls "piety" (*Frömmigkeit*) has the potential to encourage and inspire much deeper expressions of creativity. Ten years earlier, Rilke observes, "piousness that does not invent but only repeats after others and establishes itself in the present via various forms of hope and exposure is incomprehensible or irrelevant to me." He continues, "the relation to god requires productivity and at least a kind of private genius of invention that will not be convincing to others."[33] For Rilke, then, religion is ultimately and radically creative and personal. In a letter to one of his patrons and lovers, Marie Thun und Taxis, he admits, "I cannot understand religious-minded natures who accept and devote themselves to God as a given, without striving to create something new through his presence." And this is very close to how Rilke's views art: "With every work of art a new thing is added to the world."[34]

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[32]Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Life*, ed. and trans. Ulrich Baer (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 168.

[33]Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Life*, 173.

[34]Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Life*, 140.

**FAITH-BELIEF**

The importance of personal belief is a crucial aspect of the post-modern and post-secular Christianity to which *Exhibiting God* responds and with which it works. In fact, belief is a crucial part of modernity. Yet I want to argue that belief and faith are not exclusively religious concepts and practices. They are an effect of the structure of the symbolic order, of language, of signification, in which the real, the void, the *tehomic* abyss bubbles up. Todd McGowan argues that "religious belief is belief in the lack in the order of meaning—in the incompleteness of the field of signification that one confronts as a subject…the religious impulse takes the gap itself as its theoretical point of departure."[35] Religious belief acknowledges and works with and in between the cracks and fissures of the symbolic order. For McGowan, "rather than insisting on the irrationality or the problematic nature of believing, we might instead maintain the impossibility of not believing," that is, it is a necessary but unseen part of signification.[36] Belief, then, not only *acknowledges* the invisible mechanisms that make the symbolic order visible in social interaction and cultural production, it can also *make visible* that this invisibility cannot be restricted to religion. Historian Ethan H. Shagan argues that it was the "transformation of belief, rather than the rise of unbelief that propelled Western thought into modernity." And in fact, Shagan continues, "Secularization has not segregated belief from the world, it has instead opened the world to belief."[37]

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[35]Todd McGowan, "The Necessity of Belief," in *Enjoying What We Don't Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 248.

[36]Todd McGowan, "The Necessity of Belief," 248.

[37]Ethan H. Shagan, *The Birth of Modern Belief: Faith and Judgment from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 1-2.

Yet belief, which in McGowan's, Ruti's, Gourgouris's, and Rilke's hands, is interwoven with creativity and imagination, can often become reified and hardened into an artifact defined by doctrine, dogma, and repetition. Rather than a poetic and improvised expression of religion devotion, belief becomes a way to turn away from the "abyssal confrontation" in favor of an "over-investment in reassuring 'knowledge.'"[38] And so rather than embrace the destabilizing, creative and generative vibration offered by the chaotic and arbitrary void, some forms of Christianity have sought to embrace certainty that puts a vitrine over belief to protect it (what Latour calls "belief in belief") that entrenches the dichotomy of "faith versus knowledge," a dichotomy that has become a believable image in modern secularism. This particular image is especially powerful and believable in contemporary Sweden, an image that pits private belief against public knowledge, irrational and rational, religion and science in ways that can distort both religion and science and render invisible those creative spaces in-between these orders.[39]

Boothby offers a way to rethink this unproductive relationship between religion and science. He sees them as distinctive responses to the destabilizing yet seductive lure of the unknown. And so, it is not the case religion is irrational while science is rational. Rather, as Bruno Latour formulates the relationship, religion produces transformation and devotion, while science produces knowledge.[40]

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[38]Richard Boothby, *Embracing the Void.*

[39]"Science" is used here broadly as an English translation of the German term *Wissenschaft* and the Swedish term *Vetenskap*, which brings with it an adherence to—belief in—research method and objectivity that, with its model of the natural sciences, can often move into the realm of positivism. In Sweden, "science" is the overarching term and image for academic research in the academy.

[40]See Bruno Latour, "Thou Shalt Not Freeze-Frame," in *Science, Religion, and Human Experience* James D. Proctor, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).

> The crucial point comes into view when we realize that the religious impulse to bow toward the locus of the unknown, to venerate in some way what is essentially beyond our comprehension, far from being flatly inimical to the scientific standpoint, must at some point be coincident with it. For Lacan, the ineluctable opacity of the unknown Thing is the invisible, ecstatic pole of the entire structure of subjectivity.[41]

Both science and religion offer different ways to respond to the creative *tehomic* void, to the fact that nothing grounds human existence. Yet this "nothing," this "void" is productive, dynamic, fertile, and pulsing with possibilities. (That is an insight that Klein's studio practice, especially *Le Vide*, seems to have intuited, which also means that it resonates with apophatic thinking.) Boothby continues,

> On this basis, it is possible to glimpse how religion and science might both be taken to be forms of devotion to *das Ding*. Both dedicate themselves to the shifting horizon of the unknown. Perhaps the difference consists merely in the different forms those devotions assume. Or is it rather the differing forms of defense against what is unknown that most distinguishes religion from science? I break off these discussions with this question: Do religion and science both center upon the unknown Thing but inoculate themselves against its destabilizing potential by different means?[42]

Is it possible not only to see "science" (academic research in particular, the practices of the secular academy more generally) as participating in the same creative response to the unknown as religion but also, like many forms of Christianity, to betray this creativity in the service of entrenching artifacts as articles of belief (through dogmatic devotion to "scientific theories and method," through belief in "objectivity")? Swedish theologian Mattias Martinson suggests that an important role for theological research is to make visible the "theological dimension of scientific disciplines."[43]

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[41]Richard Boothby, *Embracing the Void*, 200-201.

[42]Richard Boothby, *Embracing the Void*, 201.

[43]Mattias Martinson, "Provisoriets välsignelse och vetenskapernas drottning," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 100 (2024): 25-39.

Bruno Latour regards religious belief not only to be problematic, he considers it to be "an artifact engineered by the conflict—also artificial—between science and religion."[44] He continues, "neither science nor religion fits even a basic picture that would put them face to face—that is, enough in relation to be deemed incommensurable!" Moreover, Latour argues that religion "attempts to break all habits of thought that direct our attention to the far away—to the absent, to the other-world in order to bring attention back to the incarnate…"[45] In contrast, "science *has nothing to do with the visible*, the direct, the immediate, the tangible, or the lived world of common sense…It is quite the opposite…"[my emphasis].[46] What science does do, however, is that

> it builds extraordinarily long, complicated, mediated, indirect, and sophisticated paths so as to reach the worlds…that are invisible because they are too small, too far, too powerful, too big, too odd, too surprising, too counterintuitive, through concatenations of layered instruments, calculations, and models….[47]

Latour argues that religion and science are "two regimes of invisibility" and that "to show and to hide is what true reproduction does, on the condition that it is false reproduction by the standard of photocopies…."[48] This project experiments with the photograph—not the "standard photocopy"—with its expression of lateness, loss, and its capacity to make

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[44]Bruno Latour, *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech*, trans. Julie Rose (2002; London: Polity, 2013), 65

[45]Bruno Latour, *Rejoicing*, 70.

[46]Bruno Latour, "Thou Shalt Not Freeze-Frame," 36.

[47]Bruno Latour, "Thou Shalt Not Freeze-Frame," 36.

[48]Bruno Latour, "Thou Shalt Not Freeze-Frame," 42.

the absent past present *in its absence*. The photograph is thus an important metaphor for museal theology.

Some theorists, like Terry Eagleton, Robert Pfaller, Thierry de Duve, Simon Critchley, and Slavoj Žižek have sought to redeem the concept of faith by distinguishing it from belief. For them, *belief* operates on the level of social practices and institutions and bound up with what we do. *Faith*, by contrast, is not a matter of offering intellectual assent to dogmatic propositions but a general posture. Žižek uses the French to distinguish between faith (*foi*) and belief (*croyance*). He writes, "Apropos of the ancient Jews, they BELIEVED IN many gods and spirits, but what Jehovah demanded from them was to HAVE FAITH only in Him..."[49] This discourse tends to distinguish a good belief from bad, or potentially dangerous, belief. The former operates more like faith, a general disposition toward something, a posture, a way of orienting and organizing a life toward the unknown, which may or may not include religion. The latter, "bad belief," is what is regarded as ideological, a commitment to particular propositions that is brittle, hardened, and unreflective—what Latour calls a freeze-frame. Theorist Thierry de Duve is clear: "Belief is an abdication of thought, whereas faith is an explicit acknowledgment of the limits of thought."[50] The attempt to distinguish between faith and belief is an expression of a secularism that is unhelpful. The complicated and in fact contradictory definitions and categorizations of belief and faith is evidence that Martin Luther was right: "faith is

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[49]Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001). See also, Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners* (New York: Verso, 2014); and Terry Eagleton, "Faith and Belief," in *Now is the Time: Art & Theory in the 21st Century* (SMBA, 2009). See also, Michel de Certeau, "What We Do When We Believe," in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984).

[50]Thierry de Duve, "Come On, humans, One More Effort if You Want to Be Post-Christians!" in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, eds. Lawrence Sullivan and Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

not what some people think it is."[51] This project experiments with ways to think about—even practice—a museified *faith-belief*, perhaps one that resembles Melville's description in *Moby-Dick*: "But Faith, like a jackel, feeds among the tombs, and even from these dead doubts she gathers her most vital hope." Perhaps such scavenging faith, creative and resourceful, can dislodge even the most hardened and secular artifacts that cover over the gaps and cracks or removed the vitrines to allow these artifacts to live on in different ways, taking up new relationships to language and experience.

No matter how and in what ways *belief* and *faith* are defined, they are evidence of the cracks and fissures in signification and the multiple ways that such practices, such as religion, science, art, and the like respond to and work against and in-between these cracks. What makes theological discourse distinctive among other academic disciplines in the humanities is that it acknowledges those fissures more explicitly as a fundamental aspect of its discourse. Some theological discourses, then, can offer ways to think more productively about both religion and science through the mediating apparatus of the museum, as a discourse that manages and frames visibility and invisibility, distance and intimacy in ways that can render religious belief (and academic research) more creative and imaginative. Theology operates in countless ways, and so, as a basis for the chapters that follow, it is important to articulate more clearly how theology might be practiced and how it might, in the words of Yves Klein, participate in "the creation of an environment, of a real pictorial climate, therefore one that is invisible."[52]

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[51]"Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans (1522, Revised 1546)," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. William R. Russell and Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 3rd ed., 79.

[52]Quoted in Nuit Banai, *Yves Klein*, 90.

## WHAT IS THEOLOGY, WHAT IS A THEOLOGIAN?

But what is theology? Where is it found? And who is responsible for producing it? Martin Buber's question to Dorothee Soelle, "Theology—how do you do that?" justifies this project's experiment with a theology that emerges in conversation with museology, art history, and heritage studies. This project concedes philosopher Jacob Taubes's claim that "everything is theology, with the exception of what the theologians talk about" as an opportunity to experiment with doing theology as an art historian, as a museologist, as a curator and explores the implications of such professional role displacement.[53] What follows is a brief overview of how this project understands theology and those that practice it.

### Theology and the Void

Theology saturates public discourse. It is anywhere God is invoked or God-related concepts, like faith, hope, and love are deployed, anywhere concepts of sacrifice, transcendence, redemption, and belief in what cannot be seen, what is invisible, unknowable. And according to some philosophers of religion, like Clayton Crockett, theology is also found in secular discourses that advocate for and are committed to such abstract (and thus invisible) values and aspirations as democracy, justice, hope, and freedom. He writes, "theology is understood broadly as an open-ended discourse about value and meaning in an ultimate sense…."[54] These abstract (and invisible) aspirations

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[53]*Jacob Taubes; To Carl Schmitt: Letters & Reflections*, ed. Mike Grimshaw (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 26.

[54]Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 27.

and values are part of the same cracks and fissures and gaps as "God" and thus cannot be proven or demonstrated. As Žižek writes, "theory becomes theology when it is part of a full subjective political engagement…to see the reasons for belief one already has to believe." The result is that, like *faith-belief* in McGowan's Lacanian formulation, theology may be just as ubiquitous given the fissures and cracks in the symbolic order that puts language in contact with what cannot be articulated, cannot be observed, cannot be proven. Theology in this formulation is thus not limited to God and religion, but ranges across all aspirational discourses that cannot be argued from experience or observation—*what cannot be seen or described*—from art theory to academic research in the humanities, and even discourse about and in defense of the academy. So that "theology" is neither a retreat into nor an escape from religion but marks its creative participation (even if late and at a distance) in a practice that not only works within and between those cracks and fissures of signification, but *embraces them* as an inherent part of that discourse (i.e., *theology of* art theory, *theology of* academic research, *theology of* the museum, etc.). It is a discourse that reveals those gaps and cracks where the void can be made visible along with the veils and vitrines that are used to manage them. The theology deployed in this museological experiment works with these cracks that reveal the *tehomic* void rather than plaster over them.

The implication of this project's approach to theological discourse is that, like McGowan's understanding of *faith-belief*, it is not "irrational" or, in the parlance of the academy, not "unscientific" to practice theology.[55] It is thus not an uncritical retreat into

[55]Although it falls outside the limits of this project, this approach to belief and theology opens up the possibility to explore how the academy and academic research use belief and theology to manage the gaps and cracks in the signification that sustains the myths of science and transform them into creedal confessions and doctrines. As the academy, whether in the U.S. or in Sweden, continues to suffer under

the refuge (or refuse) of dogma, ideology, etc. Like McGowan's *faith-belief*, the challenge of theology in this register is to maintain its contingency and not to fill in the gaps and cracks in signification or to cover them up by placing vitrines over certain artifacts, concepts, images. The point is rather to collaborate with these gaps and voids through various kinds of *veils* that, while covering, continue to fan the flames of desire, mystery, and the unknown that enable these *tehomic* voids to serve as a creative catalyst that improvises rather than controls. Giorgio Agamben returns here to offer assistance. In "The Last Chapter in the History of the World," he suggests that "[t]he ways in which we do not know things are just as important (and perhaps even more important) as the ways in which we known them" and that an important skill is the "capacity to keep ourselves in harmonious relationship with that which escapes us."[56] Agamben introduces an apophatic dimension to the pursuit of knowledge, an apophasis that brings with it theological implications.[57]

Whether or not it is practiced by a politician, corporate consultant, art critic, ordained priest, or academic researcher, theological discourse operates from the same structural incongruity inherent in all signification. And so, theology is a discourse that *does not fit*, that rubs against and creates friction with both religion and science, with certainties of belief and unbelief, and enfolds these and other incongruities—including

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right-wing and neo-liberal leadership, it is crucial for the academy to invite belief and theology into the conversation, since such defenses of democracy, the academy, or intellectual freedom require prior (unprovable or undemonstrable) commitments.

[56]Giorgio Agamben, "The Last Chapter in the History of the World," *Nudities* (Berlin: De Gruyter Brill, 2010).

[57]For an exploration of the role that apophasis plays in philosophy, theory, and theology, see William P. Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).

the vulnerability and precarity of its own discourse. Within this Lacanian context theology is a *believing* discourse, whether or not it is practiced by trained professionals in the church or experts in the academy. Perhaps this is the best way to read Gilles Deleuze's observation about theology:

> It is our epoch which has discovered theology. One no longer needs to believe in God. We seek rather the 'structure,' that is, the form which may be filled with beliefs, but the structure has no need to be filled in order to be called 'theological.' Theology is now the science of non-existing entities, the manner in which these entities— divine or anti-divine, Christ or Antichrist—animate language and make for it this glorious body which is divided into disjunctions....[58]

This "science of non-existing entities," then, offers a way to think about those entities, concepts, images that might emerge from these cracks, gaps, and voids that do not have "substance," or "existence," but do nevertheless generate ideas, images, and practices. It is the "structure" and framing that *becomes theological*. It is also a structure, if put into the framework of this project that address the mechanisms of what becomes visible and invisible, seen and unseen, also comes to resemble the museological and the curatorial.

The challenges, whether in political discourse, church or confessional theology, or academic theology, and practiced by politicians, entrepreneurs, priests, journalists, or researchers are similar. Do such theological practices manage and frame visibilities and invisibilities in ways that respond to the *tehomic* void? Do they creatively *veil* it, drawing from its creative potential rather than filling it with a substantial, "existing" Other that establishes order, stabilizes meaning, concentrates sovereignty? This response, in contrast to the veil, follows the logic of the *vitrine*. While the veil, a material or discursive fabric that flows and billows, shifts and takes different shapes, and even pulled back on

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[58]Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 281.

occasion, the *vitrine* does something else. Placed over an artifact, it is intended to hold it, freeze it, protect it, and make it continually visible. The vitrine makes the object precious and thus worth preserving but also reveals it to be fragile, and in constant need of protecting. Klein's use of the vitrine in gallery space in *Le Vide*, by emptying it out and refusing to fill it, thus rendering this vitrine *visible as empty*, protecting nothing, making nothing (as nothing) visible is in contrast to his installation and deployment of curtains that function as veils. *Exhibiting God* will suggest that theology, wherever and however it is practiced, uses both veils and vitrines. But a museal theology makes those mechanisms explicit by making them visible.

Theology is thus a discourse that is not restricted to confessional theology or academic theology, and can be found or can appear anywhere those voids and gaps and cracks in signification occur. Therefore, it is often practiced by those who might not call themselves theologians. *Exhibiting God* experiments with non-specialist approaches to theological discourse, approaches that may be found in other academic discourses as well as more public-facing ones, especially in the arts and culture. I attempt to embrace the spirit of the amateur, as one who practices *the structure of theology* which does not deny the importance of specialization and expertise, but nevertheless resists the sovereignty of professionalization and the concentration of authority in disciplinary mechanisms that validate the expert, while acknowledging, as Catherine Keller describes it, "the fresh gifts of ancient metaphors."[59] To resist, if ever so slightly, the theologian as professional expert is only to grant that, like any other symbolic order in culture, the symbolic order of the

[59]Catherine Keller, "Dear Young Theologian," in *No Matter What: Crisis and the Spirit of Planetary Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2025), 146.

academic expert, including theologian, has its own cracks and fissures through which the real of the unknowable, of not knowing, of the diffusion of knowledge and experience shines through. To explore this concept of the amateur in more detail, I return again to Adorno's essay on art museums.

The Amateur

In "Valéry Proust Museum," Adorno develops his theory of the post-war art museum through a contrast between poet Paul Valéry and novelist Marcel Proust, each of whom agree that the art museum is a kind of mausoleum or sepulchre where the "dead" work of art is displayed. Valéry is left only to mourn this loss as a form of protest, similar to cursing death while walking through a graveyard. Proust, however, *delights* in the museum-graveyard. Adorno writes,

> He adores museums as though they were God's true creation, which in Proust's metaphysics is never complete but always occurring anew in each concrete experience, each original artistic intuition.[60]

For Adorno, Proust's delight "preserves something out of childhood" while Valéry "speaks of art like an adult," with its seriousness and mournful tone.[61] For Adorno, Valéry is the "expert" who identifies with the artists in their studios while Proust is the "admiring consumer, an amateur" who "strolls through an exhibition."[62] The childlike passionate Proust sees and experiences an afterlife with the works of art he experiences because of his embrace of his identity as an "amateur," absorbing the work in his

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[60]T.W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," 181.

[61]T.W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," 181.

[62]T.W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," 180.

emotional landscape, while the adult Valéry—the dour and cynical expert—can only see the loss of the artist's sovereignty.

The concept of the amateur plays an important—indeed crucial—role in the work of literary scholar and cultural critic Edward Said. In "Representations of the Intellectual," Said regards the amateur, who is guided not by profit or reward but by love, to be a crucial quality of the public intellectual. (It is a quality it should be noted that already puts the public intellectual into perilously close proximity to theology.) Said writes that the amateur is motived by an 'unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers, in refusing to be tied down to a specialty, in caring for ideas and values despite the restrictions of a profession."[63] For Said, the concept of the amateur, because of their failure or refusal to be fully professionalized, fully catechized into the priest class of professional experts, enables them to cultivate the energy of the marginal, the exile, the border-stalker who might be "bridge-builders," to borrow Isabelle Stengers's term, who, because they are dislodged from or create friction within a profession (a discipline, field, subject area), have the capacity to find connections across areas of interest or fields of inquiry. Significantly, Said himself practiced such "amateurish" work not only as a public advocate for Palestine and critic of Israel, but also as a music critic.

*Exhibiting God* is a Proustian theological project. It does not mourn Christianity's museification. Therefore, rather than the hand-wringing and pearl-clutching of those who might mourn the power of the art museum to transform works of art and other artifacts—including religious artifacts—into "museum art," this project embraces it. Moreover, it

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[63]Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon, 1994).

regards their potential afterlife in the museum as a model for thinking about accepting and working with theology's afterlife. This afterlife does not presume that theology as an academic discipline is "dead" which can be greeted with relief by some or by others, with a hope for "resurrection" in some distant future. Rather, for this museological project, *afterlife* serves two purposes. First, it marks Christian theology's lateness—that it arrives after the fact, after the spirit, after the spontaneity of religious devotion, religious practice. Rather than mourn this lateness, it gives theology its melancholic beauty and its creativity. Second, it marks contemporary theology's break from its past, that it shows up late, after Christendom, long after the cathedrals and monuments have been built, after it has given up the crown as "queen of the sciences," that it can no longer follow St. Anselm's *dictum, fides quaerens intellectum*. Freed from these burdens and privileges (real or imagined), however, theology can embrace its lateness, its marginalized location in the church and in academia and explore new collaborations, new roles within the church, the academy, and public life as that discourse that, like museological apparatuses, work with what becomes visible and invisible.

*Second*, this project embraces the role of the amateur. It cultivates a non-theologian's approach to theology. What might such an approach look like? Such an approach need not be the result of theological professionalization, that is, formal training as a theologian and assimilation into a "discipline"—even as *Exhibiting God* is itself a theological project and specifically an artifact for theological credentialization in the academy. Yet this theological project is still produced by an art historian and art curator, one who still thinks theologically *as an art historian and art curator*. This project argues that since theology, like *faith-belief*, is unavoidable, appearing wherever the gaps and

*tehomic* voids become visible, then it is necessary for academic theology to be a promiscuous discourse, showing up in departments, research institutes, and subject areas across the university; in public discourse and in culture, from art museums to artist studios *not* in order to argue about the existence of God or the influence of the church or even the viability of Christian faith in public life. Rather, it is to bear witness to the pervasiveness of *faith-belief* in every nook and cranny of social life and that this pervasiveness can be a potential source of creativity and imagination that enriches and deepens *this life*.

Following Proust, *Exhibiting God* suggests that not only is it not such a bad thing that theology shows up late, *after faith*, after unselfconscious belief, after faith inseparable from practice, but that theology is *by its very nature* an iteration of an afterlife, that it always arrives late, at dusk, like Hegel's owl of Minerva. For as t Mattias Martinson suggests, "Theology…arises when faith in God as the spontaneous and natural expression of trust and grace has become obsolete…to be *after* faith in this way is the deepest identity of theology, which in turn is its simultaneous blessing and curse."[64] It is, in other words, a museum discourse, a discourse *of* the museum, perhaps even the paradigmatic discourse of the museum.

## Agamben's Cat

In his essay, *Profanations*, Giorgio Agamben argues that "the museification of the world is an accomplished fact."[65] And characteristic of this museification is that what was

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[64]Mattias Martinson, "Inifrån ett utanför: Teologi, verklighet, vetenskap" ["From Inside Out: Theology, Reality, Science"], unpublished manuscript.

[65]Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, 83.

once "useful"—the "spiritual potentialities that defined the people's lives—art, religion, philosophy," et al have "docilely withdrawn into the Museum."[66] However, unlike Adorno's Valéry, such a withdrawl is not to be mourned. For, like Proust, the museum is where other lives can be initiated. Agamben likens the museal situation to a cat playing with a ball of yarn.

> For the cat, what is the possible use for the ball of yarn? It consists in freeing a behavior from its genetic inscription within a given sphere (predatory activity, hunting). The freed behavior still reproduces and mimics form of activity from which it has been emancipated, but, in emptying them of their sense and of any obligatory relationship to an end, it opens them and makes them available for a new use…The activity that results from this [cat ball of yarn] thus becomes a pure means, that is, a praxis that, while firmly maintaining its nature as a means, is emancipated from its relationship to an end; it has joyously forgotten its goal and can now show itself as such, as a means without an end. The creation of a new use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative.[67]

The museification of objects, practices, and concepts deactivates their "old use," which thus "emancipates" them for new ones liberated—playfully—from the ends for which they were made. How does Agamben's cat relate to theology? The "genetic inscription" of theology is its role in the Church or in Christendom. Its theorizing—and thus legitimizing and *justifying*—doctrine, dogma, canons, thus applying plaster and grout to the cracks and gaps instead of veiling them, generating the semblance of certainty rather contingency. It is perhaps best described by adapting St. Anselm's definition of theology from *fides quaerens intellectum* to *fides quarens iustificationem*, which Deleuze suggested when he wrote, in a book on the paintings of Francis Bacon, "It is with God

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[66]Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, 83.

[67]Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, 85-86.

that everything is permitted" because with God everything can be justified as divinely sanctioned.[68]

The Museum for Agamben is a monument to arriving late—perhaps not too late, just afterward, after what once "defined people's lives" are no longer possible.[69] And so, museification is a testimony to the inevitable reality that artifacts outlive their original purpose, outlive their makers and become anachronistic presences from different worlds. Perhaps theology is the discourse most suited to dealing with responding to these anachronistic monuments from the past. But museification does not simply take theology and belief out of the Church. Rather, it reconfigures them in new relationships, or potentially many new relationships, perhaps even for new purposes. As Martinson observes, reminding us again that "[i]n the museum you are only a museum visitor, [but] in the church you are *also* a museum visitor." Martinson's statement does not merely address the museal reality that differentiating the tourist from the pilgrim is much more difficult than often presumed and that the museum viewer might also define the Christian, who becomes *a tourist in their own religion tradition*. A museal theology might offer a way to embrace such a situation and reflect on the *faith-belief* that thus emerges from such a museified and heritagized Christianity, whether in the museum or in the church.

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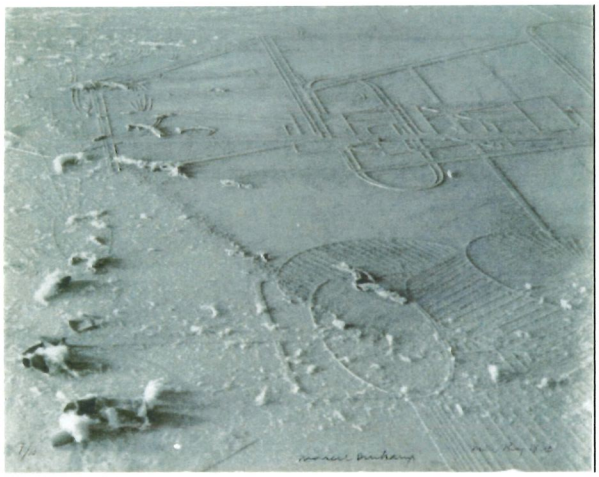
[68]Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (1981; New York: Continuum, 2003), 10.

[69]Agamben's argument resonates with Hegel's aesthetics and suggests that Hegel's thought is as museological as it is theological.

***EXCURSUS—DUST***



Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, *Dust Breeding*, 1920.

An artist friend stopped by Marcel Duchamp's studio in New York in 1920 and was surprised by the amount of dust in the room, observing that it appeared to have never been swept. The friend's interpretation was only partially correct. Duchamp hadn't swept for a few months because he was running an experiment. He had been working in secret on a nearly three meters high two-panel work on glass which he would call *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923) and which would become his most ambitious and influential work, usually referred to now as *The Large Glass*. Duchamp had placed the panes of glass on two sawhorses under an open window with the intention that it would collect as much dust and airborne debris as possible from within and outside the studio. Duchamp also included a sign for visitors who might be tempted to disturb the experiment: "dust breeding. To be respected."

One day, the artist Man Ray came by the studio with his camera and Duchamp suggested that he photograph the dust-coated surface. The camera was placed on a tripod and the lens pointing down on the surface. Man Ray opened the shutter for a *two-hour*

exposure and the two left the studio to get something to eat. Duchamp's biographer, Calvin Tomkins, describes the outcome. "The resulting image was like a lunar landscape, with hills, valleys, and mysterious markings in low relief. Considered a joint work by Man Ray and Duchamp, it was given (by Duchamp) the evocative title *Elevage de Poussiere (Dust Breeding)*."[70] After the photograph was taken, Duchamp ended the experiment, cleaning the dust and detritus from the glass pane, and presumably, finally sweeping and dusting his studio. But he was careful to keep a small patch of dust on the glass, which he preserved in the final work, adding texture and color to a portion of the enigmatic and schematic composition, memorializing the dusty experiment *in* the work.

*Dust Breeding* embraces and relates in a distinctive way to *materiality* and *time*, two concepts that appear throughout this project and thus worth addressing more directly, if briefly, here. The presence of dust is evidence of our inescapable materiality. As theorist Michael Marder suggests, "Dust is the precarious hanging together of remnants, particles, fragments. It is the community that survives after an organic unity has faded away."[71] Our dwelling places are filled with dust, shed bits of skin, hair, and other parts of our own bodies as well as those of our human and non-human companions, like animal fur and piece of paper. Dust reminds us of our relationship to and entanglement and interconnectedness with all living beings, what Timothy Morton refers to as "the ecological thought."[72] Marder also observes that "Dust is the residue of what remains of everything that is and the elementary building block of sundry entities."[73] The presence

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[70]Calvin Tomkins, *Marcel Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: MoMA, 1996), 225.

[71]Michael Marder, *Dust* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 68.

[72]Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

[73]Michael Marder, *Dust*, 82.

of dust, then, has ecological implications. Moreover, this "elementary building block" affirms a materiality that includes more than animals, insects, and plant life. It also includes non-living material, like rocks and paintings, which, as political theorist Jane Bennett argues, have their own kind of agency that she calls "thing power," which denotes "the active role that nonhuman materials play in public life."[74] For Bennett, some objects *collaborate with* rather than are merely *used by* human beings. In *Dust Breeding*, not only do Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp collaborate with each other, but they also collaborate with the dust particles, the incomplete work of art that sits on two sawhorses, the camera, tripod, a single lightbulb hanging from the ceiling that illuminates the surface. This kind of collaboration with this diverse assemblage of material artifacts, props, furniture, and lighting is what constitutes *curatorial practice*, which is working with multiple agencies of various degrees. Curating plays a fundamental role in *Exhibiting God* as a theological method, a way of thinking in multiplicities, assemblages, constellations, collectives, in producing juxtapositions and relationships between works of art, concepts, and images that can generate next ways of thinking and experiencing not bound to the original contexts that generated them. Curating thus presupposes thing-power, presupposes the agency of artifacts that collaborate with the curator's intentions but cannot be reduced to them. Curatorial practice, whether or not the curator is aware of it, relies on the vibrancy of objects and their capacity and potential to collaborate not only with other objects they are displayed with but also the objects that make up the apparatus that enables them to become visible (e.g., pedestals, lights, wall labels, frames). They also collaborate with the human subjects that experience them, insinuating themselves into

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[74]Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

their emotional horizon and intellectual landscape. The result of this encounter produces what this project refers to as *afterlives*. And in *Dust Breeding* an unfinished work of art collaborates with the contents of the physical environment and material atmosphere—to produce a photograph, offering a unique adjacent other life for the work of art and the dust.

But because it affirms and bears witness to the ecological thought and the interconnectedness of human and non-human materiality, dust also poses a challenge to the museological dimension of this project. *Museums hate dust*. They are a particular space, a sacred secular space, set apart for (human) subjects to view material objects. They are, as Preziosi argues, one of the pre-eminent "epistemological technologies" of the Enlightenment, a well-lit, well-ordered, and dusted monument to rational clarity and universal truth. And so, museums *practice* dusting; that is, they attempt to remove dust because, as Marder observes, "dusty realities are scorned because they represent disorder and lack of care—being unkept."[75] "Dusting," Marder argues, "is a material-phenomenological trope of the enlightenment enacting a veritable 'reduction' of the sediments that conceal the real, the sediments intervening between the subject of perception and the perceived object."[76] And so any obstacle to the perception of material objects by the human subject must be eliminated.

Yet, *dust cannot be eliminated*. It can only be transferred from one location to another. This barely visible material, which speaks to our relentless materiality, that "humans are nothing but dust looking through dust at dust," is constantly—daily—

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[75]Michael Marder, *Dust*, 23.

[76]Michael Marder, *Dust*, 14.

removed, or at least made invisible under particular circumstances, including specific locations.[77] *Exhibiting God* argues that because the museum manages what is visible and invisible, seen and unseen while producing believable images, the management of dust is one of its first and most fundamental challenges, both literally and figuratively. Museums must be experienced as clean, sealed off from outside elements—direct sunlight, wind, humidity, and temperature must be strictly controlled and limited. The "pre-eminent epistemological technology" of modernity is in reality pre-eminently vulnerable, and so it *porosity must be prevented, or at least made invisible*. The fundamental argument of this project is that theology operates like the museum, managing what is visible and invisible, seen and unseen, while producing believable images. Moreover, *Exhibiting God* argues that theology is a discourse of the museum, and therefore a collaborator (co-conspirator) that has shaped this "pre-eminent epistemological technology."

And yet, despite its efforts, the museum *is* porous. It is subject to "outside" environmental and ecological circumstances, if only because it is site for human beings—those shedders of organic material—to rub against each other, to bring the outside inside, to disturb the (visible) *appearance* of clarity, order, and cleanliness. The value-neutrality that the museum space produces, exemplified most clearly in the art museum's "white cube," is the result of considerable effort.[78] In other words, the white cube requires continual dusting—literally and figuratively—in order maintain environmental control that enable objects to become visible and legible as objects for human subjects.

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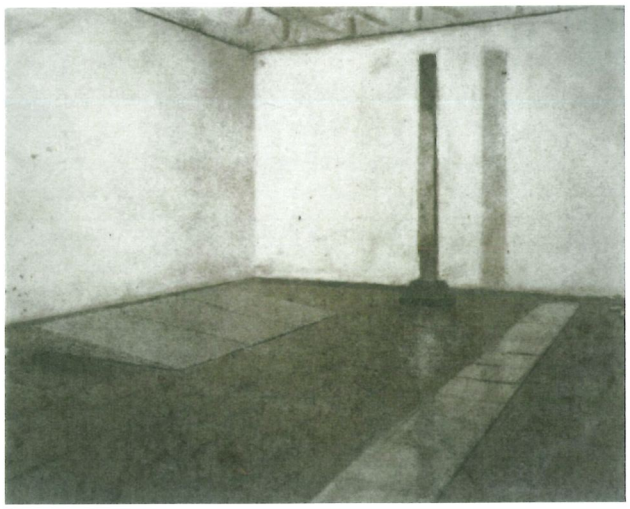
[77]Michael Marder, *Dust*, 16.

[78]See Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Lapis Press, 1986).



Vik Muniz, *Pictures of Dust*, 2000.

The Brazilian artist Vik Muniz produced a series of photographs, called *Pictures of Dust*, which demonstrates the ultimately impossibility–even futility—of such museological dusting. While a Fellow in the Whitney Independent Study programme he collected the dust removed by the maintenance staff at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2000 and recreated exhibition installation photographs from a 1982 permanent collection installation on Minimalism, one of the pre-eminent Modernist (and anti-dusty) art movements.

Does dust pose a similar challenge to as well as opportunity for theology? Since *Exhibiting God* experiments with a theology of the museum, a *museal theology*, dust would seem to play a role, if only as a reminder that to think theologically and practice theology does not need to be done in a white cube, in a tightly-controlled and non-porous environment filled with human subjects and inert non-human objects, which renders everything but the work of art invisible, and even at times certain aspects of the work as well (e.g., considerations of race, class, gender). If language casts a shadow, as the novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard suggests, then it might also attract dust. Perhaps in their

efforts to resist disorder, disuse, irrelevance, and its materiality and vulnerability, some forms of theology could feel threatened by dust, which exposes its ecological entanglement with non-human living beings and non-living material objects as well. And, perhaps, ultimately, its *mortality*—its own lateness, pastness. Perhaps theology only shows up after the dust has settled.




Nina Katchadourian has worked with dust in the museum in another way. *Dust Gathering* (2016-17) was a two-year project in which the artist explored the hidden infrastructure of the museum itself, where dust accumulated and how it was removed. Katchadourian collaborated with the Museum of Modern Art in New York to produce a series of interviews with building operations staff from various locations around the museum, from near particular works of art to locations such as a window ledge, a closet holding air purifiers, and other areas that "brought MoMA down to earth."[79]

Duchamp and Man Ray not only collaborated with material artifacts like the camera, unfinished *Large Glass*, and the dust, they allowed them to act with maximal

[79]Laura van Straaten, "How to Clean a Dusty Picasso at MoMA: Use Your Spit," *The New York Times* (Oct 24, 2016).

freedom on *Dust Breeding*. This is more than merely two artists "using" materials for their collaborative work of art. It was a collective work with multiple agents. In response to the theological narratives and histories of knowledge that have emerged in the Western philosophical tradition that separate the human from the non-human, from the rest of the world, Petra Carlsson Redell offers another perspective.

> It could be otherwise. Paying attention to the nonhuman voices and presences in worship, in the Scripture, in life, in thought. I think it could make a difference. And the funny thing is, it is not about adding something new, it is just about paying attention to what is already there, in the midst of theology, today and through history.[80]

Another way of saying "paying attention" could be called *curating* and *collaborating*. In addition, Duchamp and Man Ray curate with their non-human entities through their collaboration with a crucial immaterial dimension, *time*. Indeed, the art historian Rosalind Krauss called this photograph "a kind of physical index for the passage of time."[81] Duchamp allowed the dust to accumulate on his unfinished work of art for many months, patiently allowing the dust to settle and letting the glass surface become a landing strip, of sorts, for particles that circulated in the air. And Man Ray opened the shutter on his camera and allowed it to take a very long, two-hour exposure. In describing his earliest memories of the experience of a museum, Preziosi writes that it was "a place where you could walk through time by walking through space."[82] Dust also *makes visible* space as well as time, spatializing time, temporalized space. Marder again is helpful, observing,

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[80]See Petra Carlsson Redell, "Nonhuman Histories of Theology: On Polyp, Plant, and Paper Theologians," in Andreas Krebs, ed. *Rethinking Theology in the Anthropocene* (Berlin: wbg Academic, 2024), 43.

[81]Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 (Spring 1977), 75.

[82]Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body, Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 50.

"[f]loating in the air, dust draws our attention to space, to the in-between we habitually overlook because we single-mindedly worry about the objects that frame and crowd it."[83] This evocative and at times threatening in-between, when the light hits just right, offers "a tangible and, indeed, spatial appearance of time."[84]

Dust not only affirms, embraces, and makes visible materiality, vulnerability, and porosity, it also, through its evocation of time, introduces *death*. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" writes the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes. It is ironic, though, that museums fear dust in large part because they have, since their inception, struck fear into the hearts of such folks as poet Paul Valéry, who regarded the museum to be a mausoleum, a sepulchre where works of art, vibrant and dynamic, came to die, where, as Adorno claims, culture is "neutralized." Valéry mourns the death implied in the art museum, believing that it is through its mechanisms and apparatuses, dislocating and dislodging the artifact from its previous life in the artist's studio, hanging on the wall of a dealer or a collector. For Valéry and those commentators and critics who bemoan the museum's allegedly dislocative practices, the work of art quite literally, "collects dust." The museum only recontextualizes what has *already been* dislocated and dislodged from its context by other means, such as simply outliving its maker and its intended audience. But for Marcel Proust, the work of art, once it enters the museum, enjoys the potential of an afterlife, or another life, one in which it collaborates with those works it is installed next to and also collaborates with the imaginations of the viewers who give it attention. *Exhibiting God* works with a particular understanding and experience of time that is formed in and

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[83]Michael Marder, *Dust*, 21.

[84]Michael Marder, *Dust*, 37-38.

through the experience of this museum, that is, formed in and through a particular way of experiencing the loss of the past as present, or, put more specifically, experiencing the presence of the *absence of the past*. What the museum makes present is not the presence of the spiritual life, its immediacy, or the vitality of the artifact, *but its absence*. The museum's relationship to dust is evidence of its unique position as a mechanism of as well as a response to distance and dislocation. The museum is a mechanism of lateness, of an afterward, of distance. The museum embodies Hegel's well-known image of philosophy as the owl of Minerva, which takes flight at dusk, as the shadows lengthen and the dust settles on what remains or on what is left behind, the artifacts of religious and artistic imagination and cultural environments that generated and were made in response to them. Hegel's philosophical approach is, in this context, museological. Maurice Merleau-Ponty noticed this, for he simply declares, "Hegel is the museum."[85] Resonating with Hegel's philosophy of aesthetics and spirit, *Exhibiting God*, however, begins with Giorgio Agamben's (Hegelian) claim that the entire world—its art, religion, politics, and nature—is *museified*.[86]

When precisely did art, religion, politics, and nature become museified as in Agamben's case, or with Hegel's? When exactly did Spirit leave art and religion and come to rest on the shoulders of philosophy? (When was art, religion, and politics ever *now* and not *yesterday*? And does not every attempt to offer an answer seem fictional, a fabrication, a piece of folklore or mythology?) The emergence of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the Kantian "Copernican Revolution" in the late eighteenth

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[85]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (1952), in Galen A. Johnson, ed. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994).

[86]Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

century, which coincides with the founding of the first museum in Europe, the Louvre in 1793 initiates a way of approaching the past, *as past*, the past of medieval Christianity, Roman Empire, Classical Antiquity, Egyptian and Assyrian dynasties. The development of the museum in the early nineteenth century initiates an experience of lateness, of distance, that Hegelian philosophy, as museological thinking is about collecting, preserving, interpreting and displaying the artifacts of the past. This distinctively modern or Enlightenment approach to the past, as shaped as it was by the secularizing energy of Protestantism-Deism-Atheism, still resonated with a lateness and distance that is at the heart of Christian theology from the very beginning, even, from the apostle Paul. In this context, Paul could be regarded as the first museal theologian—as one who is "untimely born" (1 Cor 15:8) who did not see Jesus when he was alive and whose work sought to graft Christ onto the Hebrew Scriptures. Christianity, then, is a religion, a faith, that has always arrived on the scene late, after the Hebrew Scriptures, after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, after Jesus's death, after the worshiping communities and their liturgies have been established. And so, the museal theology that *Exhibiting God* attempts to develop is a theology that not only works with the affect and experience of lateness and distance manifest in modernity's museological focus, but also acknowledges the lateness of Christianity in relation to Judaism, in relation to Jesus. And while this project works with modern museology, within the framework of the (post) Christian and the (post) secular, it acknowledges the lateness and distance already baked into the loaf of Christian thinking, from the very beginning, from the apostle Paul, who not only might be the first museal theologian, but the first curator of theological concepts, recontextualizing, dusting off Jewish concepts to produce Christian exhibitions. Indeed,

far from introducing a new concept (the museological) and a new method (curating) into theological discourse, *Exhibiting God* may simply make visible its museological and curatorial nature.

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But this project is ultimately conceived as a Proustian experiment, working with the novelist's experience of Time, of the loss, distance, dislocation, and the weakness of memory, that overwhelms and defeats all human efforts to resist—dust to dust, ashes to ashes. And yet, Proust's novels claim that the past is never really obliterated, never completely forgotten. In other words, the dislocation is never entirely successful. The past exists along with the present, and it can appear suddenly, through what he calls "involuntary memory" (*mémoire involontaire*) that is catalyzed through an experience—a smell, a taste, a touch, a sound. For Proust, it is through the experience of works of art that this most often occurs (that is, when it doesn't occur through a madeleine and a cup of tea). And so, for Proust, the museum is full of potential catalysts for such sudden explosions of memory, bursts from the past. Far from dusty artifacts, entombed and thus inert, works of art and other material artifacts vibrate with imaginative, aesthetic, and experiential potential *to do something* to the viewer. In Proust's museal world, the work of art's afterlife amounts to a very different life indeed, one woven into a viewer's past, and perhaps inseparable from other works on display near it—on the same wall or the same room.

Like Proust, Walter Benjamin appears frequently throughout this project. But he does so in multiple ways, in different guises, and for different purposes. Here Benjamin arrives to support Proust's view of history and the role of material artifacts in resisting the

oppressive chronological nature of Time, what Benjamin calls "reified historical continuity," which the historical materialist and dialectical historian, who, through their creative engagement with the work of art "blasts the epoch out of this reified historical continuity."[87] Benjamin formulates his theory in part through an engagement with Eduard Fuchs, a Marxist cultural historian and political activist. But it is not through Fuchs the historian and writer that Benjamin uses, but through Fuchs *the art collector*. Works of art, as Proust claimed, punctures the chronological and ideological continuity of time, what Benjamin calls "historicism, [which] presents the eternal image of the past, whereas historical materialism presents a given experience with the past—an experience that is unique."[88] This uniqueness has something to do with the work's afterlife, or what Benjamin calls its "after-history." But here Benjamin adds friction to Proust's concept. The "dialectical historian," as Benjamin believes, and manifest most clearly in the art collector, blasts through the "eternal image of the past" by integrating the work's afterlife with its previous life, its "fore-history" with its "after-history." The appearance of the work of art, in Benjamin and Proust, reveals that the past is always somewhere curled up in a corner in the present as a potential experience, ready to be unleashed through engagement with material artifacts, like works of art. And so, the museum, while it might at first glance suggest a mausoleum, a sepulchre for dead artifacts that once lived but no longer, vibrates with possibility. This is one of the reasons why Michel Foucault, who approaches the museum (and the library) from a different epistemological perspective,

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[87]Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector & Historian" (1937), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: 1935-1938*, vol. 3, eds. Howard Eiland & Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 262.

[88]Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector & Historian," 262.

called it a heterotopia, a place that has the potential to undermine its own cultural authority and enable revolutionary thought and action by revealing the incongruity and friction between inside and outside, making visible the mechanisms that manage what is seen and unseen.[89] Klein's exhibition *Le Vide*, is both a curatorial and a theological project, making what is invisible, present and believable.

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How does dust relate to theology? How might a museal theology respond to the presence of dust that has settled on its own discourse? First, to think with the dust in the museum is to think the museum theologically. While dust brings the museum down to earth, makes it part of the material, temporal, entangled world, the dusting that takes place in the museum is a theological practice. The kind of energy needed to transform a space into a "white cube," into a museological space, is *theological*, that is, a practice informed by belief in invisible images, images of transcendence and timelessness, of a belief in a past that has presence, that can be made clear, clean, objective.

But how might a theology of the museum, a museal theology, work with the dust that has settled in the corners and on the surfaces of its own discourse, a discourse that shows up late, that works with the unbridgeable distance between the past and present, a lateness and distance that the museum instantiates? First, the presence of dust on an object or a concept is the affirmation of its distance, its museification—if temporarily—that it was once in use, but no longer, or, no longer could be used in the same way. To

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[89]Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" (1967), trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* (October 1984), 6-7.

dust off an object or a concept, then, is to put it to use—to a *new use*. And so, the museological dimension of theology, a museal theology, is sensitive to the potential of dusting off unused concepts or artifacts and putting them into new arrangements with others. This approach is *curatorial*—it is what curators do in the storage rooms in the basements of museums: they find works of art that have not been exhibited for years, perhaps even generations, works that have been forgotten, on which dust has settled. And the curator dusts them off, brings them out of storage, offering them a new life in relation to other artifacts.

*Dust Breeding* offers another theological approach to dust, one in which particles from the atmosphere, bits and pieces of material, land on the pane of glass. Rather than rooting about the shelves and racks in storage, a museal theology can also play the role of the glass, serving as an attractive surface that collects particles, bits and pieces. A museal theology might, like Duchamp's unfinished work of art, serve as an inviting surface for whatever happens to find its way there. Such a theology attracts artifacts and concepts, bits and pieces here and there, which, through the photograph, offers a dramatically different image of theology, perhaps a structure, a landscape, a terrain, which, also brings out the theological dimension of whatever happens to accumulate on it, like works of art, images, concepts, discourses, fields. And Michael Marder claims that dust itself has such theological substance. He writes,

> dust is the image of eternity stamped on every least bit of material reality. It is the point where the vectors of frailty and tenaciousness intersect, attesting to a strength that is not equivalent to stubborn immutability.[90]

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[90]Michael Marder, *Dust*, 46.

No mere matter, no "stubborn immutability," dust does something else. It *veils*. It flows and billows, its scrim-like or gauze-like materiality, gives shape to what cannot be seen without it, just as Man Ray's photograph revealed a portion of and gave shape to Duchamp's unfinished work, enabling it to appear as Calvin Tomkins called it, "a lunar landscape," thus *intensifying* not hiding or denying the uncanny mystery of what would become Duchamp's most ambitious and influential work of art. "Dust accumulates," Marder observes, "precisely in the difference between the infinite finitude of things and the finite infinity of matter."[91] And so, perhaps dust's most important role is to draw our attention to those crevices and corners, intimate locations of theological resonance, where it accumulates, or, perhaps even better, where we allow it to accumulate. Like theology and the museum, dust manages what is seen and unseen; what is visible and invisible. This project works with dust by working with materiality and time and their inextricable entanglement. Perhaps this project is an extended experiment in *curatorial dusting*—the process of dusting off as well as allowing dust to accumulate. "The enigma," as our theologian of dust observes, "is on the surface."[92] And so, perhaps this project is a four-hundred-page photograph of a surface onto which various particles have landed, like Ted Joans's *Long Distance*, Anselm Kiefer's studio, *Ghent Altarpiece*, the model of *Merzbau*, Nicholas of Cusa's Prologue and Benjamin's Artwork essay, Duchamp's *Fountain* and Kline's *Le Vide*. This project dusts off and also allows dust to accumulate on these artifacts and concepts, producing its own kind of theological "lunar landscape."

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[91]Michael Marder, *Dust*, 75.

[92]Michael Marder, *Dust*, 29.

But perhaps, it is Marcel Proust who is the most museologically dusty theologian. Adorno's celebration of the novelist's theological dimensions is a fitting last word to this dusty reflection on time, materially and their inseparability.

> For it is this concentration upon opaque and quasi-blind details through which Proust achieves that *Remembrance of Things Past* by which his novel undertook to brave death by breaking the power of oblivion engulfing every individual life. It is he who, in a non-religious world, took the phrase of immortality literally and tried to salvage life, as an image, from the throes of death. But he did so by giving himself up to the most futile, the most insignificant, the most fugitive traces of memory. By concentrating upon the utterly mortal, he converted his novel, blamed today for self-indulgence and decadence, into a hieroglyph of "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"[93]

The next chapter will focus on the work of theologians Mattias Martinson and Petra Carlsson Redell, outside and inside the cathedral. But we will begin with a fire in a cathedral in Paris in 2019.

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[93]T.W. Adorno, "Art and Religion Today" (1945), *The Kenyon Review* 18/3-4 (Summer-Autumn, 1996): 240.

# CHAPTER THREE

## CURATING DECAY
## THEOLOGY AS MUSEOLOGY IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION



> When I imagine that I would become a practicing Catholic today, where is the church that would not insult me…it really would need to be a small, ruined chapel of the kind I found in Spain, the kind which will not be fixed or touched by any contemporary hand.
>
> —Rainer Maria Rilke (2 December 1913)

On 15 April 2019 a structural fire broke out beneath the roof of Notre-Dame de Paris. By the time it was put out, the majestic spire of the Cathedral had collapsed, most of its roof destroyed, and its upper walls severely damaged. Two years later, the Diocese approved plans proposed by President Emmanuel Macron with an international group of architects and designers, which included modernizing the space to accommodate tourists by removing the confessionals and a tabernacle and including commissions from contemporary artists and designers. Although the plan was a scaled-down proposal from

an even more radically modern intervention, it nevertheless generated significant criticism for what was called at the time Notre-Dame's "Disneyification."[1]

When it comes to the preservation of such monuments as Notre-Dame, balancing preservation, restoration, and conservation with renovation and "modernization" reveals the challenges of how such cultural artifacts as cathedrals, temples, frescoes, and statues live on in the present. The challenge for conservationists is to balance preservation with renovation that extends its life, delaying as much as possible inevitable deterioration while recognizing that these monuments, whether paintings or buildings, continue into a present culture quite alien to the social context, values, and circumstances that generated the artifact in the first place. And yet the artifact survives these contexts and circumstances. In the case of Notre-Dame, for example, it has outlived the Paris of Richelieu and Louis XIV, Voltaire and Descartes, Robespierre, Napoleon and Delacroix, Victor Hugo and Emile Zola, Picasso, World War I and the Nazi Occupation, Derrida and Foucault. And on 7 December 2024 a crowd of over 40,000 gathered outside the cathedral for reopening ceremonies. The political implications and complexities involved in the renovation of the cathedral, which has been described as "a stage for a new, global mode of secular power, one that increasingly centers a culturalized version of Christianity," are worth exploring, but my interests move in another direction.[2] I am interested in thinking about Christian theology as a medieval cathedral as way to develop—indeed, curate—a museal theology, a theology that recognizes itself as a

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[1]See, for example, Lucy Thackray, "Don't Turn Notre-Dame into Politically Correct Disneyland," say renovation critics," *The Independent* (30 Nov 2021).

[2]Nur Yasemin Ural & Donovan O.Schaefer, "Cultural Christianity's Secular Cathedral," *Political Theology Network* (Sept 25, 2025).

discursive monument to Christian faith, a monument as magnificent and intricate as Notre-Dame. How might thinking about theology change if we approached it as a material artifact from the distant past, which exists today in fragments, takes up space in our cities and neighborhoods but without the same kind of life it once had, existing as anachronistic monuments of the past.

This is not the first time that Notre-Dame Cathedral has been subject to such attention. In the first decade of the twentieth-century, the French government commissioned a young architect, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, to restore the Cathedral, which had deteriorated significantly since the damage it suffered during the French Revolution. Sculptor Auguste Rodin was not happy. In an editorial published in *Le Matin* in 1909, Rodin criticized what he believed to be the architect's heavy hand in its restoration. As Rachel Corbett writes,

> Rodin argues that it was far better to allow cathedrals to deteriorate naturally than for them to be mutilated by restorers ignorant of the "secret" of Gothic design, which he describes as the harmony of opposing planes; the delicate distribution of light glancing across reliefs, carved neither too deep nor shallow; the dance of chiaroscuro as the sun highlights and darkens figures throughout the day.[3]

For Rodin preservation became renovation, improvement, a modernizing gesture to make it more "useful," which then risked strangling the creative life from these intricately designed structures. Rodin proclaimed

> The soul of Gothic art lies in the voluptuous declension of light and shadow which gives rhythm to the entire structure and makes it live. Here is a knowledge now lost, a deliberate ardor, controlled, patient, and strong, which our greedy and restless century is incapable of understanding.[4]

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[3]Rachel Corbett, "Introduction," in Auguste Rodin, *The Cathedral is Dying*, trans. Elisabeth Chase Geissbuhler (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2020).

[4]Ibid.

Let them deteriorate and die and in the process, Rodin declares. We may be able to enjoy and be encouraged by their aesthetic beauty as they transition from functional buildings of worship and ceremony to an artifact of and monument to creativity, not unlike the headless and limb-less marble torsos of the ancient Greeks that so enthralled Rodin.




What are we to do with these magnificently delicate architectural creations of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries? Rodin's conclusion, "Nothing can be repaired! Modern men are no more capable of producing the double of the least Gothic marvel than of repeating one of nature's marvels."[5] "Modern men [sic]" have lost the secret and so any attempt at renovation risks damaging the beauty of what remains. He then adds, "By our creations as well as by our restorations, does no one see where we are?"[6] Rodin's claim that a culture is known by its *restorations*—how and what of the past we preserve,

[5]Rodin, "The Cathedral is Dying," 50.

[6]Rodin, "The Cathedral is Dying," 50.

what we allow to decay more slowly, and what to ultimately to let go—is a crucial insight.

In 1951 art historian Erwin Panofsky published what would become a classic text in the art historical canon, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, in which he argued that Gothic architectural style and structure—such as that embodied at Notre-Dame—offered visible and material semblance to the Scholastic theological definitions and arguments of order and form.[7] For Panofsky, Rodin's phrase, "voluptuous declension of light and shadow which gives rhythm to the entire structure and makes it live," could just as easily describe the dialectical arguments of Thomas Aquinas. Thus, the Cathedral and the *Summa*, the two most ambitious creative artifacts of the Gothic period, produce similar effects of light and shadow, veiling and revealing. Notre-Dame as theology in stone, Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* as discursive architecture. What if the persistent durability of Christian theology has been subject to similar precarities and vulnerabilities, decay and deterioration, clumsy and heavy-handed conservation and preservation as the cathedral?

Despite its whiff of melancholic Romanticism, Gothic aestheticism, and conservatism, Rodin's views might offer another perspective from which to consider the museal gesture of this project, that is, of regarding Christian theology as a creative cultural artifact—and an *historical artifact*—that will be displayed among other creative artifacts, images, and concepts in our museified world. Perhaps Rodin's diatribes, Panofsky's comparison of the cathedral with theology, and the current restoration and renovation of Notre-Dame offer a way to think about how theological discourse as a creative linguistic play of light and shadow, a discourse that veils and vitrines, that

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[7]Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (1951; Meridian, 1957).

collects dust, that consists of mechanisms that manage what is visible and invisible, seen and unseen, must reckon with its relationship to its present and future. Is it possible that the endurance of such architectural structures, relentless in their seeming resistance to change, impressive in their grandeur, cannot, however, be easily preserved, conserved, or renovated—renovated, that is, made to accommodate, resonate, or align with contemporary concerns? It might require another approach. Perhaps theology is, like Rilke's God, "too old from the beginning," which is another way of saying that it arrives late, *after* its spirit had departed. But that does not mean that theology has no future. It just depends on acknowledging that what it was or believed to have been in the past, is not what theology is now.

The image of the cathedral is a common metaphor and expression of the end of Christendom, the crisis of Christian faith, and the rise of secularism, hence the attention that Notre-Dame has received since its fire. Rilke's poetry and prose often used the metaphor of the cathedral or church building to reflect on Christianity, belief, and God. One of his more provocative and influenced images for this project was produced in 1898 when he just twenty-three and visiting Florence:

> God is the most ancient work of art. He has been preserved very poorly and many parts have been added later, in approximations.[8]

As an act of creation, God now requires occasional and frequent conservation and preservation, which have not lived up to the original artistic creation. Significantly, when Rilke visited Florence, it had become the tourist capital of the European world, in large part due to nostalgia—it was the last vestige of the pre-modern life that was disappearing

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[8]Quoted in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Diaries of a Young Poet*, trans. Edward Snow & Michael Winkler, (New York: Norton, 1997).

due to modernization (for example, it was one of the last major European cities to get electricity)—Florence at the turn of the century became an artifact of cultural heritage, a monument to a Christendom expressed through its art.[9]

Bruno Latour has also deployed the metaphor of the decaying/ruined church in his description of religious discourse, in particular:

> Changes of epochs have caused the strata of discourse to slide, slowly and inexorably, just like the rocky plates along the San Andreas fault line, so much so that half the church now finds itself several dozen meters away from the other half. All that's left is two gaping ruins: the one for sheltering the people on the inside, the other only good for expelling the people on the outside. How many centuries ago did you stop rebuilding the nave to prevent it collapsing? Stop shifting it out of line and propping it up again without let-up, the never-ending resumption of work accompanying the slow shearing away that more and more contorts the gaping lips of the fault?[10]

For Latour it is the lack of effort on the part of the priests, theologians, and other administrators to do the work necessary to keep the nave and other architectural features at least somewhat functional to enable a robust incorporation of both the inside and outside of the church—that is, its role for both believers and unbelievers, or, better, participants and non-participants.

"The original," Bruno Latour writes, referring to the "cathedral" of religious discourse, "is not in the past but in the present, always in the present, the only asset we have."[11] Whatever else the renovation of Notre-Dame Cathedral implies about secularism, neo-liberalism, and the like, the fire forced those invested in it (financially,

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[9]Bernd Roeck, *Florence 1900: The Quest for Arcadia*, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[10]Bruno Latour, *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech*, trans. Julie Rose (2002; London: Polity, 2013), 14.

[11]Bruno Latour, *Rejoicing*, 97.

emotionally, politically, culturally, spiritually, aesthetically) to deal with and respond to its present situation, a situation which includes secularism, tourism, nostalgia, national identity, neo-liberalism, Christendom, the Olympics, and much more. The present situation of Notre-Dame Cathedral is that it is an expression of an intended use that is no longer accessible and thus serves as a monument to a faith no longer possible. It exists in a *museified* world in which the sacred and secular, a church and a museum, which accommodates religious practitioners, sacred pilgrims, secular pilgrims, and tourists *at the same time* and many of whom perform multiple roles *simultaneously*.

The Italian theorist Gianni Vattimo contrasts art and religion, the museum and the church, with an image that is relevant for this project's museological emphasis:

> In church one prays, in the museum one aesthetically enjoys works of art and even when the two experiences take place in the same space, one can easily resolve the conflict by a careful division of 'times' – although it still remains a little unclear why it is the churches that contrive this division of times and not rather the museums.[12]

Vattimo's images of the church and the museum is a diptych that presupposes a strict distinction and separation between religion and the secular, spiritual and aesthetic, worshipper and tourist, and which treats the church in a nostalgic way, a way not unlike Paul Valéry's approach to the museum as a site entirely lacking of inspirational spiritual vitality, a site "merely" for tourists. Within the museal framework articulated by Agamben, both church and museum are sites that manage the past in the present. As Mattias Martinson has observed, quoted in the previous chapter, which will continue to appear throughout this project, that the religious practitioner is in some way a tourist—a

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[12]Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans David Webb (1994; London: Polity, 1997), 59.

museum visitor—in the Cathedral as well. In fact, the contemporary Christian, the practitioner and believer, is perhaps as much a tourist as the tourist who visits the cathedral to see this or that painting, this or that relic, or to see the wall paintings and vaulted ceilings, visit the gift shop and have a coffee at the café. Is it possible that the belief that emerges from this situation is itself a complex form of tourism that is always already at a distance from belief (or what is imagined to be "authentic" belief). In her book, *Curated Decay*, heritage studies researcher Caitlyn Desilvey observes that

> We live in a world dense with things left behind by those who came before us, but we only single out some of these things for our attention and care. We ask certain buildings, objects, and landscapes to function as mnemonic devices, to remember the pasts that produced them, and to make these pasts available for our contemplation and concern.[13]

*Exhibiting God* suggests that Christian theology is also among that dense class of things that have been left behind, things that cast shadows, redirects traffic, captivates our gaze, and attracts our attention—positively and negatively—or have become invisible in plain sight. And these things left behind present themselves for new uses in their afterlives.

This chapter explores what it might mean to think theologically from the image of the cathedral that is as much a product of museification as the museum and that those who practice Christianity—are in many cases tourists of a tradition that is theirs *only in part*, at a distance, only afterward and is their heritage, only in part, only afterward. This is a theology that is fully aware of this present situation, that the burned and decayed, deteriorating, and crumbling yet still magnificent cathedral is a site for religious practitioners, aesthetes, sceptics, and tourists simultaneously. And a site where the believer is as much a tourist as the tourist is a pilgrim. This is a museal situation, a

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[13]Caitlyn Desilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 3.

museological reality that invites *curating*. In Agamben's museified world *there is neither religious nor sacred*, or rather, the secular and the sacred are inseparably mixed together in a brackish museological fluidity.

## THE FIGURE OF THE CATHEDERAL IN SWEDISH THEOLOGY

The cathedral figures prominently as an image for two Swedish theologians, Mattias Martinson and Bengt Kristensson Uggla, each of whom take up contrasting postures toward it. The former takes up a position *outside* while the latter positions himself *inside*.[14] In an essay that contrasts his position with Kristensson Uggla's, Martinson argues that their positions are indeed different, but not opposed.[15] Martinson describes his position from outside the cathedral

> [a]s an attempt to specify the difference between a post-Christian theology that critical and constructively attempts to see how secularism and atheism as modern phenomena are entangled in a Christian view of reality.

Martinson thus contrasts his position with one *inside* the cathedral, in which Kristensson Uggla "critically and constructively seeks to formulate a framework for a Christian faith that is aware of the entanglement of atheism in Christian forms."[16] The position inside the cathedral is concerned with explicating, unfolding, and then defending a richer more nuanced and robust Christian faith, while Martinson's is concerned to see this Christian

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[14]Mattias Martinson, *Postkristen teologi. Experiment och tydningsförsök* (Göteborg: Glänta produktion 2007). Bengt Kristensson Uggla, *Katedralens hemlighet. Sekularisering och religiös övertygelse* (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma bokförlag, 2015).

[15]The following discussion relies on Mattias Martinson, "Nästan religiös Katedraler och sekulära teologier," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 92 (2016): 24-36. Translation from Swedish my own in consultation with the author.

[16]Mattias Martinson, "Nästan religiös Katedraler och sekulära teologier," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 92 (2016), 27.

theology within the larger, and more comprehensive framework of a post-Christian society. Martinson's post-Christian theology

> becomes a theology that must primarily regard the cathedral as part of a cityscape where it is both fundamentally natural and unnatural, while the [Kristensson Uggla's] becomes a theology that must regard the cathedral as a public space with an almost incomprehensible historical weight and a teeming life that harbors untapped possibilities.[17]

According to Martinson, Kristensson Uggla's perspective attempts to offer a better version of the Christian faith to respond to and engage the post-Christian world. In contrast, Martinson's

> position outside the cathedral opens up is simply for a broader concept of theology than the dogmatic Christian one; a new concept of theology that, at best, has the potential to make room for a reflection that initially does not even want to define itself as theological, but which can nevertheless be regarded as continuing the questions posed by established theology, would also like to continue to call such a theology "post-Christian."[18]

Martinson's description of a theology that might not even be recognizable as nor desire to define itself as theology while "continuing the questions posed by established theology" is what he calls "post-Christian" theology and it is a description that coincides with and is helpful for the museifed or museo-curatorial theology that I am experimenting here.

Martinson claims that his and Kristensson Uggla's positions, from inside and outside the cathedral, co-exist as a "critical dialectic."[19] This project takes Martinson's assessment as its starting point. But it goes a step further, though, and puts both Martinson's and Kristensson Uggla's positions *within the museum*, both positions as

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[17]Mattias Martinson, "Nästan religiös Katedraler och sekulära teologier," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 92 (2016), 27.

[18]Mattias Martinson, "Nästan religiös Katedraler och sekulära teologier," 27.

[19]Mattias Martinson, "Nästan religiös Katedraler och sekulära teologier," 27.

different expressions of museification. The museum theology I am developing here brings the dialectic *into the museum*, a space that accommodates both atheistic and theistic, religious and secular, believer and unbeliever, tourist and pilgrim, insider and outsider. Martinson's post-Christian theology, from outside the cathedral, is crucial for *Exhibiting God*. But what this project does is enable me bring Martinson *into* the museum by extending and elaborating on Martinson's own concepts from a museological and curatorial point of view.



**MATTIAS MARTINSON: THE CATHEDRAL IN THE CITY**

Martinson stages his book *Katedralen mitt I staden: om ateism och teologi* (2010) outside Uppsala Cathedral, the medieval church that was consecrated in 1435 and then became the center for the Lutheran state church in the middle of the sixteenth century. Martinson, who is on the theology faculty at Uppsala University, reflects on the role that the monument plays in his daily life, how it is simultaneously a natural part of the

environment of the city as well an alien presence, an anomaly, a colossal relic from a time in which Christianity, the church, and the theological faculty played the primary role not only in shaping religious life, but in the production of Swedish culture. Martinson writes,

> Church buildings and their dominant role in the cultural landscape express very precisely "our" culture as it has looked for a very long time. This is why churches are being protected, even though their presence in the landscape and townscape are not at all in harmony with the current cultural configuration between church and state.[20]

And yet the unique configuration of Swedish secularism suggests that such a "harmonious disharmony" is appropriate, especially within the theoretical context of Agamben's museification. Martinson offers a description of how the Cathedral is experienced in daily life. He continues,

> One sees it constantly, notices it, and even if one just passes by it reluctantly or actively ignores it, it is always there as a real point of orientation. It makes a silent speech that can easily be ignored. But the next day it will just as fully stand there in the same position and [provoke] the same attention. The cathedral remains forever.[21]

The cathedral remains unchanged as the culture around it changes—unless it is damaged by fire as was the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris, in which case the state must make decisions about how and in what ways the monument as an artifact of cultural heritage and a pilgrimage site for cultural tourism will be preserved and renovated. For Martinson, it is a "practical cultural atheism that surrounds the cathedral today, rather than in the now abandoned reality of faith, of which the cathedral reminds us only vaguely in its enigmatic grandeur."[22] And it is an "enigmatic grandeur" that is presumed to be kept

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[20]Mattias Martinson, "Introduktion," *Katedralen mitt I staden: om ateism och teologi* (Lund: Arcus, 2010), 24.

[21]Mattias Martinson, "Introduktion," *Katedralen mitt I staden: om ateism och teologi* (Lund: Arcus, 2010).

[22]Mattias Martinson, "Introduktion," *Katedralen mitt I staden: om ateism och teologi* (Lund: Arcus, 2010).

safely at arm's length as cultural heritage, which also includes faith as a museum artifact, placed on a pedestal covered by a vitrine.

Yet Uppsala Cathedral, the model for Martinson's reflections, is not as unchanged as it appears as an image for his theological work. It was commissioned in the thirteenth century as and then played the central and leading role in the Lutheran state church of Sweden in the mid-sixteenth century, shaping the ecclesial, political, and cultural life of the country and it has suffered from a major fire and its towers designed in the late nineteenth century. Martinson uses the geographical presence of this specific church, with its dramatic twin spires, to re-think theology in light of this colossal and relentlessly ever-present monument in a society that is profoundly secular and relates to Christianity in dramatically different ways than previous generations. The result is, "the former religious normality has become difficult to distinguish from a non-religious normality."[23] This is an important observation. Both religious and non-religious, or in Martinson's dyad, theists and atheists, operate in similar ways, ways that reveal the *museification* of both belief and disbelief, religious and irreligious.

Monumentality

Martinson's concern is to articulate a role for theology in a post-Christian cultural context in which secularism (for Martinson, equated with atheism) is itself an often unrecognized and thus largely untheorized *inheritance* of Christianity that compromises the potential of secularism to cultivate a pluralistic society. But this does not mean that Martinson dismisses Christianity or regards Christian theology as irrelevant to a post-

[23]Mattias Martinson, "Introduktion," *Katedralen mitt I staden: om ateism och teologi* (Lund: Arcus, 2010).

Christian secular society. The problem is neither Christianity nor theology, per se, but what he calls Christian *monumentality*, which is a particular European cultural phenomenon in which the artifacts of "old Christianity," such as

> great buildings, archaic artifacts, music, etc.—become a neat and helpful ingredient in a monumental ideological mixture called "the Christian heritage." It has very little to do with historical Christianity, but it is indeed a monumental mixture, which often succeeds in displacing the role of local cultural heritage, creating a narrative through which this culture is wholly neutralized and naturalized. It is a paradoxical *creation* of cultural memory.[24]

Christian monumentality serves to naturalize the power of Christianity in the spaces of our cultural consciousness, largely as a deceptively harmless artifact of "cultural heritage," an artifact, through monuments, works of art, buildings, holidays, rituals, concepts become part of the fabric of the history, origins, nature, tradition in which these artifacts are "transform[ed] into an almost natural aspect of the place" where it "ambiguously exercises power over cultural production"—especially cultural production that describes itself to be secular (and "natural"). Echoing the work of cultural heritage researchers, Martinson argues that this *heritagization* of Christianity is a fiction of modern secularism that betrays its diversity and radicality, a diversity and radicality that does not serve the sovereignty of the state entirely but offers pockets of resistance, beyond its deployment as an instrument of Swedish bureaucracy. For Martinson, this Christian monumentality distorts Christianity's role in secular society and obfuscates its potential to catalyze new practices and concepts in large part because it fails to recognize the effects that it has in the present. "The traditional faith still charges the secular normal

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[24]Mattias Martinson, "Towards a 'Theology' of *Christian Monumentality: Post-Christian Reflections on Grace and Nature," in Monument and Memory*, eds. J. Bornemark, M. Martinson, J. Svenungsson (Nordic Studies in Theology, 2015), 22.

in Sweden," Martinson observes, "with a certain theological energy."[25] This "certain theological energy," is the energy that justifies the present situation, that smears the sharp edges of Christianity and the philosophical concept of the "death of God" that serves to entrench and empower the largely cultural unconscious energy of a deep Christianity that turns secularism into a covert cultural Christendom. It is this theological energy that lurks about in museums, art studios, and in art exhibitions that this project is interested in exploring. What is needed is a form of cultural archaeology or curatorial museology that cracks open the subversive, provocative, and creative energy in the Christian tradition that scrapes against the consensual "Christian heritage" that characterizes Swedish secular society. It is a secular society, Martinson shows, that is deeply *Lutheran*, or, rather, adapts certain aspects of the Lutheran tradition that coincide and serve a modern secular Sweden, such as privacy of belief, separation of "faith and works" and separation of earthly and heavenly sovereignty, religion and politics.

Martinson's work is predicated upon his insight that "Despite its rigid stone construction, the building is culturally fluid. So, *what* does it mean and what does it *not* mean? How does it work and how doesn't it work?"[26] These questions suggest a museological orientation in which this cultural fluidity is a possible site for creative theological intervention. Moreover, Uppsala Cathedral is not only fluid culturally but also socially. And this is exemplified by Martinson's discussion of the Italian theorist Gianni Vattimo's comparison of the museum to the cathedral quoted earlier in the chapter.[27]

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[25]Mattias Martinson, "Introduktion," *Katedralen mitt I staden: om ateism och teologi* (Lund: Arcus, 2010).

[26]Mattias Martinson, "Introduktion," *Katedralen mitt I staden: om ateism och teologi* (Lund: Arcus, 2010).

[27]Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. Derek Webb (London: Polity, 2007), 59.

> Vattimo has pointed out that there is an interesting asymmetry between museums and old cathedrals: both are today the place for the enjoyment of ancient and in some case sacred objects. But if for most people it seems alien to imagine a museum visitor worshipping in front of one of the altarpieces in a museum collection, the worshipper in a cathedral must always be prepared to be disturbed by tourists who are questioning the museum value of the cultural treasure.... *In the museum you are only a museum visitor, in the church you are also a museum visitor* [my emphasis].[28]

Martinson's work creates space for the kind of museological gesture that considers the possibility that the museum visitor and religious practitioner share multiple roles simultaneously: tourist *and* pilgrim, museum visitor *and* church goer. However, ultimately, for Martinson, who seems to follow Agamben here, the decisive role is museum visitor. Moreover, Martinson's observation suggests *layered* and *multiple* identities—that one *can be* simultaneously believer and unbeliever, atheist and theist, tourist and pilgrim, religious and secular, past and present. Martinson's insight is that the church-goer, the religious practitioner, then *believes as a tourist*, as a museum visitor, whose relationship to the faith is museified at a *complicated distance*. The management of these multiple and simultaneous identities and roles as well as the curation of what appears is theological *and* museological. This project initiates a way to curate new displays of artifacts, images, and concepts from a Christian cultural heritage, ways that might make more visible its presence in contemporary society and reveal the afterlife it already has, even if such an afterlife can only be at a museal distance—for believer, unbeliever, and agnostic. Yet perhaps it may also generate the possibility that thus isolated and made visible, these bits and pieces of this heritage might then have a more

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[28]Mattias Martinson, "Introduktion," *Katedralen mitt I staden: om ateism och teologi* (Lundon: Arcus, 2010).

creative afterlife in relation and in response to the concerns of the present cultural moment if they can be curated in new constellations.

Theological discourse has the potential, according to Martinson, of *breaking through* the monumental rigidity of Christian cultural heritage, or *finding a way to relate to it* by revealing the Christian tradition to be "fluid," and thus capable of being redirected and reshaped into new images, concepts, and artifacts that might dismantle this (Christian) rigidity and monumentality—what Martinson calls "nature," in which the Cathedral takes its place within the landscape, which of course, is also a product of culture, and thus a product of museification.[29] In contrast, Martinson argues that it is important to resist entrenching such naturalized monumentality, such as historical continuity, and origins. It can also affirm a theology that is "experimental" and thus liberated from dogma and orthodoxy and that can be freed to generate what he calls *grace*—"the unexpected construction of alternative perspectives"—through its improvisational and innovative gestures, its exploration of the improbable that "opens up *escape routes* from the logic of traditional dogmatic discourse" [my emphasis].[30] This experimental approach enables Christian theology to become something like

> a post-Christian theology, where "post" can be said to indicate a geophilosophical shift in theology's relationship with the cathedral, from a symbiotic to an aporetic relationship. This is not a question of an exit from or escape from the imperial environment, but of the continued museum function of the razed imperial culture in the contemporary environment.[31]

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[29]David Thurfjell, a religious studies scholar, has devoted considerable attention to the importance of "nature" for secular Swedes and the role it plays in the spiritual life and spiritual imagination in secular Sweden. See, for example, David Thurfjell, *En Lockton i Ödemarken: Om människans förmåga att besjäla världen* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2023).

[30]Mattias Martinson, "Introduktion," *Katedralen mitt I staden: om ateism och teologi* (Lund: Arcus, 2010).

[31]Mattias Martinson, *Katedralen mitt I staden: om ateism och teologi* (Lund: Arcus, 2010).

Martinson wants theology to relate differently to this cathedral. Instead of working to strengthen and underwrite its apparently naturalized, inevitable presence in a practically atheist post-Christian culture that regards Christianity (and the cathedral) as an artifact of cultural heritage—what Martinson calls a "symbiotic" relationship—he wants theology to generate an "aporetic" one, that is, one that emphasizes the sharp edges that "post" necessitates between the culture and the cathedral. This does not mean, though, that there is no relationship. Rather, to distinguish them enables a greater awareness of what concepts, ideas, and images—to which the cathedral bears witness—by curating their juxtapositions in order to reveal resonances and friction. In effect, "post" becomes a *curatorial concept* and tool that enables the cathedral to become alien, strange, feral, in order to begin the process of understanding from a different perspective how it has shaped secular society and how it might be utilized to shape it in different ways—how it might make a significant contribution to public discourse and academic research. And an important means by which Martinson considers this aporetic process to take place is through what he calls the "museum function" of attending to the "razed imperial culture"—that is the fragments, ruins, artifacts of images, concepts, and ideas—that populate the landscape of contemporary society. An important part of Martinson's post-Christian theological approach, then, is *archaeological*. It scours the contemporary landscape in order to discover, recover, and then preserve concepts that theology has produced throughout its history. But his approach is not simply historical, but critical and constructive. He wants to explore how these artifacts strewn along the landscape and hoarded by the cathedral, continue to underwrite culture invisibly, and *then to make them visible*.

Another important part of Martinson's post-Christian theological approach is that it must be—or liberated in order to be—*experimental.*

> A completely different way of expressing theology in our time is to say that it should always be experimental and aware that thinking always takes place in an artificial environment where things are arranged in a way that ultimately does not really correspond to the historical flow of reality.[32]

Martinson's model for the experimental is not the artist's studio but the scientific laboratory, or an ideal of how the scientific laboratory can work as it embraces failures, false-starts, closed paths, offering a version of Karl Popper's theory of science as "conjectures and refutations." Yet it also resonates with the image of the exhibition that both Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel described in the previous chapter and is worth quoting again in this context.

> [i]t is a highly artificial assemblage of objects, installations, people and arguments, which could not reasonably be gathered anywhere else. In an exhibition the usual constraints of time, space, and realism are suspended. This means that it is an ideal medium for experimentation; and especially for addressing the current crisis of representation....[33]

This "highly unrealistic" assemblage of tangible and intangible artifacts that characterizes the exhibition offers a useful framework to practice Martinson's experimental theology in a museal context.

What this "museum function" introduces is *distance*. It treats Christianity and its tradition of theorizing about its content (theology) as a constellation of unusual and strangely shaped artifacts of the past. The result allows them to have *new effects* through

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[32]Mattias Martinson, *Postkristen teologi: experiment och tydningsförsök* (Göteborg: Glänta Produktion, 2007).

[33]Peter Weibel and Bruno Latour, "Experimenting with Representation: *Iconoclash* and *Making Things Public*," in *Exhibition Experiments*, Sharon Macdonald, Paul Basu, eds. (New York: Blackwell, 2007).

curating its museological "afterlife," giving them the opportunity to speak in different ways to different audiences for those who attend to them imaginatively. (In this way, theology works like art criticism, responding creatively to the concepts on view.) Interestingly, this means that the *Christian* specificity of the Christian cultural heritage must be made more visible—not dissolved and softened into "naturalized" historical development—or even renovated or redefined to make it fit more comfortably and thus invisibly within existing secular conventions. Interestingly, the exhibition creates a distance between the artifacts and the viewer. Yet this distance *qua* distance also brings them into visibility, as the viewer must relate to this or that artifact *as artifacts*, with their sharp edges and cracks, and fissures, which does not allow them to operate in the vague, fluid, and *invisible* way that Martinson argues Sweden's "deep Christianity" usually operates culturally.

Therefore, according to Martinson, a post-Christian theology must *embrace* (not reject) its Christian identity. Yet this embrace is a *museological* one. In other words, this museo-theology must make Christianity visible and address it in museological distance. Theology must also embrace its Christian beginnings as a practice of "faith seeking understanding" and its poetic and radically creative attempt to build "orthodoxy." This is a creative practice that resonates with what Deleuze has in mind when he claims that

> It is with God that everything is permitted, not only morally, since acts of violence and infamies always find a holy justification, but aesthetically, in a much more important manner, because the divine Figures are wrought by a free creative work, by a fantasy in which everything is permitted.[34]

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[34]Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (1981; New York: Continuum, 2003), 10.

Theology cannot simply cast off its Christianity like a cloak, which is what secular humanist scholars and politicians claim to have done. But what it can do, however, according to Martinson, is to "think creatively from the image of its own situation, its own story."[35] And this distinctive situation, story, tradition, and practice is a treasure trove of provocative artifacts—ideas, concepts, and images that can be deployed in different ways to address contemporary needs. An important part of Martinson's work is to reveal the deep and invisible connection between atheism and theism (Christian belief), which has limited both postures and positions.[36] And this connection can become clearer, and also more dynamic, when both artifacts are incorporated and installed in a museum theological framework that makes such connections visible, thus enabling museal afterlives not only for Christian concepts but for the atheism that emerges from them. Martinson's museological gesture therefore enables the theologian to

> destabilize the Christian heritage by developing the critical dynamics of theology within. An experimental and heretical dynamic has always existed within and associated with the more conformist Christian doctrine....[37]

A post-Christian theology must find the cracks and fissures in the apparently seamless and totalizing "Christian cultural heritage" that remains diffuse and invisible and transforms them into discrete visible artifacts, which will simultaneously reveal their vulnerability, the precarity, in all their sharp edges, crumbling corners and smudged surfaces, diversity, unpredictability, and unruliness. A museological theology treats

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[35]Mattias Martinson, *Katedralen mitt I staden: om ateism och teologi* (Lund: Arcus, 2010).

[36]Mattias Martinson, "Atheism as Culture and Condition: Nietzschean Reflections on the Contemporary Invisibility of Profound Godlessness," *Approaching Religion* 2/1 (June 2012).

[37]Mattias Martinson, *Postkristen teologi: experiment och tydningsförsök* (Göteborg: Glänta Produktion, 2007).

Christianity as *monumental*, and as cultural heritage, that is, an artifact which casts shadows, takes up space, stands out and is visible as *more than* cultural heritage. And like other material artifacts, these concepts are thus subject to deterioration and decay.[38] Moreover, like Notre-Dame, Uppsala Cathedral has burned and been rebuilt, has been renovated, and in the nineteenth-century "modernized," in order to appear more fashionably Gothic.[39] The cathedral that shapes Martinson's work, that is the figure and image that is the Christianity from which he works, is itself an artifact that has a history that includes construction, destruction, renovation, addition, etc. and which continues to live, even as an artifact of cultural heritage, even if that life is a more limited and peripheral one in contemporary culture. But a peripheral location and limited role does not make museal theology irrelevant. It only means that it addresses society from a different cultural angle.

Ultimately, for Martinson, the goal of a post-Christian theology is to transform the unconscious "Christian deep identity" into a more *visible* and thus conscious and self-reflective constellation of artifacts that already influence and shape culture but which could, through an imaginative curation, do *so in different ways*. As curatorial theorist Jean-Paul Martinon claims, "the curatorial is a jailbreak from pre-existing forms."[40] Exhibitions are never seamless, homogeneous entities, but have subversive potential,

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[38]Martinson's post-Christian theology resonates closely with critical heritage studies. See the Norwegian collaborative research project "Unruly Heritage: An Archaeology of the Anthropocene," led by Bjørnar Olsen & Þóra Pétursdóttir.

[39]See Annika Franzon, *A Guide to Uppsala Cathedral* (Church of Sweden, 2016).

[40]Jean-Paul Martinon, "Introduction," *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 4.

catalyzing or provoking multiple interpretations and alternative responses. For Martinson, this means that, ultimately

> To think theologically in a post-Christian situation is therefore to manage the valuable (and to show the problematic) in the Christian particularity of theology, and to put it in interaction with other particularities that in their particular ways give expression to the lost relevance and power of Christianity.[41]

One way that this kind of attention can be enabled, a kind of attention that stresses the strangeness, distance, and alien character of Christianity as well as its potential contemporary relevance as a creative catalyst and collaborator in the present is the museological gesture that this project initiates and around which Martinson's theological project circles. This gesture reveals that such an experimental, "post" Christian theology

> can never be anything other than an interpretation of a very definite and arranged environment, which of course is not identical to the reality in which the theology is then supposed to function as an interpretive norm." [42]

This "definite and arranged environment," again, suggests the kind of experience that a museum exhibition offers—a curated selection of material artifacts from multiple locations or contexts displayed together in relationships that generate conversations about them and relationships with the kind of distracted, kinetic visual attention of the exhibition viewer who moves about through these displays, not unlike Martinson and countless others who navigate the cathedral visually and spatially on a regular basis.

Martinson's museal theological approach also offers a creative way to address heritage studies in unique ways. Post-Christian theology must

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[41]Mattias Martinson, *Postkristen teologi: experiment och tydningsförsök* (Göteborg: Glänta Produktion, 2007).

[42]Mattias Martinson, *Postkristen teologi: experiment och tydningsförsök* (Göteborg: Glänta Produktion, 2007).

> use our old heritage to form new conceptions of this world and society, tearing down constructions that hinder us in experiencing the real brokenness and neediness of the world.[43]

Martinson's post-Christian theology has the potential to work with "our old heritage" in creative and imaginative ways—perhaps even "tearing down"—or, in Desilvey's conception, curate their decay and dissolution in ways that open up space for new conceptualizations, new images that resonates with Martinson's concept of the curatorial as potentially disruptive. This constructive, or curatorial approach to the monumentality of Christian heritage. It brings the risk of discomfort, in which "our old heritage," with which we were comfortable, by allowing to remain visibly invisible in some distant past, which enables its specificity to be dismissed all the while it continues to operate invisibly in a general way, neither unclaimed nor unacknowledged.

> Ultimately, a constructive theological ambition has to be confident enough to alienate us from our familiarity with ourselves and to reactivate the disturbing force of our imagination.[44]

Martinson's post-Christian theology offers a way to engage curatorially with Sweden's distinctive Christian heritage with the intention of disturbing its "monumentality," comfortable homogeneity, and monochromatic distance. Martinson's approach, however, is to bring it close—*uncomfortably close*. To work with theological heritage in this way, then, is a *curatorial practice*.

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[43]Mattias Martinson, "Lutheran Secularism as a Challenge for Constructive Theology: A Swedish Perspective, a Foucauldian Proposal," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56/3 (Fall 2017).

[44]Mattias Martinson, "Lutheran Secularism as a Challenge for Constructive Theology: A Swedish Perspective, a Foucauldian Proposal," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56/3 (Fall 2017).

After Faith

Martinson's recent writings on academic theology offer a meta-critique of both the overdetermined, overly visible (visually saturated) images of "knowledge" that seduce the academy *and* the church, the seminar room *and* the sanctuary. For Martinson theology is characterized by appearing *after* faith, that is, "relating faith to truth after faith."[45] In its classic, confessional, formulation, theology is "faith seeking understanding." Yet it is this understanding that, according to Martinson, comes after faith, yet in friction with faith, which museification "abolishes," which makes it "no longer relevant."

> If theology is needed, it is after something decisive and crisis-like has happened to what theology is based on and moves around, namely faith in God as a spontaneous expression of trust and grace. Theology thus has no pattern of movement other than that which leads back to faith; it always moves toward that which it must abolish…Theology, which must clarify the relation of faith in God to truth, parasitizes on the impossibility of a living and true faith in God; *the impossibility of living faith in God generates theology* [my emphasis].[46]

Faith remains implicated in and in relation to the work that theology does, the truth of understanding. But faith does not need this work, and so when theology shows up, when it begins to do its work, faith is already not "living and true" (i.e., spontaneous and unreflective) which, in the context of *Exhibiting God*, is another way of saying that faith is an artifact of the museum. And, just as importantly, theology—whether academic or confessional, inside or outside the cathedral—*is a discourse of the museum.*

> The fact that theology erects monuments to faith through texts means that it very drastically distances itself from its real task, which is to abolish faith by explaining the truth of faith when it has become obsolete. Contrary to what it is supposed to do, it creates the illusion that the faith is not obsolete, that it is current

[45]Mattias Martinson, "Inifrån ett utanför: Teologi, verklighet, vetenskap," unpublished manuscript.

[46]Mattias Martinson, "Inifrån ett utanför: Teologi, verklighet, vetenskap," unpublished manuscript.

> and has a clear and constant relationship to the truth. In so doing, it also creates the illusion that theology itself is possible and meaningful.[47]

Martinson here suggests that theology needs to become more aware of what it does, that the monuments it erects *to* faith—the vitrines that it places over its concepts—fail to recognize that faith is itself an artifact that can prevent creative engagement with the void. The "living and true" or "spontaneous" faith that used to be trust in God, has passed after Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche (did it *ever* exist?). Theology in this register, in the register of "after faith" has a museological and curatorial task of working with the afterlife of faith, curating new constellations and exhibitions of artifacts from this *museal* condition. Herman Melville offers an image of this museal faith in the novel *Moby-Dick*, when he writes, "But Faith, like a jacket, feeds among the tombs, and even from these dead doubts she gathers her most vital hope."[48] Martinson's theology after faith offers a way to think museologically and curatorially about a faith that might emerge *through the museum* that incorporates theism and atheism, belief and unbelief, secularism and religion and considers all to be museum artifacts.

Theology as Photograph of Faith

Martinson's view that theology comes *after* faith, curating it in relation to truth, to understanding, bears a resemblance to theoretical reflection on the photograph, given its capacity to make visually present what is absent or what is past. For example, in his influential analysis of photography published in the early 1980s, Roland Barthes claims,

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[47]Mattias Martinson, "Inifrån ett utanför: Teologi, verklighet, vetenskap," unpublished manuscript.

[48]Herman Melville, "The Gilder," in *Moby-Dick: or, The Whale*, Hershel Parker & Harrison Hayford, eds (1855; Norton Critical Edition, 1999), 45.

> The Photograph does not call up the past (nothing Proustian in a photograph). The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed. Now, this is a strictly scandalous effect....[49]

The scandalous effect of the photograph for Barthes is not that it makes present what is absent, even though that is the popular understanding or description of its affect. Rather, it is that it makes present the absence as an event of the past. It creates proximity *through distance,* which enables the potential for an *after* in the present. Moreover, he suggests, "The realists of whom I am one...do not take the photograph for a 'copy' of reality, but for an *emanation of past reality*: a magic, not an art" [my emphasis].[50] That Barthes compares the photograph to magic rather than to art also puts it in the realm of the spiritual, the numinous, the religious—and also the *performative*. And it is not coincidental that in his reflection on the photograph he brings up his own religious upbringing and experience with Catholicism.

This relationship of the photograph to magic and to religion is one of the reasons that theorist David Levi Strauss suggests that the photograph is ultimately about *belief.*

> Belief requires making a connection, some reciprocity. Photography is a reciprocal intervention, and so involves belief. If we are going to re-establish a connection to the world, a belief in the world, we have to be able to see it "in a glass, darkly," on the way to a face-to-face.[51]

The connection with belief and sight through the quotation of St. Paul's well-known description of the believer's relationship to God (1 Cor 12) again puts the photograph into

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[49]Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (1981; New York: Vintage, 2000), 82.

[50]Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 88.

[51]David Levi Strauss, *Photography and Belief* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2024), 64.

the realm of religion. Vilém Flusser offers another, quite radical, interpretation of the relationship of the photograph to "truth." Comparing it with texts, Flusser writes:

> Texts do not signify the world; they signify the images they tear up. Hence, to decode texts means to discover the images signified by them. The intention of texts is to explain images, while that of concepts is to make ideas comprehensible.[52]

Moreover, Flusser argues that writing emerges as a struggle against idolatry and with the invention of photography, a "post-history" is initiated that represents a struggle against "textolatry."[53] It is the friction that the photograph creates as it rubs against reason and understanding, the reduction of the world to knowledge about it, that forces theorists of the photograph into the realm of religion, magic, and belief in order to understand how it works.

This is what makes the photograph a useful analogy and metaphor through which to explore Martinson's distinctive iteration of "post-Christian" theology and to take it from outside the cathedral into the cathedral *qua* museum. The photograph becomes the distinctive medium through which a museum theology, a theology in and of the museum, operates. In each of the following chapters, in substantially different ways, the photograph will play a constitutive role as a theological resource. Yet the photograph is not merely visual, it is also conceptual. Martinson's theology can be described as Barthes's defined photography, an "emanation of a past reality."

Martinson's "after faith" approach to theology is thus photographic, that is, it relates itself to "reality" in a particular way, a way that is always from the past.

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[52]Vilém Flusser, *Toward a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (1983; London: Reakton Books, 2000), 44.

[53]Vilém Flusser, *Toward a Philosophy of Photography*, 44.

> It is in this illusory form that we normally recognize what we call theology, namely as the opposite of theology, that is, as an account of the truth of a faith that never becomes truly obsolete.[54]

Like the photograph, theology's own magic is *misplaced.* It does not represent or establish a consistent and permanent relationship of truth *to* faith, as the truth *of* faith, such as making faith *present*, or *representing* faith. For Martinson, theology is no longer "faith seeking understanding," but an understanding that comes after faith, dislodges, or even "abolishes" it. *Theology is the photograph of faith.* "Theology as we know it abrogates faith as an abrogated *imprint* in theological texts, by adding new texts and creating the illusion that faith is not abrogated" [my emphasis].[55] Martinson argues that these texts are most often offered as monuments to faith, not as faith.

> The fact that theology erects monuments to faith through texts means that it very drastically distances itself from its real task, which is to abolish faith by explaining the truth of faith when it has become obsolete.[56]

Another way of saying that faith is obsolete is to say that there is nothing there, that these theological texts are offered as monuments *to what is not there or no longer there*, that is, a "true faith" that no longer (or has never) existed. Like the photograph that appears to make present what is absent, or make visible what "really happened," theology *appears* to establish the truth of faith. Yet in fact what the photograph and theology do is *to make visible* the distance from what happened but no longer lives, whether that is the moment of the photograph or the moment of faith. Both the concept of the photograph and

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[54]Mattias Martinson, "Inifrån ett utanför: Teologi, verklighet, vetenskap," unpublished manuscript.

[55]Mattias Martinson, "Inifrån ett utanför: Teologi, verklighet, vetenskap," unpublished manuscript.

[56]Mattias Martinson, "Inifrån ett utanför: Teologi, verklighet, vetenskap," unpublished manuscript.

Martinson's theology appear afterwards, or *when the moment no longer exists*. This is the "abrogated imprint" of a post-Christian theology to which Martinson bears witness.

But what happens when museum theology, standing with Martinson outside the cathedral, *enters* it? Another Swedish theologian, Petra Carlsson Redell, will be there to meet us, and guide us—as tourists, museum visitors, pilgrims, and religious believers. And she will do so through her engagement with Walter Benjamin's seminal and influential essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility" (1936) as she enables us to think about how we might practice this *museal* theology inside the cathedral.[57]

***EXCURSUS— SACRAMENT, AUDITORIUM, BIBLE STUDY,***

The *cathedral* is a potent and vivid image in Swedish theology. It is so because it encapsulates and expresses the crucial role that medieval Christianity played in the history and development of the nation. Parish churches from the eleventh and twelve centuries are scattered throughout the Swedish countryside. Its history predates the Protestant Reformation and then, like England, its conversion to Protestantism took the form of a state-supported church. (In fact, some commentators suggest that Sweden never actually experienced a doctrinal Reformation as it did in England and Denmark, for example.) Its major cathedrals, such as Uppsala, Lund, Strängnäs, Göteborg, Stockholm, Linköping, Visby, Växjö, Härnösands, and Luleå in the north, embody both political,

[57]Walter Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (1936), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 3 1935-1938,* trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard, 2002). This essay will be the subject of Chapter Four.

cultural, and spiritual authority. A cathedral is thus the image of Christianity for the average Swedish person, and that is where (religious) belief and theology are confined. The cathedral also plays a crucial cultural role in Sweden. It is where concerts are performed and where many important art works are displayed. Christianity in secular Sweden is visible, monumental, and cultural. And the church continues to play a liturgical role in most Swedish persons, as they marry, christen (baptize) their children, send them to confirmation, bury their family members and honor them on All Souls Day.

This is not the case in the religious United States. The cathedral plays virtually no role in the American imagination as an embodiment of Christianity. In fact, it operates in the opposite way, it is an image of "dead religion" that was identified with state religion. Rather, Christianity is shaped by its dissenting and revivalist roots from its founding, in the first and second great awakenings in the eighteenth century, and continues with its focus on large revivalist, public church events, like the evangelistic crusades of Billy Sunday early in the twentieth century and Billy Graham in the second half of the twentieth century, home bible studies, and the importance of personal conversion. For Americans, Christianity is invisible, a matter of the heart. It is thus not confined to a building or expressed in a magnificent medieval work of art, spilling into the street, office, and other public spaces, but is also often found on radio or television. It is also, perhaps because of this, Christianity is shaped by the British tradition of the dissenting movements in the Church of England, movements and later denominations that disengage and fragment the church as a unifying social authority of high culture and is an engine for democracy.[58]

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[58]See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

These extreme cultural differences and how they lead to different iterations of how the religion and the secular, belief and unbelief, private and public relate to one another are important to make visible and to display side-by-side. Yet within the context of this project's museal theology, this curatorial juxtaposition of American and Swedish images of Christianity offers two dramatically and even radically different ways of understanding the museification of Christianity and negotiating and navigating distance and inaccessibility in the American context and in the Swedish context. These contrasting images also impact how theology and religion are studied. *Exhibiting God* suggests that the museification of Christianity that makes visible the artifacts of different cultural iterations of the secular and post-secular, Christian and post-Christian, provides opportunities for multiple iterations of theologies to emerge from these different constellations (exhibitions, configurations). This study argues that to articulate the different images of Christianity in Sweden and the USA and the distinctive iterations of the secular that they each have developed, also shapes their theologies. In addition, it also suggests that the museification of the world, of Christianity, looks and behaves differently in the USA than in Sweden. And that a cross cultural comparative analysis points to a museal-curatorial theology needs to take into account these differences, distinctions, and tensions, something toward which this experiment can only gesture.

## Academic Theology and the Academy

If Martinson's earlier work focused on the development of a post-Christian theology in relation to ecclesial or confessional theology, atheism, secularism, Judaism, Islam which is exemplified by the relationship of the academy to the cathedral.

Martinson's recent work, however, has addressed how academic theology *relates to other academic discourses within the academy*. In an article published in *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* (2024), Martinson argues that the relevance of academic theology is located precisely in theologians' experience with responding to and engaging with "accusations that they are not scientific, neutral, or disinterested....In modern times, it has almost become second nature for academic theologians to have to defend their scientific work—indeed, their scientific identity—against such accusations."[59] Martinson's argument is that academic theology offers ways for academic research to proceed in the face of increased criticism from the government about its usefulness in a global marketplace that values knowledge that can be instrumentalized to maximize financial gain. This precarious situation, both in the U.S. and in Sweden, impacts the study of the humanities considerably. But Martinson goes further:

> because theology has constantly been in the crossfire of these types of accusations, theology today is also being tested in terms of its scientific nature and thus possibly also called upon to discuss more generally the conditions for critical thinking and scientific virtues in a time of uncertainty and struggle over knowledge privileges.[60]

For Martinson, *because of* the criticism that academic theology receives from multiple locations in culture (academy, government, public sphere), it is uniquely equipped to serve as a model and to participate in making the broader case for academic research in the humanities and, even more generally, *free scientific research*.[61]

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[59]Mattias Martinson, "Provisoriets välsignelse och vetenskapernas drottning," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 100 (2024): 25-39. Translations are my own in consultation with the author.

[60]Mattias Martinson, "Provisoriets välsignelse och vetenskapernas drottning," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 100 (2024): 25-39.

[61]Martinson's role in administrative leadership at Uppsala University, including his leadership in developing university-wide collaborative and multi-disciplinary programs and initiatives gives his perspective added authority.

Academic theology, because it responds to and even pursues what cannot be known, pursues what is invisible, uncertain, and ultimately unknowable, bears witness to the reality, following Agamben, that "all knowledge is fragile and provisional." Moreover, according to Martinson, academic research, and particularly such research that claims the highest scientific standards of objectivity, often "lacks…robust protection against overinterpretation of results that self-appointed experts are constantly guilt of…." This overinterpretation, which emerges from the certainty of knowledge production, has threatened its cultural authority, often because it lacks the capacity to justify its work in any way other than arguing from its own beliefs and confessions as self-evidently given or authoritative in the public forum. Martinson argues, in essence, that academic theology is the often-unacknowledged conscience of academic research, its humiliation and humility and defensiveness and precarity is in fact the academy's.[62] Academic theology is, particularly through its apophatic dimension, following Agamben's striking views that what we do not know is as important as what we do know, a particular iteration of what is unknown or unknowable, or uncertain, or a distinctive iteration of how this uncertainty and precarity can be expressed and a source for research. Put differently, how it makes visible and produces believable images—veils not vitrines—of what is unknown or uncertain. In other words, academic theology offers creative ways to manage the empty but overwhelmingly creative *tehomic* void that an overconfident scientific research community often overlooks, revealing that academic research can often become religious in problematic ways, that is, can be as guided by belief in dogmas similar to any ecclesial

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[62]Martinson argues that Hedenius's attack in the 1940s and 1950s on Christian theology and its location in the academy is in fact a response to the growing threats to the authority (and autonomy) of the academy, from the Church and the State.

tradition. But academic research also manifests a faith in the unknown, what cannot be known, and a faith in the world, as Deleuze says, a faith in its beauty, its complexity. Moreover, it manifests a belief in the world's capacity to be understood, to be interpreted, even if that understanding and the interpretations it generates cannot be affirmed and secured through scientific method or objective certainty. A museum theology, with the help of Martinson's work, can make the theology of academic research visible in order to help bear witness to and embody a faith in experiencing and understanding this world.

## PETRA CARLSSON REDELL—POST-REPRESENTATION AND PERFORMATIVITY

Exploring the experimental dimension of theological practice that a post-Christian and post-secular situation makes possible is also a primary concern for Petra Carlsson Redell, who studied with Martinson at Uppsala University and is Professor at the Stockholm School of Theology. But unlike Martinson, she is also a priest (in the Church of Sweden) and so plays a dual role of theory and practice in relation to theology. Each of the three books that Carlsson-Redell has published in English have attempted to think theologically with and through works of art, from Malevich and Pussy Riot, Magritte to Manet, and Velasquez to Liubov Popova.

Like Martinson's project, Carlsson Redell's also offers helpful resources for the development of museum theology. But she does so within the church and through its constellation of liturgical and sacramental practices. But this means not only providing new theological concepts and content, but *developing new forms and structures*. For Martinson, this is an experimental post-Christian theology *outside* the church and as mentioned above, this experimental theology is modelled on the laboratory or seminar

room. For Carlsson Redell, however, inside the church is an experimental site that is inspired by the artist's studio or the child's craft table. Her experiments with theology are directed toward developing what she calls a "post-representational" theology, that is, a theology that is *not bound to a representational thought structure*, which presumes that "there are absent realities that may be represented in the present," a world of entities ("things") that can be described through language ("words").[63] This thought structure "affirms that the particular represents the universal, just as man [*sic*] represents God."[64] Representational structures are "onto-theological," that is, they divide the world into stable and consistent subjects and objects; humans and matter, representations and entities to be represented, things to be included and excluded. Citing Foucault, these representational constructions can only invite one of two responses, critique or commentary, both of which further entrench and naturalize such structures connecting Christianity with its *credo* ("I believe") and modernity with its *cogito* ("I think").[65] Carlsson Redell's development of a post-representational theology is an attempt to circumvent this onto-theological structure, a structure that Martinson interprets in terms of faith and its stable relation to truth. And for both of them, escaping this structure, which incorporates modernity and Christianity, science and religion, truth and faith, atheism and theism, means the need to develop a theology that is experimental and performative, that works creatively with the creative "nothing" of the void and abyss that

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[63]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt: Foucault, Deleuze and Theology Beyond Representation* (Davies, 2014), 3.

[64]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt*, 3.

[65]Certain versions of secularism, particular as it might be expressed in Sweden, can also be "onto-theological."

seeps through the various cracks in the symbolic order. If Martinson's theology appears on the scene late, Carlsson Redell plays with what has been left behind.

An important instrument in the development of representational thought structures is the invention of linear perspective by the Florentine architect and sculptor Filippo Brunelleschi and its theorization for painting by humanist and architect Leon Battista Alberti in the fifteenth century. In his influential treatise, *On Painting* (1434), the first "theory" of the visual arts since antiquity, the flat surface becomes an "open window" *through which* the viewer, from a particular and stable perspective, experiences a visually coherent composition—literally a *worldview*. "Painting possesses a truly divine power in that not only does it make the absent present (as they say of friendship), but it also represents the dead to the living many centuries later...."[66] The capacity of painting to make the absent *present*, to represent what is invisible and unseen, to make visible the power of representation through the smearing of pigments on a surface has made the visual arts serve as mortar for binding representational structures in the development of a comprehensive and cohesive European worldview since the fifteenth century. It also binds it to theology as an instant of representation.

Consequently, the visual arts, as a distinctive iteration of the relationship of words to objects, words to images in relation to a *stationary*, viewing subject that stands on a solid foundation for whom the world as perceived makes optical and thus cognitive sense. This becomes an important focus for theorists exploring post-representational paths for thought, among them, Foucault and Deleuze, who guide Carlsson Redell's experiments in the possibilities of post-representational theology. And so, the visual arts play an

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[66]Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson, intro. Martin Kemp (New York: Penguin, 2004).

important role not only for the development of her philosophical and theoretical work but also for how she conceives of theology as a *creative practice* beyond the framework of academic discourse, which smudges and smears the distinctions between theory and practice, subject and object of study. "Thought is not theory, Carlsson Redell argues, "it is practice."[67] But moreover, theory is more than merely "theory."

> [T]heory is not a translation—not practice put into words, not what applies to practice—but is itself a practice among others; thus, totalization disperses, and thought becomes possible as a practice, as thinking. Thought no longer needs to resemble but may act as thought in series without beginning or end—just like postrepresentational art.[68]

For Foucault and Deleuze, among other thinkers in Paris in the 1960s—including Lacan and Guy Debord, both of whom find their way into this project—the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde practices of visual artists and poets offered a way to reveal the fissures and gaps in the appearance of a seamless representational worldview. Carlsson Redell writes, "Knowledge is born out of an asymmetrical nonrelation between statements and visibilities…therefore knowledge is never merely the words and the things, but also the gap, the non-place between the two."[69] But it is precisely the visibility of these gaps and fissures that can be rendered invisible through *commentary* and *critique*. Moreover, it is precisely commentary and critique of texts that define academic research in the humanities, including theological discourse. "It is not that language is insufficient, or that we must strive for more exact words to capture what we see, but that the very aspiration

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[67]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt*, 89.

[68]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Foucault, Art, and Radical Theology: The Mystery of Things* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 84.

[69]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt*, 38.

*to say* what *we see* is futile."[70] There is no transcendent idea or entity (whether God, Man, Reason, Nature) beyond our immanent experience to which language and discourse aspires yet always fails to represent. There is no stable, substantial Subject, or Big Other that stands beyond the open window of the representational picture that orients our efforts. This lack of transcendent orientation—the Lacanian real, Keller's *tehomic* void—can be creatively productive, for it can generate new possibilities, for if words and texts do not correspond to a substantial Big Other, then all such artifacts of thought, visual experience, perception relate to each other, other signifiers, and thus *constitute reality*, and that reality is not hidden or transcendent. Carlsson Redell puts it this way. "Focused on what reality the words represent…they miss out on the realities they present, the new realities that the words and texts create."[71] One of the many results is that words, images, texts, concepts are unhooked from the representational logic inherent in intentionality, which "collapses in the gap, the void, between speaking and seeing."[72] This "void," of course, is not empty. It is the source of creativity and imagination, for the arts and poetry, but also for theory and for theology.[73] This void or gap is also what exists between artifacts on display in exhibitions and installations that provoke interaction among them. This collapse between speaking and seeing that enables the murmurs and mumblings of those conversations that representational logic can suffocate, or render invisible.[74] And it

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[70]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Foucault, Art, and Radical Theology*, 44.

[71]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt*, 40.

[72]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt*, 37.

[73]The *void* resembles Catherine Keller's concept of *creatio de profundis*, creation not *ex nihilo* but from the murky depths. See Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[74]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt*, 34.

is these murmurs and mumblings, affects, "intensities" and "lines of flight" as Deleuze calls them, or Martinson's "escape routes" that become the very materials for Carlsson Redell's theological practice. She follows in the creative wake of theologian Sallie McFague, who has argued that theology "is the elaboration of metaphors and models" and is "mostly fiction."[75]

The result is that words occupy the same space as things, as other material artifacts, each having their own presence, performativity, and agency. "Words, images, and thoughts are all things among things that affect us—like a pipe, or a can, or a concept."[76] Knaussgaard's observation that "writing casts a shadow" returns yet again, here to remind us of the materiality of language.[77] In addition to asking, "what does this work mean?" theology can also ask, in the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari, "what does this work do?"[78]

> Each repetition of Christian dogma, or liturgy—not to mention altarpieces and church buildings—are real, actual, present, and affecting our world, our bodies, and our minds and thus constantly building and rebuilding reality as we know it. Through the account of reality as at once material and performative, Christian artifacts are seen as creative and transformative.[79]

For Carlsson Redell, a post-representational theology regards all artifacts of Christianity—its concepts, texts, images, and works of art—as the material by which it

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[75]Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), xi-xii.

[76]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Foucault, Art, and Radical Theology*, 85.

[77]Karl Ove Knaussgaard, *Inadvertent: Why I Write* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 13.

[78]"The question is not: is it true? But does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think? What new emotions does it make it possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body? Brian Massumi, "Translator's Foreword: Pleasures of Philosophy," in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xv.

[79]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Foucault, Art, and Radical Theology*, 38.

builds and rebuilds *models* of reality, neither representations nor reconstructions. Viewed through a Lacanian lens, since religion is a response to the void or the abyss, what bubbles up from cracks and fissures and gaps of the symbolic order, is not empty and meaningless, but a potentially destabilizing *source of creativity*. Theology is thus not about representation, that is, a means of establishing a stable and consistent relationship to the subject, the Other, truth, or God, a representational axis of the God-Man. For Carlsson Redell, like Ruti's definition of creativity, it is about generating signifiers, not establishing relationships to a signified. Carlsson Redell's post-representational theology, in which concepts, images, and artifacts relate *to each other* rather than to a transcendent Divine Other, is *museological* and *curatorial*. It is *museological* because it dislodges the artifacts from their intended function in orthodoxy and it is *curatorial* because theology in this museal register consists in creating new relationships, juxtapositions, conversations among concepts, images, and artifacts. The post-representational theologian becomes a *curator of theological concepts*. If Martinson is concerned with how Christianity and theology interact outside the church, how it can be made visible in ways that enable it to contribute to a secular (and post-secular) public forum beyond the church, Carlsson-Redell's approach is concerned with what to do with all the stuff *inside the church*. And the one of the primary focal points for this curator of theological concepts or theologian of material artifacts, is the *liturgy*.

The focus of theological attention migrates then from representation to *performance*. And one of the many ways that theology is performed, is through the *liturgy*, which is one of the material practices of faith. As Carlsson Redell observes,

> A liturgical theology that is not focused on symbolic content, on what the liturgical act or the holy things 'mean,' but in their performance, their material

> behavior, their effects and what they evoke, what they create. In such an account, the Eucharist would—in a radical sense—have no meaning. The Eucharist would not mean anything but would *do* something—something slightly different every time, way out of our control....[80]

A liturgical theology approaches liturgy not simply as referents to transcendent meaning, the unchanging and stable dogmas or concepts behind these practices, but in the *things themselves* and our immanent experience of them. They are wordless but they are not meaningless.

> Rather than focusing on the inner self or the transcendent or the experience one supposedly longs to have or thinks one out to have during the liturgical service, a material approach could open a space for wordless encounters between things and bodies: my hands, my lips, other bodies, the pews, the wine, the narrative, the bread, the smells, the desire, the pain, and the relief.[81]

The experiences of these things and bodies, emotions, aromas, sounds, tastes, sights, touches are not unlike the experience of material artifacts in museum exhibitions—not only works of art, but the pedestals, nails, frames, vitrines, painted walls, lighting that collaborate with the works of art to make them visible. Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist explains:

> [A]n exhibition is not an illustration. That is, it does not, ideally, represent the thing it purports to be "about," in the way that a science museum will sometimes show a simplified version of an important discovery or result. Exhibitions, I believe, can and should go beyond simple illustration or representation. They can produce reality themselves.[82]

The performative, post-representational potential of the museum exhibition suggests that Carlsson Redell's experimental material liturgy will be a useful collaborator in the

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[80]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Foucault, Art, and Radical Theology*, 67.

[81]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Foucault, Art, and Radical Theology*, 68.

[82]Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Ways of Curating* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2014), 167-68.

museological experiment in the case studies that follow in part two. Her focus on Christian liturgy as a way to perform a post-representational and post-Christian theology, explores the continuing viability of the Christian tradition for a post-representational theology. Put differently, how might the monumentality of the Christian heritage, which is full of concepts, images, ideas, dogmas, texts, cathedrals, altarpieces, music be curated differently for a post-Christian society. The "logic of representation," Carlsson Redell observes, "holds a post-representational opportunity."[83] Therefore, like Martinson's approach to the *post* of a post-Christian theology, representation is not and cannot be dismissed entirely, simply brushed off the epistemological table, or made more culturally relevant. It is the instability, the fissures, gaps, and friction that is exposed by the *post* that shows that experience and thought cannot be limited to representation *for representation itself is a museum artifact*. It is thus crucial for Carlsson Redell's approach to maintain

> awareness of both the repressive power and the liberating force of the representational logic within theology. Theological thought structures are not easily left behind; they linger on and they keep resurrecting themselves. An old and negative construction can serve as a reminder of the steadfastness of theological thought traditions, while its dual and broken appearance, on the other hand, points towards the fact that new ideas can always be added and always extracted from old ways of thinking. In other words, it can indicate that things need not be new to be otherwise.[84]

For both Martinson and Carlsson Redell to move toward a post-Christian and post-representational theology requires greater attention to the jagged and crumbling edges of the ancient artifacts of the Christian tradition, among them, its liturgical and theological objects, images, and concepts.

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[83]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt*, 52.

[84]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt*, 22-23.

To conceive of words and discourses and concepts as material artifacts that present themselves not in the arboreal connections of depth and height, but along the horizontal plane of mycelial immanence, as Deleuze and Guattari's work advocate, belief and unbelief, heresies and orthodoxies, sacred and secular appear along *the same plane*. For Carlsson Redell, post-representational theology displays words and concepts next to the things as temporary exhibitions of material artifacts unfold along walls on pedestals through room after room. In this material and curatorial approach, then,

> Inherited Christian dogma is considered actual…and as affecting our world in reality…yet it is actual and real because it is repeated as such and used as such. A post-representational theology would note the force of form—dogma, truths, authorities, eternal gestures and church buildings—but it would not believe in their final power….It would be a theology dealing with its own phantasms.[85]

Christian dogma has a material reality in the world like a cathedral or an altarpiece. This means that, according to Carlsson Redell's reading of Foucault, "metaphysics becomes the discourse that deals with phantasms. It is the discourse that wrestles with the materiality of incorporeal things."[86] Put differently, theology works with the shadows that concepts and words and ideas cast. Theology generates and works with these phantasms, these sometimes visible but often invisible entities that can serve to veil the void but resist the efforts of onto-theology to become reified or, in the language of this project, *vitrined*. "Perhaps, then," Carlsson Redell suggests, "there is reason for theology to nurse its dogmatic and metaphysical inheritance, critically yet tenderly… disobediently acknowledge and repeat this center."[87] Crucial for such a preservation of this Christian

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[85]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt*, 168.

[86]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt*, 96.

[87]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt*, 96.

tradition, the vast, repository of images, concepts, artifacts, practices, etc. is the concept of *repetition*, in which repetition, within the logic of representation, implies the *same*, entrenching and strengthening the truth of *certain* associations and connections. But in this post-representational playfulness, repetition becomes *difference*—it becomes generative, additive, multiplicative. Whether it is participating in the liturgy in church or walking through an exhibition in a museum, each time is different and thus potentially meaningful and revelatory in ever new ways.

An example of such repetition is the case of poet Rainer Maria Rilke and his daily visits to a memorial exhibition of the painter Paul Cézanne at the Salon d'Autumne during the two weeks it was open to the public in October 1907. During this period Rilke writes his wife, the sculptor and former student of Rodin's, Clara Westhoff *thirty letters* that meticulously map the process of these paintings insinuating themselves into the complexities of Rilke's emotional life. Each time he visits the exhibition he sees something else and that something else connects with some aspect of his life, most often related to his struggle with his emerging vocation as a poet. Cézanne's pictures make him reflect on the ethical dimension of the artist's painting practice as they provoke the poet to confront his own insecurities and vulnerabilities. In short, the exhibition provokes deep self-reflection, resembling something like a conversion. [88] But this emerges over time, over repeated and multiple viewings.

> [I]t takes a long, long time. When I remember the puzzlement and insecurity of one's first confrontation with his work, along with his name, which was just as new. And then for a long time nothing, and then one gets the right eyes.[89]

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[88]See Daniel A. Siedell, "The Right Eyes: Curating a Theology of Modernist Painting," in Ben Quash & Chloë Reddaway, eds. *Theology, Modernity and the Visual Arts* (London: Brepols, 2024), 19-31.

[89]Rainer Maria Rilke to Clara Rilke, 10 October 1907, in *Letters on Cézanne*, ed. Clara Rilke, trans. Joel Agee (1952; New York: North Point Press, 2002), 39.

"The right eyes," then, are the result of visiting the same exhibition multiple times. And like Proust, this experience of Cézanne's paintings become companions on Rilke's creative and spiritual journey. The afterlife of these paintings for Rilke is the encouragement and challenge they offer him at that particular moment.

Rilke also addresses this kind of creativity and repetition in relation to religion in a remarkably "post-representational" theological passage in a letter to Marlise Gerding in 1911:

> Insofar as I have insight into it, the relation to god requires productivity and at least a kind of private genius of invention that will not be convincing to others. I can imagine this genius to be stretched to a point where one suddenly does not understand what is meant by the name of god, and one repeats this name and asks others to recite it ten times, without any understanding, but in order to encounter it as entirely new somewhere at its origin, its source.[90]

This repetition, recitation of the name of God "without any understanding," can conjure something else, something new, releasing the name's creative force by draining it of its representational content and form— phantasmic and representational "truth" that defies its framing or display *as an artifact* but yet structures *all framing and display*. As Nietzsche claimed, as long as there is belief in grammar, God—as the subject that structures objects and establishes subjects—remains. In order to dislodge the grammar of theology, it requires a re-curation of artifacts into new exhibitions, new relationships, new arrangements that dissolve the Subject as a God-Man viewer that orders the world into a cohesive and comprehensive picture, freeing language from the shackles of representation.

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[90]Rainer Maria Rilke, "Letter to Marlise Gerding, May 14, 1911," in *Letters on Life: New Prose Translations*, ed. trans. Ulrich Baer (New York: Modern Library, 2005), 173.

Second Theology

Carlsson Redell has developed the concept of a "second theology" in order to develop further her post-representational theological practice. It is an adaptation of Walter Benjamin's distinction between first and second technologies in his influential essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility." Benjamin defines *first technology* as an attempt to "master nature," while the origins of *second technology* are found in "play." Inspired by these concepts, Carlsson Redell observes,

> A second theology would recognize its task not as pertaining to Christian truth *tout court* but to *the relationship between humanity and the idea of Christian truth*. Thus, it would be a truly political theology in Benjamin's sense of the word. Just as art turns political when it has related its loss of the original and become function rather than depiction, in Benjamin's reasoning, so a second theology would be a political theology—a theology that *does*, a theology that *acts*.[91]

A first theology, then, in Carlsson Redell's framework, is a theology of orthodoxy, tradition, of origins and The End, a theology that seeks to *represent* the world as it is projected on the screen of the *cogito* and *credo* of an autonomous subject. A second theology, in contrast, is "not focused on Christian truth as such but on the relationship between humanity and the ideas of Christian truth," that is, how this relationship "works" or "functions" in the world, *including how it functions in the church*. And these "ideas of Christian truth" the artifacts of belief and unbelief, orthodoxy and heresy, critique and commentary, are unhooked museologically from the church and re-curated in secular contexts, not according to orthodox rubrics.[92] A second theology

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[91]Petra Carlsson Redell, "Toward a Second Theology: Avant-Garde Art and Theopolitics," *Literature & Theology* 35/1 (March 2021).

[92]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Avantgarde Art and Radical Material Theology* (New York: Routledge 2020), 75.

considers the larger, messier, and less organized or sorted collection of Christian artifacts rather than the smaller, more refined, edited, organized and vetted collection of orthodox or traditional artifacts from which to curate theological exhibitions. Moreover, second theology is not only concerned with the artifacts to be selected and exhibited, but the institutional framework within which they are presented, from the lighting, frames, pedestals and vitrines, painted walls, and signage as well as those invisible social, cultural, and political forces that nevertheless collaborate with these visible entities to establishing the visual apparatus of the museum. Moreover, such a second theology "would be more of a construction site than an archaeological site. A workshop, perhaps," a theology that "does."[93] This workshop works with heritage by putting it to creative use. A second theology resonates with a museal theology because it is *curatorial*. It arranges concepts, images, and artifacts into constellations. It rummages through the vast and fascinating collections, archives, and storage facilities of historic Christianity and from them produce exhibitions—juxtapositions and relationships—that produce ever new meanings and experience. Carlsson Redell's second theology facilitates the afterlives of Christian artifacts through a liturgically-shaped curatorial practice.

Mechanical Reproduction

Carlsson Redell often works with the Deleuzian concept of the machine. The image of the machine, for Carlsson Redell, derived from Deleuze and Guattari, refers to "totalities, systems, theories or organisations that form a whole, a unity, but their

[93]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Avantgarde Art and Radical Material Theology*, 74-75.

organization is contingent, changeable and consisting of separate pieces."[94] And this machine

> does not unite the parts, but organizes them…A machine is made up of partial objects, forming a whole out of heterogeneous bits—not because they belong together inherently, not because they were "meant" for each other, but because creation is possible, construction is possible."[95]

The mechanistic imagery that Carlsson Redell deploys is a way to push against the human-centered imagery that most usually establishes a God-Man vertical axis that marginalizes the horizontal plane of fellow organisms and material concerns. However, in the context of museal theology, her mechanistic imagery pushes against another characteristic of traditional or first theologies: the tendency to render invisible the mechanisms and apparatuses that make theological concepts visible and believable. Moreover, the Deleuzian mechanism is not *merely a tool* for human use, to be discarded when the work is finished, but it works autonomously, *incorporating* the human into its machinery as one of its visible parts. When making an exhibition, the curator becomes a part of, is incorporated into, the machinery of the museum. As theorist Vilém Flusser observes,

> When tools in the usual sense became machines, their relationship to human beings was reversed. Before the industrial revolution, the human being was surrounded by tools, afterwards the machine was surrounded by human beings…and subsequently the human being [became] a function of the machine.[96]

In this theological exhibition, the technological and mechanistic focus of Carlsson Redell's concept of second theology brings to mind Benjamin's concept of the *apparatus*,

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[94]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Avantgarde Art and Radical Material Theology*, 62

[95]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Avantgarde Art and Radical Material Theology*, 62.

[96]Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983; London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 23-24.

which plays an important role in his Work of Art essay. In his analysis of film Benjamin writes:

> In the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of what reality, free of the foreign body of equipment, is the result of a special procedure—namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted photographic device and the assembly of that shot with others of the same kind. The equipment-free aspect of reality has here become the height of artifice, and the vision of immediate reality....[97]

The apparatus that makes a film includes not only the actors and other human beings, but the director, persons behind the camera, equipment, instruments, and those that work with lighting. This multi-human collaboration also includes non-human collaborators—the machines and material structures that make possible the experience on the screen of an "equipment-free aspect of reality"—the apparatuses and mechanisms are made invisible. And while Benjamin's focus is on the apparatus and its instruments and contraptions on the film set, there is a more sprawling apparatus offsite, the apparatus that consists of support staff, editors, agents, costume and stage set designers, lighting experts, writers, and funders, all of which collaborate—in various ways and to varying degrees of awareness—in producing the film. Karen Barad observes that apparatuses are more than, in her field of study, laboratory set-ups, like lasers and accelerators. They are the means "through which the 'subject' and the 'object' emerge" and "are the conditions of possibility for determinate boundaries" that are "formative of matter and meaning" and in which "concepts are materially embodied."[98]

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[97]Walter Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (1936), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 3 1935-1938, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard, 2002), 115.

[98]Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and The Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 143-44.

Carlsson Redell's articulation of a second theology helps to bring Benjamin's concept of the apparatus into view, like Agamben's apparatus, *as a theological concept*. This expands the scope of theological practice into an analysis of the *process by which* material and conceptual artifacts become experienced as theological, that is as a dynamic between visible and invisible, seen and unseen. Her use of the abstract paintings of Wassily Kandinsky as an example is a useful indicator of the existence of apparatuses that enable certain artifacts to be experienced as *art* and others to be experienced as *theology*. While Kandinsky's non-objective abstract paintings are an attempt to circumvent the representational structure of the visual arts with their rhythmic splashes and skeins of color spread across the canvas, "the very same painting used as an altarpiece is likely to be brought right back into the logic of representation."[99] This example reveals that the apparatus of display shapes how material artifacts are experienced. But it also suggests that it is more expansive and immaterial than merely the furniture and stage sets of various display contexts—such as sanctuary, altar, gallery space, pedestal, lighting. It also includes parts that make up a more sprawling mechanism that includes various political, economic, and social machines of various sizes and function. Carlsson Redell concludes, "This in turn explains why a painting by Kandinsky should not be hanging above an altar if it wants to stay out of the game of representation."[100]

Like Martinson's post-Christian theology, which does not abandon or dismiss Christianity, but puts it into a new relationship with secular culture, Carlsson-Redell's

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[99]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt*, 139.

[100]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt*, 166.

*post*-representational theology does not dismiss representation but dislodges its authority and sovereignty that enables concepts and images form new constellations and relationships that make visible the apparatuses that manage what is visible and invisible, seen and unseen. Carlsson-Redell's interest in the image of the machine is an effort to make visible the gears and levers and pullies, the devices and hinges that participate in the production of meaning. For according to Carlsson Redell, "theology is thinking about visibility and viewing, being visible and being seen in a wider sense."[101] But theology is not only about what is visible but what is not visible. She observes that "theology thinks invisibilities" and "the invisible is a material and corporal presence."[102] In other words, and according to the Lacanian perspective presented in the previous chapter, Carlsson Redell's post-representational theology is a material theology that finds its locus in the practical actions and performativity of the church's liturgies. It emerges from the creative engagement with the *tehomic* void, the abyss, the empty "too muchness" that must be creatively veiled while resisting the temptation to certainty, stability, representation. The result is that

> each repetition of Christian dogma, narrative, and liturgy—not to mention altarpieces and church buildings—are real, actual, present, and affecting our world, our bodies, and our minds and thus constantly building and rebuilding reality as we know it.[103]

And this material theology becomes museal in that, like the museum display framework, it manages what is made visible and invisible. And Carlsson Redell's performative and material approach to theology is also curatorial, for theology consists of organizing,

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[101]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Foucault, Art, and Radical Theology*, 63.

[102]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Foucault, Art, and Radical Theology*, 62.

[103]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Foucault, Art, and Radical Theology*, 125.

relating, and juxtaposing the multitude of images, objects, concepts, and practices that fill the storage rooms of Christendom.

### *EXCURSUS—PROUST'S VILLAGE CHURCH*

The image of the cathedral figures strongly in Swedish theology, which is in sharp contrast to the image of Christianity in American theology, which tends toward the revival meeting hall or the home bible study as the dominate image. While faith appears confined to the "cathedral" in Sweden, it however does exist in non-religious areas, like the artworld and the academy, not to mention the forest and the park, although it is not visible *as faith*. The cathedral figures so strongly in Swedish culture because it has been woven into the state, and so its ceremonial formality and sovereignty, offers a particular iteration of a museal Christianity. Yet there is another image of the church that might be useful, especially as it relates to Carlsson-Redell's performative, post-representational theology. It is a liturgical theological practice that assembles, or curates, material and immaterial artifacts into ever new and different improvised constellations, a practice that seeks not to establish horizontal and transcendent relations between God and Man but horizontal immanent collaborations and constellations and assemblages of humans and material artifacts.

This alternative image is from Marcel Proust, who again returns as a helpful guide. In "The Village Church" (*Le Figaro*, 3 Sept 1913), Proust recounts the impact of the church from his childhood in Illiers (now Illiers-Combray), 100 km southeast of Paris, which also served as inspiration for his six-volume magnum opus, *In Search of*

*Lost Time*.[104] In contrast to the authoritative visibility and distance of the cathedral as articulated by Martinson, Proust describes his local parish church as an intimate presence in his daily experience.

> How well I knew that church of ours, that familiar companion of my days! Seen from the street, on to which its main door opened, it formed a bulkhead between the house where the chemist lived and the grocer's shop. We regarded it as just one of our neighbours. As a building it might well have had a number, if the street of this little country town had boasted such things as numbers: nor should we have been surprised to see the postman include it in his rounds, and go in by its door after leaving the grocer and before coming to the chemist.

The familiarity and intimacy of this church, which is not off in the distance, but simply part of the neighborhood, is also magical. After describing its particular architectural and sculptural features, Proust continues,

> All these ancient things combined to make the church, for me, into something that was entirely different from the rest of the village, a building, if I may so put it, occupying a four-dimensional space-the fourth dimension being that of Time; into a great ship sailing across the centuries, and seeming, from span to span, from chapel to chapel, to have conquered and overleapt not only a few yards of ground, but successive epochs above which it towered victorious, concealing in the thickness of its walls the crudity and ferocity of the eleventh century.

Proust continues his recollection of the church, for example, asking the Beadle about serving larger than usual post-Mass cakes at luncheon because the good weather has attracted more visitors, including some of his friends. And these memories of the role that this church played in every aspect of his life, remain with him. And he concludes:

> And even today, if in some great provincial city, or in some part of Paris with which I am unfamiliar, a passer-by who has "set me on my way," gives me as a landmark some distant belfry of a hospice, some monastery tower lifting the tip of its religious hat at the corner of the street I ought to take, no matter how little I find it, when compared with memory, reminiscent of that dear and distant image, he will, turning perhaps, to make sure that I have not gone wrong, see with amazement that, forgetful of the purpose of my walk, of the point I had set out to

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[104]Marcel Proust, *A Selection from His Miscellaneous Writings*, ed. and trans. Gerard Hopkins (London: Allan Wingate, 1948).

> reach, I am still rooted there before the tower, trying to remember, aware, deep within myself, of lands recovered from the depths or oblivion, cast high and dry upon the shores of the present, and built anew from the ruins of the past. More anxious then than ever, I was when I asked my way, I seek it still. I turn a corner…but the corner lies within my heart.

What Proust offers is the afterlife of this church, a church that plays different roles and serves multiple functions in the community, insinuating itself into the lives of the village, becoming a "natural" part of neighborhood while also being an anachronistic time-traveling machine. It also serves as the site for administration of liturgical and sacramental practices that includes Beadles and cakes, flowers, and mail carriers, etc. It is a Christianity that emerges from and spreads out from this eleventh-century church, which in its apparent permanence, moves through time. It is a church whose Christian services spill out into the streets of the village for it connects to or embraces or brings along the deep and distant past, a violent past of Christendom as Proust describes it, into a "modern" context in which the church itself serves as a relic of this deep past, yoking this past to the present, integrating itself into the neighborhood through its coffee and cake receptions as much as its formal liturgies. And in fact, within Carlsson Redell's curatorial framework, the coffee and cake enjoy the same sacramental role as the Eucharist wine and bread.

## CONCLUSION

The re-opening of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris in December 2024 was not merely the re-opening of a tourist attraction, a triumph of European secularism. It was also a re-opening of a functioning church with a robust constellation of liturgical and sacramental practices and pastoral ministries. An indication of its ecclesial identity is a

new altar, baptismal font, and other sanctuary furniture designed by Guillaume Bardet and liturgical vestments designed by fashion designer Jean-Charles de Castelbajac.[105] Not only does it serve a congregation and the traditional administrative responsibilities of the cathedral, it serves pilgrims—religious *and* secular, side by side. Carlsson-Redell's post-representational theology, a second theology that is disconnected from the sovereignties of God and Man, and connected to articulating, representing the relationship of faith to truth, or entrenching the truth of faith. Rather, liturgical practice and all it encompasses, including the administration of the sacraments, from Eucharist and Baptism to Confession, Confirmation, Marriage, and Burial, but also other practices as well, which include pilgrimage and tourism, that become the means by which a *museal faith* might be improvised, again and again, over and over. For Martinson and Carlsson-Redell, academic theology is both outside and inside the cathedral; it offers both tourism and devotion, as secular and sacred are brought together, displayed side-by-side, or relate to each other. Through a curatorial practice, which takes up the creative and imaginative dimension of Christianity and theology as a collection of museal artifacts, which makes the mechanisms and apparatuses of their display more visible, it makes their afterlives possible. For Martinson, the experimental dimension of theology takes place *outside* the church (the religious believers are free to use the interior however they like). But for Carlsson-Redell, the experimental dimension of theology takes place *inside*, with whatever happens to be there, whether old paintings, dusty sculptures, broken baptismal fonts, and even ancient rune stones leaned up against a stone wall. And it is through this museal situation, in which heritage is deployed creatively, improvised, as a mechanism of

[105]Dana Thomas, "When a Cathedral is a Catwalk," *The New York Times* (Dec 5, 2024).

distance, that enables new museal intimacies and connections, from which something like a *museal faith* might emerge, but emerge among this constellation or assemblage of things or, as Carlsson-Redell has come to call them, "thingies"—alive and active things of indeterminate identity—as potential collaborators. This post-representational liturgical practice, with its attempt to dislodge the God-Man vertical axis that names and prioritizes, offers a plane in which objects, ideas, concepts, images, humans and other than human creatures are all potential collaborators at different times. In contrast to the photographic dimension of Martinson's theology, in which theology makes present the absence of faith, Carlsson-Redell's theology is photographic because it offers a broad frame that encompasses more than the human eye can possibly see, spreading what is visible and dispersing visual attention *across* the surface, whether things or faces, shadows or substances. In this way it is a visual expression of Carlsson-Redell's post-representational theological practice, "It is not that language is insufficient, or that we must strive for more exact words to capture what we see, but that the very aspiration to say what we see is futile…We may, in other words, see more of the world if we retrain from naming."[106] The photograph, while refraining from naming, frames. To refrain from naming theologically is not to stop using words, but to find the words to build, to construct, to express, to assemble, to curate rather than to represent, to veil rather than to vitrine.

[106] *Foucault, Art, and Radical Theology*, 120.

CHAPTER FOUR

# DRIFT
## *SENSIBILE EXPERIMENTUM* & DISTRACTION



*Salvitur ambulando*
—St. Augustine

This chapter orchestrates a collision between two texts, one written by a fifteenth-century bishop and the other written by a twentieth-century cultural critic. One is concerned with the mystical vision of God and the other is concerned with the aura of a work of art in the age of the cinema and the photograph. The result of this collision isolates and dislodges a cluster of concepts and images from their specific authorial contexts in order to curate a new theologically-inflected constellation of concepts and images. This new constellation addresses the role that movement and speech play in the management of what is seen and unseen, made visible and rendered invisible. This new constellation, one that invites movement and encourages speech will characterize each subsequent chapter. I will produce this constellation by reading these two texts *visually* and *curatorially*. Rather than follow the reading habits of the researchers who devote

their energy to *critique and commentary* of canonical texts, I follow the directions of artist Anselm Kiefer, who, in an interview, claimed, "I read enough to capture images."[1] In this chapter I break off just a piece of one text and in the other I smuggle a small handful of concepts, and from these bits and pieces I build a theological contraption that moves, speaks, and sees.

In order to help curate this new constellation I introduce Marie-José Mondzain's theory of the image as a way to deepen our understanding of the role that the image plays in maintaining and managing the relationship between and movement from what is visible and invisible. The curatorial method I follow is adapted from the Duchampian readymade method of exchange, de-contextualization, re-contextualization, and displacement. This chapter puts the theological text in the context of curatorial theory and places the art theory text in a theological context. I suggest that these curatorial moves might offer new ways to think about these texts and the concepts they generate, new ways that are useful for a theology of the museum, a theology that appears on the scene late not only for faith in God, but also for faith in art.

## A FIFTEENTH-CENTURY THEOLOGICAL TEXT

The brothers of the Benedictine abbey at Tegernsee in southern Germany write their spiritual father, Nicholas of Cusa, who is at the time the Bishop of Bressanone-Brixen, in northern Italy, near the border of Germany and Austria. They want to learn more about his understanding and use of the neo-platonic concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*, or the coincidence of opposites, which he had introduced in his text, *De docta ignorantia* (1440) a few years earlier addressing the mystical theology of Pseudo-

[1]Michael Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth* (Munich: Prestel, 2005), 339.

Dionysius related to seeing God. In that remarkable text, Cusa writes that "God is the enfolding of all things, even of contradictories" and, "The infinite providence of God enfolds both the things that will happen and also those that will not but can happen, and it enfolds contraries, as a genus enfolds contrary differentiae."[2] Cusan enfolding includes a counter movement of unfolding, an exhalation and inhalation that offers a rhythm of God's "infinite providence." This demands what Cusa calls a "learned ignorance" from the reader or would be mystic who must practice a discipline of unknowing, an unknowing that not only affirms an apophasis at the heart of Cusa's theology, but also resonates with our museological theorist Giorgio Agamben, for whom "the ways in which we do not know things are just as important...as the ways in which we know them."[3] And so, in response to the curious but confused monks, Cusa produces another text, *De visione Dei* (1453).

Since the early twentieth-century Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64) has become recognized as one of the more compelling and inspiring figures in European intellectual history. Martin Heidegger claimed that modern German philosophy began with Cusa. He is considered to be

> one of the most brilliant and creative thinkers of the fifteenth century, an important key to unlocking the origins of modernity. An enigmatic and paradoxical figure straddling the divide between the Middle Ages and emergent modernity, Cusanus was in many ways an embodiment of the manifold ideals and tensions of his age. While rooted in the piety and *Weltbild* of Latin Christendom, he was also deeply attuned to the new humanistic and scientific spirit of his age.

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[2]Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance* (1440), in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, intro. and trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 118.

[3]Giorgio Agamben, "The Last Chapter in the History of the World," in *Nudities* (Stanford University Press, 2010), 113-114.

> A consummate intellectual, he was also a man of action who made his mark on both Church and State, even as he continually struggled for their reform.[4]

Working for reform and healing the schism with the Moravian Church led by the Bohemian Jan Hus at an especially volatile time in the history of the Church, Cusa's thought was a "daring attempt to rethink—and reconfigure—the relation between the Triune God, the natural world, human society and the human individual...."[5] And Johannes Hoff argues that Cusa's thought "offers an alternative modernity."[6] Cusa's visionary thought emerges in and through his administrative and reform work in his role as Cardinal and Papal legate. His work for the church is an iteration of the apparatus as Agamben defines it, as part of the *oikonomia* of God, that is, how the church, as "God's household," practically administers the salvation entrusted to it. Theorist Marie-José Mondzain regards *oikonomia* to be crucial for understanding the concept of the image and the authority it acquires. She claims, "The economy only exists because there is an organization, administration, and management of the visibility of which the incarnation is the prototype," which she describes as "a prudent adaptation to circumstances."[7] Moreover, the practice of such "prudent adaptation to circumstances," associated as it is with *oikonomia*, is, as already suggested in Part One, *inherently curatorial*. Cusa's

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[4]Simon J.G. Burton, Joshua Hollmann, and Eric M. Parker, "Introduction: Nicholas of Cusa and Early Modern Reform: Towards a Reassessment," in *Nicholas of Cusa and the Making of the Early Modern World* (London: Brill, 2019), 1.

[5]Simon J.G. Burton, Joshua Hollmann, and Eric M. Parker, "Introduction: Nicholas of Cusa and Early Modern Reform: Towards a Reassessment," in *Nicholas of Cusa and the Making of the Early Modern World* (London: Brill, 2019), 1.

[6]Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

[7]Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Franses (1996; Stanford University Press, 2005), 36.

responsibilities as a cardinal consisted of just such curatorial practice, such as initiating reforms, healing schism through the deployment of negotiation and discipline. Yet, as many scholars have suggested, it was this *oikonomic* work that *catalyzed* his theological creativity, which resulted in some of the most radical and innovative work in the fifteenth century. "The difference between theology and economy," Mondzain claims, "is the difference between believing without seeing and believing while seeing."[8] Both theology and economy, according to Mondzain, work with what is seen and unseen, what becomes visible and what remains invisible. Mondzain's theory of images suggests that theology is a curatorial practice, curating the household of God. Is it possible that rather than keep them distinct, as they have functioned in orthodox Christendom, economy and theology are brought together in a curatorial relationship within a museum theology that does not oppose seeing and believing but interprets them as part of the management of the visible and the invisible at any one time? For a theology of the museum, which appears late, after faith, encountering a landscape dense with Christian artifacts, a *museal seeing* might develop a different kind of faith and a different kind of belief, a museal *faith-belief.*

[8]Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Franses (1996; Stanford University Press, 2005), 24.



Petrus Christus, *Head of Christ (Ecce Homo)*, c. 1445. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Returning to *De visione Dei* and the curious monks in Bavaria, Cusa writes in the Prologue, "I am sending, to your charity, a painting that I was able to acquire containing an all-seeing image, which I call an icon of God...."[9] In response to their question about a mystical theological concept, Cusa does not simply send them another text. He also sends a *painting*, something that they can see and touch, a gesture that recalls Petra Carlsson Redell's claim in the previous chapter that theology can be wordless. Although the identity of the artist and subject of the painting is unknown, it is probably a portrait of Christ painted by Rogier van der Weyden, whom he knew from his time in Bruges. The painting serves as a gift, a material manifestation of his care and concern for their intellectual and spiritual lives. This gift becomes a personal icon that seals the relationship between Cusa and the community. But this painting is not merely an artifact to be displayed and then forgotten about or treated as a momento. It is an inextricable part

[9]*Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, intro. and trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 236.

of his text. But Cusa does not intend for them merely to pass it around amongst themselves or for it to be used as a visual illustration of the thesis of his new text. *The painting is the response* and the text is the explanation or reflection on the painting. He wants the monks to get up from their reading desks or off their knees. "Hang this up some place, perhaps on a north wall. And you brothers stand around it, equally distant from it, and gaze at it."[10] Significantly, as Catherine Keller has observed, "Cusa does not send them an icon from the Eastern Church, but a painting in the western tradition, whose naturalistic spatial construction is at odds with the Byzantine iconographical tradition. Keller suggests that this feature is not incidental but crucial for his argument since it refuses to limit the theological relevance of visual images to Orthodox theologies of the icon. She continues, "yet Cusa has in view works of fifteenth-century Europe—very different, precisely in their three-dimensional perspective—from the flat, symbolic surfaces of medieval art, Eastern or Western."[11] Even though he spent considerable time in Constantinople and was familiar with the tradition of icon veneration, Cusa was not interested in introducing the monks to this Byzantine practice or limiting their experience to this theological tradition.

Cusa does not want the monks simply to learn *about* such a vision, he wants them to experience it. But it is not enough for the monks to stand in front of the picture. He wants them *to move*.

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[10]Ibid, 236.

[11]Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

> Even if while fixing his gaze on the icon, a brother walks from west to east, he will discover that the icon's gaze continuously follows him. And if he returns from east to west, it will likewise not leave him.[12]

But Cusa does not stop there. It is not even sufficient to walk around the painting in silence and in solitude contemplate privately as the painted face follows your gaze. He wants the monks to break the spell of contemplative silence that has shaped their spiritual lives together. He also does not ask them to pray or sing praises to God, *facing* God, another practice that has shaped their spiritual life. Rather, he wants them to turn their faces *to each other* and to speak *to each other*. When they pass another monk, Cusa instructs them:

> let him ask the other whether the icon's gaze continuously turns with him, and he will hear that it moves just the same in the opposite direction. He will believe him, but unless he believed him, he would not imagine this to be possible."[13]

Cusa calls this a "*sensibile experimentum*." It is also a *curatorial* experiment. Cusa curates an installation from a distance by asking the monks to hang the painting on the wall and inviting them to do what curators expect visitors to their installations/exhibitions do. It is a slow-moving *looking-speaking-believing* contraption that transforms the experience of viewing a picture into a *social* event, one that invites *interpersonal participation*. The singular and autonomous subject (the solitary monk who reads texts, prays, and venerates images and relics as part of a private devotional practice) is transformed into a social and affective one that resembles Carlsson Redell's performative theology. It becomes a porous and wobbly assemblage of moving and incomplete parts among other likewise porous and wobbly viewers who then generate a collective

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[12]*De visione Dei*, 236.

[13]*De visione Dei*, 236.

discourse (address and response) that weaves its way into their visual *and* bodily experience. Michel de Certeau, who has written extensively on Cusa's *sensibile experimentum*, claims that it "guarantees the passage from the visual to discourse."[14] This passage, however, from the visual to the discursive, from seeing to speaking, from singular subject to a collectivity, from "human means" to "divine things," generates *faith* as a mobile, creative act "for the imagination of the one who is standing in the east cannot conceive that the icon's gaze is turned in any other direction…"[15] Cusa's curatorial experiment is also apophatic, as it relies on the limits of the knowing subject who must move and address and be addressed by others in an effort to experience knowledge. The experience requires belief to experience knowledge, *a belief that accepts the witness of others*.

De Certeau has devoted considerable attention to the creative dynamics of belief, which he argues "prevents the totalizing unification of the present." Belief, in other words, keeps the present open towards the future, to possibility. Moreover, he claims that one of the "secrets of believing" is found in the "coincidence of absence and presence." De Certeau also argues that "speech enjoys a privileged relationship with belief."[16] For de Certeau, contra Latour and others, belief is porous, opening the present toward the future, opening the relationship between what is absent and present, and opens the mouth, and, by association, opens the ears.

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[14]Michel de Certeau, "The Gaze: Nicholas of Cusa," *Diacritics* (Fall 1987):18. See also, de Certeau, "The Look: Nicholas of Cusa," in *The Mystic Fable, Volume Two: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (University of Chicago Press, 2015). The chapter is a revised version of the *Diacritics* essay.

[15]*De visione Dei*, 236.

[16]Michel de Certeau, "What We Do When We Believe," in Marshall Blonsky, ed. *On Signs: A Semiotics Reader* (London: Blackwell, 1985), 192-202.

It is significant that movement and speech are also crucial ingredients for Mondzain's concept of the image, as is belief. In Mondzain's framework the image is invisible, "await[ing] its visibility." The image is thus creative and generative, giving birth to seeing but also speaking: "a subject is a speaking spectator."[17] "The image," she continues, demands a new and innovative management of speech between those who exchange looks in the sharing of images."[18] It is crucial that the visibilities that the (invisible) image generates do not "enslave" the image in the visible, for "the world of images demands that one is never completely sated."[19] Mondzain's image is *curatorial* in that it generates and manages visibilities, invisibilities, and their dynamic relationship as well as what is seen and what remains unseen, and what is desired through movement and speaking. Mondzain's image, then, always escapes being entirely identified with the visible, that is, it resists becoming an idol by a vision that aims to restrict and stabilize.[20] It thus bears within it an absence, perhaps a void, an abyss, which, as Mari Ruti has suggested, is a destabilizing locus of creativity and desire. In the context of Cusa's thought, this destabilizing creativity is located in the non-finite cosmos, in which "God is the enfolding of all things, even of contradictories" and that "all are in all and each is in

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[17]Marie-José Mondzain, "Can Images Kill?" *Critical Inquiry* 36/1 (2009), 30.

[18]Marie-José Mondzain, "Can Images Kill?" *Critical Inquiry* 36/1 (2009), 33.

[19]Marie-José Mondzain, "Can Images Kill?" *Critical Inquiry* 36/1 (2009), 50.

[20]See Jean-Luc Marion on the idol and the icon, and what he calls "saturation," in Marion, *Crossing the Visible*, trans, James K.A. Smith (1996; Stanford University Press, 2004) and *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud, trans. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

each."[21] Consequently, as Keller observes, "if the image eludes idolization, it also destabilizes vision, putting perspective itself in view and in motion."[22]

For Cusa it is destabilization, vulnerability and a posture of unknowing that will characterize the one who seeks for a vision of God. The monks cannot rely solely on their own experience and their own perspective to ascertain the sovereignty of the "all seeing gaze," and so to experience a spiritual vision of God. They must acknowledge their *limited* perspective and through this vulnerability reach out to others, and then take the risk to *believe* their testimony, through speaking and listening that enacts a potential future.[23] The presence of precarity and vulnerability is a crucial part of Cusa's curatorial experiment. This is the moment, the event, the gesture that de Certeau focuses his attention. The "third moment," as he calls it, is movement from the visual to the more than visual, more than visible, even more than conceptual. Also, this "astonishment" that Cusa expects to be the response by the brothers is crucial. "The domain of surprise," de Certeau suggests, "will be the birthplace of discourse."[24] Wonder, which cannot be predicted and is inherently destabilizing, evokes new or fresh speech. The mystery of the encounter with the painting is deepened not only through discourse, but also through a belief that is a collective, mobile, speaking and hearing practice. Astonishment is not

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[21]*Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, intro. and trans. H. Lawrence Bond (Paulist Press, 1997), 140.

[22]Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 95.

[23]The appearance of *faith* and its complex and ambivalent and ambiguous relationship to *belief(s)* lingers throughout this project. I suggest that a museo-curatorial theology might shift how we understand these fraught and problematic concepts, in which both faith and belief are a product of the museum and thus might enjoy their own afterlife.

[24]Michel de Certeau, The Gaze: Nicholas of Cusa," *Diacritics* (Fall 1987):18.

enlightenment, a state of clarity, but a state of affect, of enchantment and desire. De Certeau explains, "for want of a common vision, the one has to believe the other."[25] The "common vision," refers to the viewer who stands before the picture as a singular and autonomous subject and through its immobile and static gaze disciplines what it perceives, and does so in contemplative *silence*.

Cusa's *sensibile experimentum* offers an alternative theory of perception to the one developed by his contemporary, Leon Battista Alberti in his influential treatise, *On Painting* (1434). Alberti deployed the recent discovery of liner perspective by Brunelleschi in Florence as the foundation for the first theory of painting since Classical Antiquity.[26] Alberti reconceives of the pictorial surface as an "open window through which the subject to be painted is seen."[27] Alberti's geometrical visual regime is a reductive and stationary one—it presupposes a stable, totalizing world picture that creates objects that become visible before a seeing subject who stands on firm ground, a secure epistemological foundation. Alberti initiates a visual regime, a visual technology, or perception apparatus that is proto-Cartesian. It separates objects and subjects, those who have the power to see and those who become visible and thus subject to being seen.[28] It is

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[25]Michel de Certeau, The Gaze: Nicholas of Cusa," *Diacritics* (Fall 1987):19.

[26]Given that Brunelleschi developed his theory by painting the Florence Baptistry, it is tempting to compare Alberti's theory as developing outside the cathedral while Cusa's emerges *within* it.

[27]Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting* (1433), trans. Cecil Grayson and intro Martin Kemp (New York: Penguin Classics, 1991), 54.

[28]Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture" (1937), in *Off the Beaten Track*, Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, ed. and trans. (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

also this separation of objects from subjects that is an important tool of the museum in the eighteenth century, which coordinates not only what is seen but also how they are seen.[29]

Research suggests that Cusa knew Alberti's text and that *De visione Dei* is in part a response to what he regarded to be its spiritual limitations, related specifically to Alberti's resistance to embracing the apophatic dimension of knowledge, that is, that unknowing is a central feature of any knowledge, scientific or religious.[30] Yet it is his curatorial experiment, embedded in the text that *escapes* the text, that *enacts* the limitations of Albertian perspective as it is applied to the production and perception of the visual arts. It flattens and stops the world by limiting experience to the optic purview of a seeing subject and renders invisible what complicates the autonomy of the seeing subject, that is, the apparatuses and mechanisms that enable and sustain such a seeing subject by creating visible objects that can be seen. Johannes Hoff argues that Cusa's text represents a more theologically robust direction for the development of modernity.[31] Cusa's curatorial *sensibile experimentum*, which, through its epistemological modesty, reveals a significant weakness in Alberti's theory of pictorial perception as it relates to the museo-curatorial experience that this project develops. Alberti presumes *a silent, static, and*

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[29]See Petra Carlsson Redell, "Nonhuman Histories of Theology: On Polyp, Plant, and Paper Theologians," in *Rethinking Theology in the Anthropocene*, ed. Andreas Krebs (Freiburg im Breisgau: WBG Academic, Verlag Herder GmbH, 2024), 27-44.

[30]The scholarly literature on the Cusanus and Alberti connection is substantial. See Karsten Harries, "On the Power and Poverty of Perspective: Cusanus and Alberti," in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, Peter J. Casarella, ed. (Catholic University of American Press, 2006). See also, Taylor Knight, "In a Mirror and an Enigma: Nicholas of Cusa's *De Visione Dei* and the Milieu of Vision," *Sophia* (March 14, 2019); C.H. Carman, *Leon Battista Alberti and Nicholas Cusanus: Towards an Epistemology of Vision for Italian Renaissance Art and Culture* (Ashgate, 2014). Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science*, Deborah Lucas Schneider, trans. (Belknap Harvard, 2011).

[31]See Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

*immobile* subject for the image to "work" (i.e., become meaningful) and it creates the illusion that the viewing subject can master the image from this stationary perspective, thus reducing, restricting, and also hiding its polyvalence, its ambiguity, its destabilizing duplicity.

In short, Alberti's theory claims to exorcise the picture's polyvalent potential by privileging a single perspective—a single perspective from a subject that needs to be autonomous, silent, and immobile. But it is a limited and restricted perspective that reduces experience to the Procrustean bed of a seeing subject who expresses a narrowly circumscribed visual and epistemological mastery. Cusa's experiment, however, reveals the limitations of this approach to visual perception as it obscures the visibility of the apparatuses and display mechanisms that collaborate with and enable images to become visible. As the monks stand motionless and silent around the painting—a painting not made to affirm the mastery of the solitary viewing subject but one that turns the viewer into the *viewed*[32]—Alberti's theory remains limited to a single self-sufficient and stationary subject observing an image that *does not look back.*

Although it was written to explore and develop his concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*, Cusa's *De docta ignorantia* (1440) was also a response to Alberti's theory of perspective, which was an attempt to control and discipline visual perception. For Cusa's thought, it is crucial to develop a practice of "learned ignorance," a discipline of recognizing and embracing the limitations, the gaps, cracks, and fissures of knowledge.

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[32]See Michael Baxandall's classic *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford, 1988), which argues that painters made pictures that conformed to the viewer's capacity to gauge and calculate the size and weight and proximity of represented objects that the deployment of linear perspective facilitated.

Moreover, this virtue is necessary in order to think in creative and imaginative ways that which is "incomprehensibly understandable and ineffably nameable."[33] Cusa's curatorial experiment led the monks, as Keller puts it, to "the outer edge of perspective."[34] This out edge of perspective reveals Alberti's theory ironically to be one-dimensional—Alberti's viewer stands motionless, alone, and silent contemplating the painting while Cusa's monks walk around him, back and forth, speaking and listening. This "outer edge" as Keller calls it is apophatic and it is resonate with a theology of the museum that works from the limits of inaccessibility, distance, and absence—what is unknowable and invisible. Yet it is precisely these limits that generate creativity and imagination.

Cusa's alternative modernity, which grants agency (although not autonomy) to subjectivity by embracing vulnerability, movement, and speech, resists the modern narcissism of the gaze that Alberti initiates. He accomplishes this through what de Certeau calls a liturgical performance—a movement around the icon that destabilizes the single perceiving subject, and which thus generates a liturgical discourse, a subtle call, *did you?* and response, *I did* (or, significantly, *I didn't*). This discourse generates belief in the experience of the other and is part of experiencing the vision of God, following de Certeau's essay on belief, opening a possible future. Sight, the gaze, the experience of seeing is crucial and catalytic, but it is not ultimate, nor is it self-contained, and autonomous, it requires movement and speech. "The experience of the gaze," de Certeau observes, consists in believing without seeing."[35] Cusa's liturgical performance around

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[33]Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance* (1440), in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, intro. and trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 118.

[34]Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 96.

[35]Michel de Certeau, The Gaze: Nicholas of Cusa," *Diacritics* (Fall 1987): 19.

the icon generates a visual experience that is not a mastery because it bears within it an absence, reveals a gap, or, rather, an *apophasis*, an experience that vision cannot contain, a vision that acknowledges its inability to see everything. It is also beyond discourse, to which the visual and verbal experience reaches and which de Certeau describes as "astonishment." The apophatic dimension of the icon is an important insight of this Cusan curatorial event. Keller observes, "An icon effects an apophasis of the eyes. The silent image escapes not only speech but gaze."[36] And yet speech and gaze working together, mindful of their limitations, effect what could be described as kinetic apophaticism—*a curatorial contraption* inspired by Carlsson Redell that is unable to sit still but has to move and speak—asks and responds.

This mechanism resembles the unique situation of the museum experience, in which, as museologist Tony Bennett observes, the "roles of viewing, speaking, and listening [are] mingled complexly with one another."[37] It is what art historian Barbara Marie Stafford calls "mobile thought," which she describes as "material, elastic, splintering into fresh forms and startling angles."[38] Bennett also refers to this as a "side-glancing dialogism."[39] He explains,

> The forms of looking that this involved, however, supposed a wandering rather than a disciplined eye and an eye that, rather than functioning in isolation from

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[36]Catherine Keller, "*Nuda Veritas*: Iconoclash and Incarnation," in *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 52.

[37]Tony Bennett, "Pedagogic Objects, Clean Eyes, and Popular Instruction: On Sensory Regimes and Museum Didactics," *Configurations* 6/3 (Sept 1998): 345-71.

[38]Barbara Marie Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

[39]Tony Bennett, "Pedagogic Objects, Clean Eyes, and Popular Instruction: On Sensory Regimes and Museum Didactics," *Configurations* 6/3 (Sept 1998): 345-371.

> the other senses or being distanced from the collection, was pulled into it to be caught in a system of side-way glances between objects whose organization was dialogical....[40]

This wandering eye that makes side-way glances is a seeing that might be called superficial—that is, following Carlsson Redell, a depth that remains on the surface of things, across them, on what Deleuze calls, a "plane of immanence" and what Keller has called "the face of the deep." It is also *on the move*, as part of a body moving through spaces, viewing and experiencing artifacts and images not as separated and isolated entities, but as knit together or connected, however loosely and arbitrarily as a larger assemblage. He does not tell the monks to look at the work *after* having read his treatise or that it serves as an illustration of what they had read. In fact, it seems that experiment is to take place *before* such reading.[41]

What Cusa sets into motion is motivated by a desire to see God: the desire to experience a vision of God, a desire that is also a response to lack, to a gap, a void, or, in the language of Cusan apophasis, the unknowable. The implications of this Cusan desiring mobility can be further illuminated from an unlikely resource, Guy Debord's concept of *dérive*, or drift, which became a crucial method and practice for the Situationist International, a Paris-based collective of artists, writers, activists, and sociologists from the late 1950s through the 1970s. It is a "technique of rapid passage through varied ambiences" that "involve[s] playful-constructive behavior and awareness

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[40]Tony Bennett, "Pedagogic Objects, Clean Eyes, and Popular Instruction: On Sensory Regimes and Museum Didactics," *Configurations* 6/3 (Sept 1998): 345-371.

[41]The advent of audio tour guides is not only an attempt to make the museum more accessible, but it also isolates and silences the viewer from the social dimension of the museum experience and leads the viewer in a programmed movement form one discrete work to another, which undermines the viewer's own visual desire in the service of "following" the voice in the ear.

of psychogeographical effects."[42] For Debord, this method is not primarily a solitary practice, but a collective one, ideally practiced by a small group of two or three as a way to experience, explore, and record the distinctive ambiences of a particular part of a city, neighborhood, even an interior space like an apartment. Practitioners should "[l]et themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there."[43] However, "those who drift are not passive," claims Vincent Kaufmann. Rather, "The dérive is the projection onto space of a temporal experience, and vice versa."[44] It is a *proactive* drifting, one that is sensitive to the urban environment and one's body and mind as it moves through it and the "ambiences," as Debord calls them, that the drifter encounters. The museum gallery spaces that make up an exhibition become, through Debord's concept, a kind of terrain, an urban environment, with what Debord calls a "psychogeography" that generates ambiences that are more than the sum total of individual artifacts on display.

Debord's concept as well as the research on the museum experience by Bennett and Stafford enables a way of viewing Cusa's instructions in a more museological way. While Cusa does not ask the monks to install multiple works to move through, he invites them to practice a kind of exhibition-like side-glancing visual attention by putting them into motion. And in addition to enabling them to follow their desire to see God, he creates a situation to project onto this exhibition space a "temporal experience" that requires a collective practice, and one that includes speech that relies on believing the testimony of

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[42]Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," *Bureau of Public Secrets* (1958).

[43]Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," *Bureau of Public Secrets* (1958).

[44]Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, trans. Robert Bononno (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 110; 109.

another's experience. What arises, Cusa believes, could be a "contemplation," which are the seeds of a *visione de Dei*, a *visione* that is not purely visual but seems to incorporate all the senses through movement. This mystical experience keeps the seeing subject "porous," responsive to the acoustics and ambiences that the picture generates in concert with its environment, including its human participants.

Cusa's curated experience, we can argue, creates a space of future possibility. Cusa's letter to the monks not only lays out the instructions, he raises their expectations for what *could* happen, what they might not merely expect, but anticipate, hope for—an aesthetic experience of "perhaps."[45] Possibility emerges, from the Cusan *Posse Ipsum* itself, which is his preferred name for God. And so, this machine that the curated event enacts is driven by collective imagination, anticipation, possibility. Perhaps the Cusan curatorial event is thus directed toward—and enacts—a future. (This is echoed in Freud's essay, "The Uncanny" (1919), in which the experience of the uncanny (*Unheimlich*) is predicated upon its expectation, that is, the subject cultivates the *anticipation* of experiencing it.) And this anticipation primes the pump of perception, directing expectant attention toward these potential experiences.

The Cusan exhibition is also a space of learned ignorance, an embrace of one's limitations through an apophatic liturgy of ignorance that is responded to with astonishment. Such a practice of curious ignorance, a key feature of Cusa's mysticism, relinquishes control by the ego of the subject, preserving its porosity and thus responsiveness to the all-seeing figure of the icon. This panoptic icon, generates a social participation that encourages and sustains relationships with those others who are

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[45]See John Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013).

encountered along the walking path—the other brothers whom they pass as they walk around the icon. This is an experience this is at once singular *and* collective; private and social; For Cusa, the personal mystical experience of God that the brothers desire is the result of the social interaction effected by this curatorial contraption. (He asks that the painting be installed, not that it simply be passed around to each and every monk for their own contemplation as supporting material, or as a visual example of his treatise.) Cusa suggests that during the experience of this painting, "a contemplation will arise in you, and you will be stirred…."[46] What he says here is a crucial part of the experience of a curated installation—you will be stirred to reflect, to think, to experience. How viewers might be stirred, what contemplations may arise that will be generated by the installation *cannot* be controlled or predetermined by the curator's intentionality. In fact, Cusa as the curator of this particular installation cannot predict or control the specifics of the contemplation or the stirrings. Perhaps, for some, what might arise is *doubt or disbelief.* They might not experience the eyes of the painted face following them, seeing them and so their answer might very well be a *no*. It might generate feelings that drive one further from an experience of God. In addition, this event generates memories on which the participant may continue to reflect, ruminate, and rely on throughout their spiritual journey.

Cusa's text presupposes that the picture itself, as a particular icon of Christ, is an exemplary image that bears within it this all-seeing panoptic potential that activates what he calls, *Posse Ipsum*, or "possibility itself," as Cusa's name for a God that is unnameable, unknowable, yet makes all things visible and invisible. But the curatorial

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[46]*Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, 239.

contraption that Cusa enacts with his *sensibile experimentum* does not require the engine of an all-seeing-sovereign Subject. It is the *structure* of the experiment as a curated installation, an experiment in creative drift, that is important for this museo-theological project, which, as mentioned previously, follows Deleuze, who writes:

> One no longer needs to believe in God. We seek rather the "structure," that is, the form which may be filled with beliefs, but the structure has no need to be filled in order to be called "theological."[47]

This project suggests that the structure that Deleuze regards as theological is precisely the moving-seeing-speaking-believing structure that Cusa's *sensibile experimentum* enacts, an experiment that is also curatorial. Yet it also suggests the possibility that theological discourse—at its best—is always already this curatorial and museological contraption that manages what is seen and unseen, that apophatically veils the cracks and gaps in ways that fuel desire and ignite the imagination.

Cusa's curatorial experiment presumes no such static Albertian relationship nor complete and totalizing vision. Through kinetic movement and speech, his experiment transforms viewing subjects into *viewed subjects* in a social collective, while the visual artifact generates speech as testimony or witness. This museo-curatorial theological project argues that Cusa's experiment is the fundamental unit of *theological* practice that also characterizes museum exhibitions and that each benefit from thinking through the other. In fact, Cusa's experiment requires only the spatial apparatus, the museo-curatorial space of an exhibition and mobile viewers to activate the ambiguity, ambivalence, the

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[47]Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 281.

polyvalent, spectral, and haunted nature of artifacts on display in an art museum that together constitute its *theological structure*.[48]

The *sensibile experimentum* is thus more than just a painting hanging on the wall for the solitary viewer to contemplate. It is a *curatorial event* that relies on the collective kinetic energy of viewers moving past the picture with other viewers in a particular space that generates speech, questions and responses. Moreover, it is also a particular kind of speech, a speech entangled with *belief*, credulity, vulnerability, witness, and testimony. This theologically-inflected speech does not require a substantial religious image or a Big Other that the experiment *represents* or to which it points. Rather it enfolds the viewer, speaker in a movement that never stops. Keller uses the Cusan metaphor of the cloud, prevalent in the Christian mystical tradition, through an adaption of the Shekinah glory in the Hebrew Bible, to describe this experience.

> To push into this cloud is to leap through the veil. The nebulous veil does not pose any rigid boundary. The seeker does not remain passively content with not-knowing but is driven forward by an ardent desire to know more, to see more. But the knowing will not be satisfied by any object, not even a divine one.[49]

Like the empty but creatively full *tehomic* void that Ruti and Boothby explicate, this not-knowing, this non-substantial void, is creative and is a catalyst for desire, desire for more, striving, moving, searching, asking, listening.

Cusa's *sensibile experimentum* makes evident that the curatorial and museological experience is already infused with what Preziosi calls "theologisms" that are entangled

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[48]The "all seeing" nature of the portrait that Cusa emphasizes, which has a particular role in Byzantine Christianity, has become a kind of narrative trope in countless film and television dramas—of the eyes of painted portraits that follow visitors that prefigure danger. The existence of this trope relies on the power of the image that is released by its public display *and the movement of the viewer*.

[49]Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

with the desire for representation. The historical development of the art museum and the genre of the exhibition does not only have its origins in the Italian Renaissance Cabinet of Curiosities or the Enlightenment-era *Wunderkammer* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also, as Preziosi argues, in the Church—with curation of its relics for pilgrims—as well as in the secular displays of artifacts and goods outside the church during its various festivals and celebrations.[50] This spatial dimension becomes more evident and salient if we regard Cusa's *sensibile experimentum* as a curatorial practice that allows us to experience what Keller calls, "the fresh gifts of ancient metaphors" through new curatorial juxtapositions.[51]

Cusa's *sensibile experimentum* is a *museo-curatorial theology* contraption that makes this project work, that activates the experiences that follow. It and its theological entanglements, inflections, and energy will re-emerge in each of the rooms, with its focus on the assemblage of movement, speech, faith and with the mysterious spectral dimension that the museum exhibition offers to a leaky and porous agency that is as collective as it is personal.

## THE ARTWORK ESSAY

Walter Benjamin's relationship to theology has been well researched. It is a relationship that is limited to certain specific texts, such as "Capitalism as Religion,"

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[50]See Donald Preziosi, *Art, Religion, Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Preziosi argues that dead religion is preserved in art while dead art is preserved in religion and both practices seek actively to forget their relationship to their other. See also Helena Wangefelt Ström, "Lighting Candles Before a Headless Jesus: Sacred Heritage, Heritagized Sacredness, and the Many Journeys Between Categories" (PhD diss, Umeå University, 2022). See John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze* 3.0 (Sage Publications, 2023).

[51]Catherine Keller, "Dear Young Theologian," in *No Matter What: Crisis and the Spirit of Planetary Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2024), 146.

"Theses on the Philosophy of History," "Theologico-Political Fragment," and his book on the German *Trauerspiel*.[52] But "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility" has not attracted theological attention.[53] Not only is it one of the more well-known and influential essays in Benjamin's authorship, it is one of the more influential essays in art theory of the last fifty years. It has become a foundational text in cultural and media studies, theories of film and cinema, and has offered a powerful argument for the potential of art to serve radical politics. Yet its influence is equal to its opacity, due in no small part to its enigmatic and confusing arguments as well as its prophetic voice

> Benjamin's Artwork essay has been an amazing catalyst for intellectual activity…we believe the lasting power of Benjamin's work resides in its ability to complexify our thinking about culture even today…[54]

Benjamin's "Artwork essay" functions in some ways similar to Paul Klee's watercolor, *Angelus Novus*, for theorists eager to find an icon to embody their hopes and aspirations for revolution, that their theorizing could lead to practical action. While *Angelus Novus* adorns book covers and illustrates countless publications on Benjamin, The Artwork essay assumes a comfortable place among most anthologies focusing on cultural theory and visual studies. The essay represented a movement away from modernist painting and

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[52]See for example, Colby Dickinson & Stéphane Symons, eds. *Walter Benjamin and Theology* (Fordham, 2016); *Walter Benjamin and Political Theology*, eds. Brendan Moran & Paula Schwebel (Bloomsbury, 2024); Brian Britt, *Religion Around Walter Benjamin* (Penn State University Press, 2022).

[53]Walter Benjamin, *"The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" and Other Writings on Media*. M. Jennings, B. Doherty, T. Levin, trans. (Harvard University Press, 2008). See also Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan, eds. *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age* (Stanford University Press, 2003). Carlsson Redell's concepts of first and second theology is the only creative theological engagement with this text.

[54]Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan, eds. *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, eds. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan (Stanford University Press, 2003), xvi.

sculpture toward the practices of photography and film, from the museum to the cinema, from an elite few to a populist many. It signaled a shift from art and architecture history to cultural and visual studies and not confined to museums, cathedrals, and palaces. Yet its influence is not without its detractors. Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour claim,

> We are amazed by the number of mistakes cheerfully gathered by the essay, and by the deep misunderstandings of most phenomena, both modern and historical, which it reveals…In a collage that few authors have dared to make with so much ingenuity, every aspect of the modern world is briefly portrayed in the Artwork essay: art, culture, architecture, science, technique, religion, economics, politics, even war and psycho-analysis. And we believe, in each instance a mistake in category leads Benjamin to take one for another.[55]

Its many alleged mistakes and obscurities will not, however, deter my interest in scavenging several concepts for the purposes of curating theology's post-theological afterlife.[56] In fact, its errors, misunderstandings, and inconsistences might even be the strongest evidence of its nascent theological nature.

The essay emerged as part of Benjamin's excavation of nineteenth-century Paris, including the poetry of Baudelaire and the emergence of capitalism, of which his magnificently ambitious but unfinished magnus opus, *Arcades Project*, was its culmination.[57] It is tempting to suggest that Benjamin's work on nineteenth-century Paris was not so much an archaeological excavation as a post-Christian (Martinson) and post-representational (Carlsson Redell) *theological project*, curating an afterlife for an artifact

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[55]Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour, "How to Make Mistakes on So Many Things," in *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*, eds. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan (Stanford University Press, 2003), 92.

[56]Three versions of the Artwork essay exist in German. The second version, which was translated into French for publication (its first publication) in a German periodical in 1937 is considered the "canonical" and "authoritative" version. The French translation, however, provoked a revision, a *third* version, which, by 1939 and the time of his death, Benjamin still considered a work in progress.

[57]Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (1982; Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999).

called, *Nineteenth-century Paris*, produced from the fragments and shards of texts, quotations, and photographs he found while scouring the archives at the Biblioteque Nationale in Paris. Moreover, Benjamin's *Arcades Project* might be a project that reveals Paris in the very process of museification, and so, a proto-museum theology project.

Collector, Ragpicker, Theologian

Perhaps more than other thinkers, Benjamin's authorship treated concepts as artifacts to hold, display, move about as collaborators in the search for truth, revelation, critical insight. And this might be because Benjamin himself was a collector and saw in the collector a unique figure from which to think about history and capitalism, as one whose search for particular objects is an attempt to push back against the relentless progressivism of modern history and protect certain artifacts from the circuitry of capitalist value. In an essay on the collector Eduard Fuchs, Benjamin argues that the "historical materialist"

> blasts the epoch out of its reified "historical continuity," and thereby the life out of the epoch, and the work out of the lifework. Yet this construct results in the simultaneous preservation and sublation of the lifework in the work, of the epoch in the lifework, and of the course of history in the epoch.[58]

Benjamin compares historicism, as an iteration of a homogeneous and monochromatic cultural heritage to a more curatorial approach to the past. "Historicism presents the eternal image of the past, whereas historical materialism presents a given experience with

[58] Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian (1937)," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol 3: 1935-1938*, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 262.

the past—an experience that is unique."[59] Museal theology resembles Benjaminian historical materialism in its effort to curate new experiences from these eternal images of the past. "The true collector," Benjamin writes in a sentence from the *Arcades Project*, "detaches the object from its functional relations," which is taking it out of capitalist circulation, and enabling it to open up new experiences, revealing new insights from the past that are overlooked in the relentless march of "progress" and thus disturbing the present. Benjamin's collector thus resembles the figure of the curator.[60] The collector-curatorial sensibility is what Karen Barad responds to when she suggests that "Walter Benjamin was a philosopher of fragments and constellations. Discontinuity and juxtaposition played strongly in his works, over and against continuity and linear succession."[61] By giving particular objects attention the collector retrieves them not only from capitalist circulation but also from under the vitrine of cultural heritage, thus enabling them to forge new relationships with artifacts from disparate contexts. Following Jean-Paul Martinon, this concept of the curatorial is disruptive. And Benjamin's authorship, especially as evidenced in his most ambitious yet unfinished work, *The Arcades Project*, "strained the traditional conceptions of both history and philosophy to the breaking point," as Susan Buck-Morss writes.[62] Benjamin's curatorial

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[59]Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian (1937)," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol 3: 1935-1938*, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[60]Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), [H3a, 21].

[61]Karen Barad, "What Flashes Up: Theological-Political-Scientific Fragments," in *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*, eds. Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 28.

[62]Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 217.

practice was a crucial part of his method, which, according to Buck-Morss, consisted of "resc[uing] the historical objects by ripping them out of the developmental histories…into which fictional and falsifying narratives that had been inserted in the process of their transmission," a process that stressed historical progress.[63] This method necessitated a radical shift in format. "Benjamin was at least convinced of one thing," observed Buck-Morss, "what was needed was a visual, not a linear logic: The concepts were to be imagistically constructed, according to the cognitive principles of montage."[64] With its collection of images, quotes, epigraphs, and commentary juxtaposed in sharp contrasts, which was based on the "cognitive principles of montage," *The Arcades Project* is a book that wants to be looked at, walked through, grazed, as the discrete artifacts (whether text or image) could be reflected on. Just as the collector-curator takes an object or artifact out of capitalist circulation and cultural heritage display and curates it into new contexts, *Arcades Project*, as an expression of historical materialism, was an attempt to take concepts, images, and ideas out of circulation of inevitable "historical progress" and curate them differently in the present. Through that practice a contemporary juxtaposition might activate its new life in the present, in what Benjamin called the "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*), what Barad calls the "thick-now of the present."[65] This "now-time" or the "thick-now" is the museal present, in which the artifact vibrates with

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[63]Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 218.

[64]Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 218.

[65]Karen Barad, "What Flashes Up: Theological-Political-Scientific Fragments," in *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*, eds. Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 21.

the tension of its historical context and past uses and in the present among other artifacts with their own histories, their own vibrations. But this vibration, as a museal one, is the tremor of presence curled up in a corner of an *unrecoverable* past and an *unresolvable* distance.

Benjamin's approach to the experience of concepts, ideas, texts, and artifacts thus resembles Proust's approach to the experience of art in the museum, according to Adorno's essay discussed above, in which the work takes up residence in the emotional landscape of the viewer, which forms the core of the museification of art and other cultural artifacts. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes:

> The true method of making things present is to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space).... We don't displace our being into theirs, they step into our life.[66]

This focus on reception, attention, and spectatorship on the part of a viewing public open up conversations and tensions with public spectacle, capitalist commodity consumerism, and the curious blend of entertainment and instruction that emerges in the nineteenth century, especially exemplified in the short life of the arcades of Paris, or *passages couverts*, which were the glass-roofed shopping passages that fascinated Benjamin in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Yet, as Benjamin's authorship demonstrates, and as well as the museological scholarship of Donald Preziosi, Didier Maleuvre, and Ivan Gaskell reveal, the spectacle is only one dimension of the museo-curatorial experience.[67] In fact, Benjamin's *Arcades Project* fragment above resembles quite closely Adorno's interpretation of Marcel Proust's approach to experiencing works of art in the art

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[66]Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [H2,3].

[67]See Preziosi, *The Brain of the Earth's Body*, 92-114.

museum, in which the work can be appropriated into the emotional landscape of the viewer. Adorno's Proust, walking through the museum, behaves like Benjamin's collector, taking this or that work of art from an exhibition and placing it into his imaginative collection.

Benjamin associates the collector with another member of society who lives on the periphery of capitalism: the ragpicker. The image of the ragpicker was a phenomenon of Charles Baudelaire's Paris, whom Baudelaire observed as living on the margins and as a victim of capitalist society, scavenging for the trash and detritus generated by consumption and its excesses. Baudelaire defines the ragpicker in this way:

> Here we have a man whose job it is to gather the day's refuse in the capital. Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot he catalogues and collects. He collates the annals of intemperance, the capharnaum of waste. He sorts things out and selects judiciously; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry.[68]

Benjamin likens this practice to the poet and suggests that although Baudelaire did not make the connection explicit, it was a "secret one" that Baudelaire practiced.

> This description is one extended metaphor for the poetic method, as Baudelaire practiced it. Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse, and both go about their solitary business while other citizens are sleeping…[the poet] who roams the city in search of rhyme-booty...[the ragpicker, who is obliged to come to a halt every few moments to gather up the refuse he encounters.[69]

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[68]Quoted in Walter Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," in Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006), 108.

[69]Quoted in Walter Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," in Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006), 108.

I would suggest that ragpicking is a practice with which Benjamin also identified. But it is one that appears especially resonant in the images that he uses to describe his practice of theology, a practice that without the ecclesial power within Christendom, is cast to the margins, reduced to scavenging the refuse of religious, philosophical, political, and cultural artifacts to select, assemble, and curate his own temporary constellations.

The ragpicker can also be read as a function of the museification of the world in which certain artifacts are preserved as having had a use in the past, while others are discarded. Museification, then, as a part of capitalism, also produces its share trash and refuse. But it also includes artifacts which have been used up, or artifacts the use of which is no longer possible. And so, the ragpicker becomes a collector, an historical materialist, a curator, and perhaps even a *theologian*, of sorts.

Benjamin's ragpicker and collector offers a helpful context for Benjamin's Artwork essay. What follows is not a comprehensive critique or commentary of the essay, especially as it relates to film theory or the political connections he makes. Rather it is a discussion of the concepts that Benjamin generates that I can scavenge for museum theology: *aura*, *cult* and *contemplation*, *exhibition* and *distraction*.

## Aura

The most influential of the concepts that Benjamin's Artwork essay develops is *aura*. C. Stephen Jaeger shares a view held by many theorists and researchers, however, that Benjamin's "pronouncements on aura are few and orphic" and they "have become more a hindrance than a help to understanding it...."[70] Benjamin defines aura as "A

[70]C. Stephen Jaeger, "Aura and Charisma: Two Useful Concepts in Critical Theory," *New German Critique* 114 38/3 (Fall 2011), 19, 21.

strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be."[71] Significantly, Benjamin considers *authenticity* to be closely related and contributive to the work of art's aura, which he defines as "the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it [the work of art] from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it" (103). Crucial for both aura and authenticity is the work of art's "unique existence in a particular place" (103). Both concepts collaborate to produce the work of art's "real presence"—what Benjamin describes as the "here and now of the artwork" (103). But it is, in effect, *an absence* that is rendered present, the "unique apparition of a distance." And this absent distance rendered present is what Benjamin calls "tradition," which includes the commentary and interpretations it has generated over time (103-104). But Jaeger observes that Benjamin defines aura negatively. It is what is *lost* through the introduction of photography, or mechanical reproduction. The contours of aura only become visible, can only be described, then, *after* its effect has disappeared. The photograph—mechanical reproduction—functions as an acid that dissolves the "strange tissue" thus "stripping the veil from the object" as well as "liquidating the value of tradition in the cultural heritage" (105). Jaeger suggests that, for Benjamin, aura lingers with, clings to, the work of art, "like a ghost to its grave, inexpressibly present but unapproachable, mysteriously tucked into its materiality, near yet distant, sensible yet impalpable...."[72] Aura becomes the means through which the

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[71] Walter Benjamin,"The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [Second Version]," in *Walter Benjmain: Selected Writings: Volume 3 1935-1938*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others, eds Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2002), 104-105. Subsequent quotations will be denoted by page number from this essay in the body of the text.

[72] C. Stephen Jaeger, "Aura and Charisma: Two Useful Concepts in Critical Theory," *New German Critique* 114 38/3 (Fall 2011), 20.

relationship between distance and intimacy, presence and absence is experienced. But for Benjamin, it appears that aura is already too late, that it too is a concept that is an effect of museification, of mechanical reproduction. Is it possible that the advent of photography in the nineteenth century produced the value that it dissolved? Could aura, then, be a *result* of the photograph, rather than its victim?

Ritual, Cult, Contemplation

Benjamin's conception of aura has provoked sharp critique, in part because of what is regarded as its hopeless obscurity and the ambiguity related to whether it is the artifact or the subject that is responsible for generating it. For example, Arianne Conty claims,

> Hidden in Benjamin's conception of the aura we therefore find a somewhat confused, or at least confusing, theory of intentionality. Does seeing the image, object or landscape require our passive reception, or rather is it the subject who actively decides to endow the image with reciprocity? In other words, does the aura inhere in the object or is it a projection (like fetishism) on the part of the observer? Do we grant phenomena the capacity to look back at us, or is it rather the passivity of the gaze that allows for alterity to present itself?[73]

The confusion that she attributes to Benjamin presupposes that it is only the object and the observer that are at issue. However, aura, cannot do what it does alone. It needs an apparatus that enables its "veil" or "strange tissue" to cling to the work of art and manage how it becomes perceptible and what remains invisible. It is this apparatus—within which both object and observer, artifact and subject collaborate—that enables aura to work, that produces this veil or tissue, that manages perception and experience of the

[73]Arianne Conty, "They Have Eyes That They Might Not See: Walter Benjamin's Aura and the Optical Unconscious," *Literature & Theology* 27/4 (Dec 2013): 478.

void through the cultivation of desire and belief. Benjamin calls this apparatus *ritual*. The "unique value of the 'authentic' work of art," he claims, "always has its basis in ritual" (105). Benjamin affirms the religious origins of ritual and its subsequent survival through its continued presence even in "the most profane forms of the cult of beauty" (105). Moreover, when first faced with the challenge of photography in the early nineteenth century, the cult of beauty

> reacted with the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*—that is, with a theology of art. This in turn gave rise to a negative theology, in the form of an idea of "pure" art, which rejects not only any social function but any definition in terms of a representational content (106).

It is significant that Benjamin notes that the religious resonances and theological nature of the theories and practices of high art respond to the challenge posed by photography, practices that were involved in maintaining and cultivating the work of art's aura and authenticity. In addition, it is important to distinguish this form of negative theology from Cusa's curatorial experiment. While the negative theology of art elevates art to state of "purity" (i.e., puts a vitrine over it to make it inaccessible or keeps it as an invisible image, an inaccessible ideal), Cusa's apophasis emerges in the process of human interaction, material and immaterial, looking, moving, speaking, listening. It does not freeze-frame, mystify, or vitrine.

Benjamin observes that ritual—religious and secularized—is involved in maintaining cult value, that is, community identity that converges on the object.[74] Although he does not state this explicitly, Benjamin's focus on ritual and cult locates the work of art before the advent of photography in a *liturgy*, a cluster of practices, gestures,

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[74]See Daniel A. Siedell, "Liturgical Aesthetics and Contemporary Artistic Practice," in *Beyond Belief: Theoaesthetics or Just Old-Time Religion* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010).

actions, and material artifacts that function as veils and tissues that respond to and work with the gaps and cracks that appear in the symbolic order. Ritual and cult manage not only what is seen but also what is *unseen*, invisible, or otherwise kept from view. Benjamin observes that

> cult value as such even tends to keep the artwork out of sight: certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cella; certain images of the Madonna remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are not visible to the viewer at ground level (106).

An important part of the cultivation and maintenance of aura, then, is managing when, how, and in *what ways a work is seen*. Its absence, or invisibility, can serve to affirm its presence in different ways, which we will explore in the two chapters that follow. Mondzain's understanding of the image as invisible and as generating multiple visibilities is helpful in this context, since it seems that the work of art's location in ritual and cult for Benjamin ties them together representationally, reducing the invisible image's multiplicity. In other words, the work of art's aura is related to the image, or after-image, that the work's absence makes present and which a tightly controlled visibility enables, which, in the context of the Christian Church, consisted of the calendar of holy days and holidays, including the display of relics and the management of pilgrimages in which certain artifacts were made available for viewing and veneration. This is similar to how Mondzain describes the Byzantine Church, which "sought to reign over both image and vision by articulating them closely together."[75] And for Mondzain, it is the incarnation of Christ that links image and vision. "He is," as St. Paul writes, "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1: 15). In the context of Benjamin's ritual-cult framework, the incarnation of

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[75]Marie-José Mondzain, "What Does Seeing an Image Mean?" *Journal of Visual Culture* 9/3 (2010): 308.

Christ is a mystery that the Church manages by emphasizes its uniqueness, its historical specificity, and its aura, through the Eucharist but through a host of other rites associated with the Annunciation, Nativity, and Crucifixion.

Benjamin describes the ritual-cult apparatus within which aura is conjured, cultivated and maintained as *first technology*, which attempts to "master nature." It deals with origins, originals, eternity, representation, seriousness, which, puts art into the service of "magical practice," and ultimately "culminate[s] in human sacrifice," whether pagan or Christian (107). It thus privileges *creation* and the authority of place, context, a singularity, a One, eternity, and as Petra Carlsson Redell interprets it theologically, is *representational*.

Benjamin's description of first technology and the ritual-cult mechanism that generates aura bears some resemblance to the portrait that Adorno paints of Paul Valéry and the poet's mournful response to the "death" of works of art when they enter the art museum. (Their death could be interpreted as a loss of aura.) It is interesting to consider "human sacrifice" in the context of the cult of beauty and *l'art pour l'art* as expressed in the myth of the artist-martyr, who sacrifices their life for art, as evidence in Honoré de Balzac's novella, *The Unknown Altarpiece* (1831) and Emile Zola's *The Masterpiece* (1885), in which the male artists, Frenhoffer and Cluaude Lantier, sacrifice their (and others') lives for their art. Rilke, for his part, also writes about the relentless and inhuman demands that art makes on the poet, writing, "An art object is ruthless and has to be that way."[76] Does the pagan and Christian of human sacrifice, which Benjamin suggests is

[76]Rilke, *Letters on Life*, 140.

inseparable from the cult-aura-contemplation apparatus find a new home with the modern myth of the (male) artist genius?

An important part of this aura-apparatus, the posture that the participant in this apparatus takes, is what Benjamin calls *concentration*, a posture that consists of a cocktail of equal parts contemplation, reverence, veneration, silence, even solitude. It is a practice that enables the magic to work. But "technological reproductivity," in contrast to concentration, Benjamin suggests, "emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual," de-mystifying and disenchanting, dismantling the aural apparatus (106). It dismantles the apparatus by making it visible.

Exhibition Value and Distraction

In contrast to the aura-ritual-cult apparatus of the first technology, Benjamin argues that photography initiates a *second technology*. Rather than master nature, it attempts to collaborate with it; it is playful, improvisational, experimental, and "wholly provisional" (107). For Benjamin, the technical reproducibility of art shifts the value of the work of art from *ritual* to *politics*, from *cult* to *exhibition*, from the absent (hidden or scarce) original to a multiplicity of dispersed reproductions, from vertical transcendence to horizontal immanence, from representation to performativity.

> With the emancipation of specific artistic practices from the service of ritual, the opportunities for exhibiting their products increase. It is easier to exhibit a portrait bust that can be sent here and there than to exhibit the statue of a divinity that has a fixed place in the interior of a temple (106).

Rather than limited to a single location, like Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling in the Vatican or the frescoes by Fra Angelico in the monastery of San Marco in Florence, works of art are dislodged from their intended environment and can thus be put in new

relationships with other works, images, concepts in new contexts, new constellations, new installations. Benjamin continues,

> through the exclusive emphasis placed on its exhibition value, the work of art becomes a construct with quite new functions. Among these, the one we are conscious of—the artistic function—may subsequently be seen as incidental (107).

The work of art's *exhibition value* shrinks the aura that wafts up from its role in ritual, its scarcity, its relative *inaccessibility* (it requires a pilgrimage to view it). But it also serves as a solvent to the authority of artistic and creative sovereignty, which had accrued since the Renaissance, of the easel painter, creating *ex nihilo* from his [sic] imagination in the sacred privacy of the studio. The model of the artist, then, according to Benjamin, has shifted from the artist-priest-creator to the assembler, editor, constructor, collector, scavenger, and thus *curator* of the detritus of capitalist society. And as Benjamin was writing this essay, he was quite familiar with avant-gardists who were reconfiguring artistic practice through typography, broadsides, photography, cinema, installations, performances, and exhibitions.[77]

Exhibition-value then privileges *reception* and its decontextualizing energy, which disseminates, spreads, and expands through multiplicities. In contrast, ritual-cult value consolidates, concentrates, contracts. It is the meandering, loitering, even *drifting* character of the viewer's movement through an exhibition of objects that elicits Benjamin's description of the kind of attention that exhibitions produce, what Benjamin calls "distraction" (*Ablenkung*) in contrast to the "concentration" and "contemplation" required of an aura-saturated cult artifact. While the viewer is absorbed in the work of art,

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[77]See Jodi Hauptman, *Engineer, Agitator, Constructor: The Artist Reinvented, 1918-1939* (New York: MoMA, 2020).

the "distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide" (119).[78] To "absorb the work of art into themselves" is an accurate description of Adorno's Proust, who anticipates the Benjaminian distracted viewer. *Distraction* is an important concept for Benjamin and one that was a much-discussed subject, including by one of his Frankfurt social research colleagues, the cinema critic Siegfried Kracauer.[79] It offers a new and compelling way of perceiving and understanding the spectacle-driven world of images and commodities. As Howard Eiland writes, it is a "spur to new ways of perceiving."[80] Unlike Kracauer, Benjamin understands *distraction* to be simply another form of attention, not inferior to contemplation and devotion.

> Although constructed in opposition to contemplative reflection, distraction nevertheless leaves scope for a critical response founded on an alternative mode of attentive engagement...the concept of distraction acts as an umbrella term for a range of perceptual responses....[81]

Moreover, this experience is a collective one. Benjamin claims that "contemplative immersion...became a breeding ground for asocial behavior" while distraction is a "variant of social behavior" (119). It is worth considering how similar Cusa's curatorial experiment is to Benjamin's exhibition value-distraction apparatus, which both privilege the mobile, the social, and the collective. However, Cusa's curatorial experiment seems to

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[78]Benjamin goes on to suggest that it is architecture that is the quintessential example of such a distracted experience.

[79]Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces," *The Mass Ornament*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

[80]Howard Eiland, "Reception in Distraction," *boundary 2* 30/1 (2003). See also Benjamin notes, "Theory of Distraction," composed when he was writing the second version of his "Work of Art" essay.

[81]Carolin Duttlinger, "Between Contemplation and Distraction: Configurations of Attention in Walter Benjamin," *German Studies Review* 30/1 (2007): 41-42.

produce a Cusan coincidence of opposites by enfolding Benjamin's model of cult and contemplation into the *sensibile experimentum*. Yet, I would suggest that what Cusa's experiment leaves behind, viewed through Benjamin's Artwork essay, is *aura*.

In an essay on Robert Rauschenberg's so-called *White Paintings* in 1951, the composer John Cage suggests, "'Art is the imitation of nature in her manner of operation.' Or a net."[82] The concept of distraction functions something like Cage's net. It attracts and collects not only works of art on view in a room but *all* that occurs therein, notwithstanding our own thoughts, feelings, memories as well as the bodies, the sounds, the movement within which our experience of the works of art takes place, as Duchamp's pane of glass attracted dust that Man Ray photographed. Benjamin's distraction is a kind of mobile attention mechanism that casts a net, one that is neither constricting nor stationary, and what it yields is always changing and surprising as we negotiate the galleries, moving through and experiencing and *absorbing* works of art in always new ways, with new assemblages, that produce new iterations of what Karen Barad appropriately calls *spacetimematterings*.

Another important concept in Benjamin's authorship that does not find its way explicitly in the Work of Art essay but is implied by it, is that of "afterlife."[83] In "The Task of the Translator" (1921), Benjamin writes that "The idea of life and afterlife in

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[82]John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 100.

[83]Caroline Disler, "Benjamin's "Afterlife": A Productive (?) Mistranslation: In Memoriam Daniel Simeoni," *TTR* 24/1 (2011): 183-221. Disler argues that the theological connotations of a death and resurrection that "afterlife" as the common English translation of the word *Fortleben* is misleading. Disler suggests that the better translation is "living forth."

works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity."[84] "Translation" for Benjamin is not merely a passive "transmission" of the original but is an "active, dynamic process" in which the translators "become creative agents."[85] The museum exhibition provides the necessary "translation" (i.e., shifts in contexts) that enables the possibility of an artifact's afterlife, or, better, another life in which it participates in new contexts as it becomes part of the distractive attention of its audience. This process of translation dissolves the aura of the ritual-cult model, enabling the text to live in reproduction, and in continual recreation. Art historian Amy Knight Powell, consequently, is critical of curators and scholars who might claim too much credit for such giving forth of a work of art's afterlife. Powell writes,

> More problematic than this decontextualization and recontextualization is the pretense museum curators and art historians sometimes make to being agents of resurrection, capable of resuscitating past life. For, neither institution nor individual can restore life to an object that never had it. The promiscuity of the work of art—its return, reiteration, and perpetuation beyond its original moment—is the surest sign it never lived.[86]

The promiscuity of a work of art (or any other material artifact), that it enjoys another life is not due to it being resurrected, resuscitated, or redeemed or any other conjuring magic from the art historian, but the result of its outliving the context of its origination. It lives on or lives forth because of its "perpetuation beyond its present moment." The museo-curatorial experiment of this project does not, then, consist of attempts to resurrect or

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[84]Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" (1921), in *Selected Writings, vol. 1, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 254.

[85]Caroline Disler, "Benjamin's "Afterlife": A Productive (?) Mistranslation: In Memoriam Daniel Simeoni," *TTR* 24/1 (2011): 195-96.

[86]Amy Knight Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (New York: Zone Books, 2012).

alchemically transform "dead" artifacts into living ones by sprinkling a little theological magic dust on them, but to allow them to have other lives in new contexts in which living forth neither implies their death nor their resurrection, but their capacity to find companions and collaborators by allowing themselves to be curated into new constellation, relationships, and juxtapositions. A museum theology can be creatively and imaginatively agnostic—need not be an atheist regarding matters of afterlife—as it curates new exhibitions of these artifacts, images, and concepts that help us experience and understand the fullness and unknowably, overwhelmingly *present* present moment. Such a museum theology, however, also provides the possibility that an answer might be, could be, over time, something approaching a *yes* to its life, however that life *as life* (or afterlife) is understood and experienced.

If Benjamin's concept of first technology corresponds to Adorno's interpretation of Paul Valéry's response to the museum, a kind of negative theology of high art, his concept of second technology most definitely is Proustian in its liberation of the work of art from its locality in order to be absorbed by the diverse experiences of viewers. Mechanical reproduction dissolves aura and weakens rituals that anchors and controls how the work can be approached within the cult. It does so by releasing control of how and in what ways it becomes visible. In other words, mechanical reproduction takes the vitrine off the artifact and allows it to be handled, moved around, curated into new installations, new relationships with other artifacts. Consequently, it opens the work to multiple uses and experiences across a broad spectrum of platforms and contexts. Cusa's curatorial experiment suggests that displacing and dislodging the artifact from its vitrined role in the cult does not dissolve liturgy and ritual. On the contrary, it only enables new

liturgies and rituals to emerge in different ways and in new situations. A theology of the museum, then, which embraces Proustian distraction and exhibition value is not inimical to the concepts of the first technology that the photograph dissolves—aura, ritual, and contemplation. *It relates to them differently*, by improvising with them, revealing them to be part of a mechanism of display, disconnected from a representational logic that manages what is visible and invisible, which equates faith to truth (Martinson) and God-to-Man (Carlsson Redell).

In addition, the theological effectiveness of the apparatus and mechanisms of the museum resides precisely in its capacity to generate its own kind of aura and the rituals around it.[87] Benjamin's analysis, must have its own afterlife in a museum theology. Therefore, a museum theology that is a curatorial practice that reveals the mechanisms and apparatuses of what is seen and unseen, visible and invisible, and produces images that can be believed, can embrace both sides of Benjamin's binaries, aura-ritual-cult value vs. exhibition value; contemplation/concentration vs. distraction; individual vs. collective; aesthetic vs. political.

The photograph thus does not so much *destroy* aura and ritual as *re-inscribe* it museologically. The photograph might disenchant by dissolving that "strange tissue of space and time," but it also offers an opportunity, through the playfulness, creativity, and improvisation offered by the second technology, an aura, a ritual, a liturgy that emerges *from* the museum, but one that *does not have human sacrifice as its culmination*. While Benjamin's essay makes technical reproducibility literal through the photograph and film, this project has reflected on specific photographs, such as Alfred Stieglitz's photograph of

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[87]Lieke Wijnia and James S. Bielo, eds. *Museums as Ritual Sites: Civilizing Rituals Reconsidered* (New York: Routledge, 2025).

Duchamp's urinal or the installation photographs of Yves Klein, as opportunities to think about the photograph as a metaphor for a theology that arrives late, that produces images of absence and distance. It is not a coincidence that the emergence of photography in nineteenth century corresponds with the development of a "scientific" theology of the modern research university, and a modern theology after the French Revolution, after Napoleon, after Kant, after Hegel.

Roland Barthes claims in *Camera Lucida* (1981) that "photography has something to do with resurrection" and that the "essence of photography is the certain belief that its referent had really existed, the "that-has-been."[88] What might be resurrected in the photograph is the affirmation of the past, that the subject had lived, and so, what is being resurrected is the memory, a making present an absence (*not* making what is absent present). Perhaps modern theology, like the photograph, presents an image of the past, an image that not only proves its lateness, but perhaps offers proof that indeed, one had lived, that there *was* belief, that this or that doctrine, *was practiced, was believed.* But Barthes also claims, following Benjamin himself, that the photograph has more to do with magic than we might presume.[89] A museum theology embraces and cultivates the magic of the photograph, that it does not simply dissolve the aura, demystify, and secularize, but it also re-animates, conjures, resurrects. But it does so, following Carlsson Redell's second theology, playfully, performatively, and creatively. A museological theology embraces both a confessional theology that affirms faith through understanding and a modern theology that comes after faith in search of understanding, curating

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[88]Quoted in David Levi Strauss, *Photography and Belief* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2020), 35.

[89]Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography" (1931), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 2, Part 2: 1931-34* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

constellations, installations, and exhibitions. And it might be through such a re-enchanted, playful, and *museified aura* and that through the museological liturgies and rituals something like a museum theology might dwell, as well as a faith that emerges after faith, a museological faith that comes *after* understanding fails, or emerges from the rubble of misunderstanding, misuse, and overuse.

## CONCLUSION

Cusa's *sensibile experimentum* that introduces *De visione Dei* and the binary concepts gleaned from Benjamin's Artwork essay offer significant recourses for curating a museo-theology of the museum. Displaying them next to each other also generates significant theological and curatorial insights as they relate to—speak to—each other. The following is a reflection on this juxtaposition.

Cusa's curatorial experiment exemplifies Benjamin's post-aura concepts of exhibition value and distraction. Cusa sends a painting, presumably received from the artist's studio, to the monks. The painting is sent on exhibit and in fact, the artist, specific subject, and its "original context" are not of primary importance—no cult of the artist and their creative genius here since Cusa does not even mention the artist's name. Moreover, the painting's importance is one that is activated by hanging it up somewhere and moving around it as a group, *and in conversation*. The significance of this is that it demonstrates how a confessional or church theology does not have to be antithetical to a post-aura, second technological approach to art, to God, to theology. As mentioned above, Cusa's curatorial experiment is robustly apophatic in that it presumes limitations, unknowability. Yet he enacts this apophasis in the midst of moving, speaking, and listening bodies.

About Cusa's experiment, Catherine Keller writes, "Let me suggest that from this apophasis unfolds, becomes explicit, a radical relationality, and so the relativity of perspectivism, that was gestating in apophatic theology all along."[90] In addition, the "radical relationality" of apophatic theology has implications for the incarnation of Christ, which, for Benjamin, although unstated, is implied, by his claim that first technologies of aura-cult-ritual always have human sacrifice as their culmination. Cusa's curatorial experiment dislodges the incarnation—its "here-and-now" uniqueness in the life of Christ—and distributes it, multiplies it, disperses it. And Keller offers a profoundly insightful concept, which she calls "intercarnation," which is an explicit alternative to the "singular guy incarnate" of Christ's exceptionalism. It resonates with Carlsson Redell's second theology, since it focuses on "just about everybody else."[91] Cusa's curatorial project enacts this multiplicity by focusing on the interaction among the monks the speaking and listening and moving that *might* generate a mystical experience, a process that stands in stark contrast to the aura-ritual-cult singular contemplation. This solitary contemplation of first technology, it should be noted, is not in any way transformed by Alberti's linear perspective, which still leaves in place the stationary autonomous viewer as the beginning and end of aesthetic and religious experience.

There is thus an intimate relationship between apophasis and intercarnation, between unknowability and material entanglement. As Keller observes, there is a "deep fold between nonknowing and nonseparability."[92] This deep fold that relates seemingly

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[90]Catherine Keller, *The Cloud of the Impossible*, 94.

[91]Catherine Keller, *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 2.

[92]Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 89.

opposites and unrelatable entities on the same surface suggests that apophasis requires *veiling* the unknown, the creative, *tehomic* void, *de profundis* rather than placing a vitrine over an artifact. The vitrine can idealize the artifact, thus makes it precious, making it the one way, through representation, that the Unknown is addressed or understood. The vitrine concentrates, constricts, restricts, and locates aura (in the face of Christ) while the veil multiplies it, disperses and distributes it across numerous faces. The unknowability of the world, is unknowable not in one way but in multiple, potentially infinite ways, and through the faces of persons and other non-human entities, from animals, plants, rocks, and yes, even oil paint smeared across the surface of a piece of wood.

The following two chapters put into practice this Cusa-Benjamin installation of concepts as a means to develop a theology of the museum, one in which aura emerges through the improvisations of a hybrid contemplation-distraction, ritual-exhibition value that is creative, improvisational, and *always temporary, provisional, and contingent*. Rilke offers a poignant example of such a veiling approach in a letter to Marie Thun und Taxis, "I cannot understand religious-minded natures who accept and devote themselves to God as a given, without striving to create something new through his presence."[93] The following chapters attempt to create something new, something different in unlikely locations, like a conservator's laboratory in Ghent, Belgium where a face becomes visible or an artist's former studio in Barjac, France that he turned into a museum.

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[93]Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Life*, ed. and trans. Ulrich Baer (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 140.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MYSTIC LAMB'S FACE

CONSERVATION, THEOLOGY, DISPLAY




"Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne"
—Rev 5: 6 (NIV)

"Does the animal have a face?"
—Derrida to Levinas

"There are no words to express the result." Such was the response by a conservator quoted in the statement published by the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage in Brussels late 2019 announcing the completion of a three-year restoration process for the central panel of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Referred to as the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, this panel was part of the second phase of an ambitious and comprehensive fifteen-year restoration and conservation project to restore one of the world's more well-known works of art, one of the great treasures of European culture, painted by Jan and

Hubert van Eyck and completed in 1432. What follows is a theological reflection on its public afterlife.

## THE MYSTIC LAMB GETS A TWITTER ACCOUNT

The focus of the January 22, 2020 article by Naaman Zhou in *The Guardian* was obvious from the title: "Lamb of (Oh My) God: Disbelief at 'Alarmingly Humanoid' Restoration of Ghent Altarpiece." The article detailed the most surprising discovery from this restoration project. What was unveiled through the removal of five hundred years of over-painting, restoration, and dirt? The lamb *had a face*. And this face rendered many speechless. For the next few weeks, the *before* and *after* pictures of the lamb's head circulated throughout social media. While the conservation project for the entire altarpiece is itself a remarkable accomplishment, offering countless new discoveries and insights as well as deployments of new technology, it was the face of the lamb that encapsulated the project and became identified with the *Ghent Altarpiece*. The attention it received was due to the fact that the lamb's head is, as *Smithsonian Magazine* described it, "alarmingly humanoid." The media attention that van Eyck's lamb has received, including its brief but explosive popularity on social media, is significant. The head is not merely "humanoid," smudging the strict Cartesian boundary between "animal" and "human."[1] It is "*alarmingly*" so. The head generated a powerful *affective* response, a response that is more than social media's algorithmic focus on the sensational and the attention-grabbing but was a result of a history entangled with desire, repulsion, power,

[1]Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 11.

identity, and veneration, political and religious violence.[2] This unusual history is also entangled with visibilities and invisibilities, what is seen and unseen, hidden and revealed, veiled and vitrined, overpainted and removed, displayed and stored, closed and opened. In other words, the history of this remarkable artifact is at once museological *and* theological. It is *museological* because it is bound up with managing the mechanisms and apparatuses that make the work visible—how it was seen and by whom. It is *theological* in that this management of display is entangled with the belief in the visible and invisible images it generated and faith in what nevertheless remained invisible.



**ORIGINS, CONTEXT, ICONOGRAPHY**

*The Ghent Altarpiece*, or, as it is often called, *The Mystic Lamb*, was painted by Hubert and Jan van Eyck and unveiled in St. John's Church (now St. Bavo's Cathedral) in Ghent on 6 May 1432, the day of the Holy Baptism of the second son of the Duke of Burgundy, Phillip the Good. It was commissioned by Joos Vijd, a wealthy and influential patrician and his wife, Elisabeth Borluur, also from nobility who were childless and

[2]See Noah Charney, *Stealing the Mystic Lamb: The True Story of the World's Most Coveted Masterpiece* (New York, 2012).

wanted to honor and bless their ancestry. They had served as patrons for the building of one of the new side chapels in the church, which was dedicated to John the Baptist, the city's patron saint. And so, in addition to funding and establishing what became known as the Vijd Chapel, they commissioned Hubert in 1422 to paint an altarpiece, which also included funding for two priests to perform a daily Eucharist for the couple and their lineage as well as a sexton to care for the chapel and the altarpiece.[3]

Hubert died in 1426 and his younger brother Jan, who was at the time court painter for Philip the Good, took over work on the altarpiece with the blessing of the Duke after Jan returned from a diplomatic journey in Portugal and Spain on Christmas Day, 1429. The altarpiece, which at nearly four meters high and over five meters long when open, is much larger and more complex than most altarpieces, since it is made up of twenty separate panels. It also consists of two levels, an upper and lower register. Its subject matter is atypical, since the traditional altarpiece form usually includes the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Instead, this altarpiece offers a heavenly and earthly realm, coinciding with the upper and lower registers, reconciled through the last judgement of the sacrificial lamb on the altar found in the Book of Revelation 7. The altarpiece consists of a complex iconographical program that has attracted the interest of scholars since the birth of art history as an academic discipline in the mid-nineteenth century. When the Eucharistic Mass was not performed in the chapel, the altarpiece remained closed. While closed it features panels of John the Evangelist and John the Baptist flanked by the donors and the upper register include an interior scene of the

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[3]Danny Praet and Maximiliaan P.J. Martens, eds. *The Ghent Altarpiece—van Eyck: Art, History, Science and Religion* (Hannibal, 2019); Maximiliaan P.J. Martens, *The Ghent Altarpiece in Detail* (Ludion, 2020); Bernhard Ridderbos, "The Ghent Altarpiece: Iconography and Patronage," *Oud Holland* 135/1 (2022).

Annunciation with the archangel Gabriel and Mary and above this register includes the Old Testament prophets Zechariah and Micah as well as two "pagan" sibyls. The interior composition consists of a central portion that features a *Dëesis* of the upper register, which includes the seated Christ (or the Father) with John the Baptist and Mary standing beside Him and below is the main panel, the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb.[4] These four central panels are then flanked by eight others, featuring Adam and Eve and the heavenly choir and musicians. The four panels that flank the mystic lamb in the lower register include the pilgrims, the hermits, the so-called *Soldiers of Christ*, and *Just Judges*.

The *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* panel includes the fountain of eternal life, apostles, martyrs, prophets, church fathers who gather around the slain lamb from whose breast pours blood that fills a chalice. The image of the slain lamb comes from the following remarkable passage in Revelation 7.

> After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all the nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb…For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. (Rev 7: 9-10; 17).

The fountain depicted in the center of the panel includes a Latin inscription that reads: "This is the fountain of the water of life proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb," a text that combines Rev 21:6 and Rev 22:1. One of the many debates in the scholarly literature on the altarpiece is whether it is part of a visual tradition called "All Saints" or a tradition called "New Heaven and New Earth," the former referring to an

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[4]It remains an open question about whether the seated figure is Christ or the Father depending on how the scene is read, as a *future* mystical vision that reveals the Father, or as a *present* Christological state.

image that depicts the communion of saints that intercede on behalf of humanity (in the present) or if it depicts the New Jerusalem after the Last Judgement (in the future), which is depicted in Rev 21 in which the old heaven and earth pass away.[5] As Berhard Riddarbos observes,

> The eschatological meanings of the Lamb and the fountain are completely interwoven with their liturgical significance; whereas the throne bench has become an altar, with a chalice receiving the Lamb's blood, the blood transforms the altar into the throne from which the water of life proceeds., and whereas the water of life is represented as real water by the fountain, the small stream flowing out of the basin into the direction of the altar in the Vijd chapel relates it to the daily celebration of the sacrifice of the mass in that location.[6]

The complex iconographical program "testifies to the extreme ambitions Joos Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut cherished as the patrons" and that these ambitions were not communicated only to the artist but to a theological advisor "who had the capacities to combine and adapt existing themes, to invent new ones and to produce a variety of texts, derived from various sources or composed by himself, that elucidated the images…which necessarily led to some ambiguities in the painting."[7] Chief among the ambiguities is the identity of the divine person, whether it depicts the Father or the Son. Moreover, these anomalies had caused some researchers, including Erwin Panofsky, to suggest that the panels are an arbitrary assemblage scavenged from Hubert's workshop. But this and other irregularities only expand the potential realm of meaning for the Eucharist that would be performed daily in the chapel. Indeed, many of the details of the altarpiece, such as certain inscriptions and, as we shall see below, other elements in the composition would

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[5]Bernhard Ridderbos, "The Ghent Altarpiece: Iconography and Patronage," *Oud Holland* 135/1 (2022), 22.

[6]Bernhard Ridderbos, "The Ghent Altarpiece: Iconography and Patronage," *Oud Holland* 135/1 (2022), 26.

[7]Bernhard Ridderbos, "The Ghent Altarpiece: Iconography and Patronage," *Oud Holland* 135/1 (2022), 31.

be impossible to recognize. This served to emphasize the sacred and heavenly dimension that the altarpiece was intended to visualize as if the 20-panel polyptych served as a bridge between the earthly and heavenly realms, an embodiment in oil paint and wood, what bread and wine effected through the Eucharist. Rather than serve simply as a backdrop to the daily Mass, the altarpiece was conceived, through the collaboration between the donors, a theological advisor, and painters Hubert and later Jan, as a *participant* in the performance of the Eucharist, enacting, embodying, visualizing or even visually affirming its effects.[8]

Research has suggested that one of the probable theological advisors was Olivier de Langue, who was the Prior of the church in Ghent at the time of installation and also the author of a treatise on the sacrament of the Eucharist, *Tractatus de corpore Cristi*, which he subsequently published in 1440.[9] According to art historian Dana Goodgal,

> Interpreted in the light of Olivier de Langue's "Tractatus de corpore Cristi," the inscriptions and images on the interior of the Ghent Altarpiece all relate coherently and simply to a single theme: the communion of the mystical body with its head, through the sacrament of the eucharist.[10]

This theological program is a conservative remnant of the Scholastic past, even for the fifteenth century, which consists of

> strictly regulated religious and social groups that adore the sacrificial Lamb of God. A mystical vision of the Godhead—Paradise—is only accessible through the carefully mapped paths of traditional church leaders and theologians…these views do not take into productive account the opposition to speculative theology,

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[8]For one of the few in-depth explorations of the liturgical role of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, see Jonathan A. Anderson, *The Invisibility of Religion in Contemporary Art* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2025), 219-240.

[9]See Dana Ruth Goodgal, "The Iconography of the Ghent Altarpiece" (PhD diss. University of Pennsylvania, 1981), 200-233.

[10]Dana Ruth Goodgal, "The Iconography of the Ghent Altarpiece" (PhD diss. University of Pennsylvania, 1981), 234.

> nor the stress on private devotion, that had been growing in importance since the fourteenth century. They reiterate in a many-layered form the centuries-old claim of the Church hierarchy to absolute authority.[11]

From this perspective, argues Craig Harbison, the "startling realism" of the paintings, in which "a painter is able to construct the world in a way that corresponds to carefully developed Church doctrine or practice" would be a "Scholastic dream come true.[12] Harbison is quick to point out that this elaborate program did not reflect modern trends in theological discourse at the time, such as the role of subjective mystical vision, private devotion, and the emergence of nominalism. Harbison thus puts his finger on a significant tension:

> The theology of the Ghent Altarpiece may, in the fifteenth century, have been like a dinosaur today, an exaggerated relic of the past, but that view would seem to belie the artistic impact and novelty of the work. Why the first monumental public panel painting made in the Netherlands should be so traditional in is theological thrust is an interesting question.[13]

Yet the donors' spiritual ambitions combined with the creative ambitions of the artists seem to push against the Scholastic theological program that, with St. Irenaeus, there is no salvation outside the organizational structure and hierarchy of the Church.

If the theological program that served as the frame for the donors and artists was indeed Eucharistic, it was an interpretation of the Eucharist that was thus quite conservative at the time as well as dogmatic and hierarchical. It was *dogmatic* in that it is related to a theological understanding of Christ's real presence and *what* that presence is understood to be in the bread and wine. It was *hierarchical* in that the Eucharist was

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[11]Craig Harbison, *Jan van Eyck: The Play of Realism*, (London: Reaktion, 2012), 219.

[12]Craig Harbison, *Jan van Eyck: The Play of Realism*, (London: Reaktion, 2012), 215.

[13]Craig Harbison, *Jan van Eyck: The Play of Realism*, (London: Reaktion, 2012), 219.

administered through the strict ecclesial hierarchy, which it made visible. In the scholastic framework, this Eucharistic dimension is one of control, that is, in limiting how and in what ways it is understood as mediating grace and God's presence *and for whom*. The hermeneutic stakes of the meaning of the Eucharist are immense in Christendom. And indeed, as Donald Preziosi claims, "The most fundamental problem facing a theory of meaning in Europe, in fact, was the problem of the Eucharist, which occupies the absolutely key central position in traditional Christian religious dogma…At the heart, then, of traditional semiotic theory is a sign that is not a sign—the Eucharist."[14]

The Eucharist has served as a site for intense theological debate as well as ecclesial control in part because it *defies control*, exceeding efforts to limit and control it by defining what it means (and most importantly, what it doesn't mean) and also *who* is qualified to administer it and *how* it is administered and for whom. The Eucharist is, as Brannon Hancock argues, "inherently and irreducibly scandalous," especially when it eludes efforts at domestication by the Church and finds its way into the arts and literature, where it is loosened from these confessional, theological, dogmatic, and ecclesial parameters and allowed to drift, migrating into other creative practices.[15] The post-Constantinian church has sought to impose theological, dogmatic, and ecclesial limits on the Eucharist, which anchors, stabilizes, and controls its meaning. This tantamount to placing a conceptual vitrine over it to secure the inherent chaotic instability of grace. Yet, following Hancock, the Eucharist resembles a veil—a thin and translucent scrim that

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[14]Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 31.

[15]Brannon Hancock, *The Scandal of Sacramentality: The Eucharist in Literary and Theological Perspectives* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), xvii.

flows over and that responds to and collaborates with the void—the creative, unknowable, yet chaotic *de profundis*, a too-muchness—whether that too muchness is interpreted as human freedom or God's grace through Christ—or both.

Closely related to the doctrine of the Eucharist, that is, the doctrine of how Christ is present in and through the bread and wine, is the doctrine of the incarnation, which as discussed in the previous chapter, is a crucial locus for the vitrine of aura-ritual-cult. Catherine Keller, however, prefers the concept of *intercarnation*, which pushes against the exclusionary tendency to control the incarnation of Christ by the Church, which she refers to as *Christology, Inc*., in which the incarnation of Christ becomes the exception that excludes "everybody else." Rather, Keller's concept "highlights the intermittencies, the intervals and interdependencies, of world relations" which reflects the expansiveness of God who is "through all and in all" (Eph 4:6).[16] Keller's dynamic and expansive concept of *intercarnation* demonstrates how the Eucharist has such transgressively expansive potential and that the Eucharist should consist of *taking the vitrine off Christ*. Moreover, it is a potential that might have more accurately reflected the ambitions of the donors and the imagination of the artists against the conservative orientation of the Ghent theological advisors. Petra Carlsson Redell further affirms the expansive, intercarnational potential of not only the Eucharist but *all* liturgical practices when she suggests,

> A material approach to liturgy could open us to wordless—at least in the abstract sense of words—encounters between things and bodies, hands, lips, dreams, desires, demons, memories, pews, wine, narratives, anger, love, bread, smells.[17]

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[16]Catherine Keller, *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 2-3.

[17]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Foucault, Art, and the Mystery of Things* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 126.

Liturgical practices are a material means of grace and thus also a potential source of creative, expressive and innovative freedom.

*De visione Dei*

In the Mary panel in the Annunciation scene in the upper register of the closed altarpiece, the open book next to Mary includes the phrase, *de visione Dei* in red letters.[18] Although Nicholas of Cusa's book, *De visione Dei*—and with it his *sensibile experimentum*—would not be published for ten more years, the altarpiece suggests a deep shared concern with seeing and being seen, what is visible and what remains invisible. In an essay on the relationship of the altarpiece to the study of optics, Marc de Mey suggests that "it seems a plausible hypothesis that the *Ghent Altarpiece* might be organized around the theme of a pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem to see God."[19] De Mey points out that in the development of the theological implications of optics, to see God is to see all things with the light that is God. That to see is, in that very Cusan insight, is also to be seen by God, through the light that is God that not only enables the subject's sight, their seeing, but also *being seen* in a mutuality that does not express mastery but *relationship*. Interestingly, this is not only Cusan but also Rilkean insight as well, an insight that brings out the *apophatic* dimension of seeing and being seen, of seeing only in part, or at all. In a diary entry in 1900, Rilke confesses, "But there are days on which I cannot speak about myself without naming God, the solitary God in whose shadow my words darken and

[18]Marc de Mey, "*De visione Dei*: Optics, Theology and Philosophy in the Ghent Altarpiece," in Praet & Martens, eds. *The Ghent Altarpiece—Van Eyck*, 203-215.

[19]Marc de Mey, "*De visione Dei*, 204.

glisten."[20] God's light and the shadows they produce illumine the world as well as make our ability to see the world possible. And so, de Mey again asks, "Do we find in the *Ghent Altarpiece* an analogous fascination with optics, which links the sensitivity to everyday lower visual perceptual processes to a comparable boundless reverence for the Highest light?"[21] And with its incredible details, such as hair follicles, plant leaves, jewels, and the dazzling reflections they refract and absorb, the *Ghent Altarpiece* offers a hyper-visual experience that stretches, pulls at, and tears the rationalistic Scholastic theological system that, following Harbison and Goodgal, characterizes Jan and Hubert's theological advisors. "The question, however," de Mey finally asks, is whether the painter, as a specialist in representing what we see, may not, against theological advice, have given in to a tempting possibility of visualization."[22] It is this "giving in" to the temptation of making visible through this new medium—oil paint—that allows for the subtle application of thin paint layers that can produce an unprecedented luminous glow. This process enables the *Ghent Altarpiece* to slosh and spill beyond the rim of the Scholastic theological program that was to be its container that the donors and the artists, *may have sought to overwhelm*. And so, the altarpiece, like Cusa's *sensibile experimentum*, operates like a curatorial experiment that activates the viewer's perception—and significantly, confronts their *limits of perception*—what is visible and invisible; what can be seen and unseen, and the invisible images it generates that can be believed.

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[20]Rainer Maria Rilke, 27 Sept 1900 diary entry.

[21]Marc de Mey, "*De visione Dei*, 209.

[22] Marc de Mey, "*De visione Dei*, 205.

In addition to its Eucharistic function, the *Ghent Altarpiece* was also considered to be a work of art that attracted attention from many of the most influential figures in politics, culture, and the church. Also, the church recognized very early on that it would be a destination for pilgrims. As Harbison observes, "This work was clearly intended from the outset to be a spectacular public work of art. In this way it is distinctive, even unique, in van Eyck's career."[23]

The afterlife of the altarpiece begins *after* the artists, their workshops, the donors, the theological advisors leave the scene. It is to this history that I now turn, the history of the altarpiece, not in its conception and production, including the theological framework within which it was produced, but its life—on its own—out in the world and how the world responded to this remarkable work.

History of the Ghent Altarpiece's Afterlife, in Pieces

The world responded to the *Ghent Altarpiece* in a multitude of ways, some with violence, others with devotion, some irresponsibly, and others with desire, and still others with inexplicably odd behavior—all responses were in some ways *theological*, that is, motivated by a belief in invisible images in which the altarpiece participated. Art historian Hélène Dubois describes some these responses in this way:

> It was extensively overpainted in the mid-sixteenth century, split up and displaced at least nine times, stolen in 1794 following the French Revolution and again in the Second World War, and stored in wretched conditions on several occasions. Some of its shutters were sold in 1816 and sawn in half in Berlin in 1894....[24]

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[23]Craig Harbison, *Jan van Eyck: The Play of Realism*, (London: Reaktion, 2012), 217.

[24]Hélène Dubois, "The Conservation History of the Ghent Altarpiece," *The Burlington Magazine* 160 (Sept 2018): 754.

But there is more. A lot more. The outer panels or shutters, which were sold by the Church in 1816 just one year after the main four panels had been returned from Paris after the Battle of Waterloo, ended up in Berlin in 1821 and for nearly a century were exhibited at the Gemäldegalerie where they were shown with a copy of the four central panels that were painted by Michiel Coxcie for King Philip II of Spain in 1557-1559. The Berlin panels were eventually returned to Belgium under the conditions of the Versailles Treaty in 1920. Two of the side panels of the interior were stolen in 1934 and while one was recovered, the other was never found.[25] As the Germans were invading Belgium in May 1940, the altarpiece was smuggled out of Ghent to the Vatican for safe keeping but it was intercepted by the Germans and held in a castle in Bavaria in 1942 and then hidden in a salt mine in Altausse, near Salzburg along with numerous other looted artworks. In 1945 the works were recovered by American military forces and returned to Belgium, receiving a hero's welcome as if it had been a prisoner of war. It subsequently became an image for a new post-World War II reconstructed liberal order and an icon of the hypostatic union of Dutch and French Belgian cultural identity.[26]

The *Ghent Altarpiece* has spent a significant part of its history in pieces and absent from its intended location in the Vijd chapel. In 1566 and 1578 violent Calvinist iconoclastic riots broke out in Ghent and the altarpiece was taken apart and through ropes and pulleys, raised to the tower and hidden from the violence. In 1578 the two panels depicted Adam and Eve were moved to the Town Hall and the Calvinist leader Jan van

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[25]See Karel Mortier, "Crime and Myth," The Ghent Altarpiece: The Most Stolen Artwork Ever," in Praet & Martens, eds. *The Ghent Altarpiece—Van Eyck*, 303-319.

[26]Jenny Graham, "The Ghent Altarpiece after World War II: Restitution, Restoration, and Redemption," *International Journal of Cultural Property* 28 (2021): 343-367.

Hembyze was poised to hand the entire altarpiece over to Queen Elizabeth I of England in return for military aid, a transaction that was prevented only through the deft intervention of the donors' descendants. In 1781 the Adam and Eve panels again were removed because King Joseph II, who had come to visit Ghent to see the altarpiece, was offended by their nudity.

Despite these disturbances and removals, the daily Mass in the Vijd chapel in front of the altarpiece continued until 1795 when the French military confiscated the four main panels, which were then put on view in the Louvre until 1815. And just as all twenty panels were united in Ghent (the Adam and Eve panels were apparently still in storage and thus could join the rest), the church council decided to sell the remaining six side panels for a ridiculously low price and by 1821 they had entered the Berlin state collection. And in 1861, in response to the lingering offense that the Adam and Eve panels caused to the delicate constitutions of Victorian viewers, Victor Lgye painted copies of the Adam and Eve panels that included covering their nudity by painting them wearing bear furs. And in 1894 these six panels, which had panels on both sides (exterior and interior paintings) were *sawn in two* in order to enable all twelve of the paintings to be shown in the Berlin art museum. While the altarpiece was finally put back together in 1920, two panels were subsequently stolen in 1934, with only one having been since recovered. And so, since 1934, the altarpiece has remained a *fragment*—even if a high-quality copy of the lost painting, the *Just Judges*, was made by Jef Van der Veken, a restorer at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in 1939-40.

The history of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, as this absurdly tragic chronology shows, has been in pieces, torn away, hidden, confiscated, or abandoned in church storage. Its

absences has defined its life as much as its presences. Throughout its history, it has provoked and attracted kings and rulers, from Napoleon and Hitler to Joseph II, Phillip II, and Philip the Good. It has also inspired copies and thefts. It has offended the sensibilities of prudes and terrified and angered Calvinists. And it has been a complicated responsibility and at times an over-whelming burden for a church leadership that had struggled with its care beyond its liturgical function in a side chapel paid for by a wealthy and influential donor. The altarpiece has thus lived much of its life in fragments. It is thus not surprising that it has long lost its original hinges, since it has been open and closed, taken apart, and put back together numerous times. Moreover, not only have pieces of the altarpiece shown up in cities like Berlin and Paris, it has survived arduous travel and the precarities that such transit brings with it, whether it was to Paris in the late nineteenth century or to Berlin in the mid-nineteenth century.

What might it mean that an enormous polyptych, consisting of twenty panels, painted for a relatively small side chapel to accompany a daily Mass for the child-less donors, was often broken and torn from its location? From the perspective of art historian Amy Knight Powell, the *Ghent Altarpiece* is the very definition of a "promiscuous" material artifact that will not, *cannot* remain in one place for very long. Perhaps because it is made up of so many different panels, it was in some sense destined to be taken apart, separated, conscripted into new collaboratorions and assemblages, whether political, cultural, and aesthetic. Yet its theological and Eucharistic framework can be read as revealing those "other" intentions, *theo*-political, *theo*-cultural, and *theo*-aesthetic. What do the central panels make visible that so attracted and seduced the likes of Napoleon and Hitler, and others, like scholars such as Panofsky and Friedlander to study its

iconography, and those like me who make pilgrimages to Ghent to see it? I suggest that it is as much about what is invisible as what is visible, what is unseen as important as what is seen. For in the last analysis, it seems that the *Ghent Altarpiece* is an icon, a visibility that draws deeply, creatively, evocatively from a dynamic between two powerful invisible images. One is an image of order, sovereignty, hierarchy, and ecclesial authority; the other is the chaotic and uncontrollable universality of grace that, like the spirit, blows where it wills. It is an icon for which its many journeys, its many separations are as theologically relevant as its iconography. What is more, when the altarpiece panels were not being taken apart, hidden away, confiscated, or stolen, they were being *painted over*.

History of Conservation and Overpainting

Attempts to conserve and restore the *Ghent Altarpiece* have played just an important role in its history as its many thefts, removals, and other forms of separation and fragmentation. There are numerous reasons for these numerous attempts to preserve and protect it. First, the frequent opening and closing of the altarpiece itself in the course of the daily Mass and for the many visitors to the church to see the work contributed to the instability of the frames and hinges. The numerous times it was taken apart, stored or hidden away and then reassembled also contributed to its precarity. Moreover, from its public presentation on 6 May 1432, the altarpiece became an image—religious and cultural—that demanded protection and preservation. Caitlin Desilvey observes, "Objects of heritage are preserved, most transparently, in order to stabilize memory in material form and to stabilize associated identity formations."[27] How might the many and diverse

[27]Caitlin Desilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 113.

conservation and preservation efforts over the course of the eventful life of the *Ghent Altarpiece* be understood as attempts to stabilize memory and identity, and more specifically, what might those formations entail? And how might a museal theology offer insight and contribute to understanding?

The earliest recorded evidence of restoration work done on the altarpiece is in September 1550 when two painters, Lancelot Blondeel and Jan van Scorel arrived amidst significant fanfare to engage in a comprehensive conservation project. However, their records indicate that the barely one-hundred-year-old altarpiece had already been "clumsily cleaned" and that this cleaning resulted in the destruction of the predella, which had been painted in tempera and which apparently consisted of a depiction of Hell. They were reported to have venerated and kissed the panels before engaging in their work. Jean-Baptiste de Bruiyn, a court painter from Brussels, was hired in 1617 to clean and restore the altarpiece and subsequent records indicate that it was cleaned and restored again in 1663 and 1731. And while they were in exile in Paris, the central panels were restored as were the side panels when they were in Berlin.

In an effort to stabilize meaning and identity through the preservation of the altarpiece, these numerous cleanings and restoration, no matter how well done, added new and uneven layers of paint, new and uneven layers of varnish—new brushwork—to the original work of Hubert, Jan, and their respective workshops, adding layers of interpretation to what could be seen and what, over time, was obscured. As art historian Alexander Nagel remarks, "Humans choose to preserve even as physical materials deteriorate, yielding the paradox that works have often been partially or wholly replaced in efforts to make them persist. A fundamental form of preservation is more art

making."[28] Preservation becomes interpretation becomes creation. The history of the *Ghent Altarpiece* is the history of a constantly moving, shifting, assemblage of panels that travel about Europe, from museum walls in Paris and Berlin to storage facilities in Ghent, or painted on by accomplished and talented painters as well as clumsy ones, each effort mobilizing communities and networks of collaborators directly and indirectly invested in and responding to the image of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, directly and indirectly.

Nagel also observes that conservation and preservation, as a collection of practices relating to the care of artifacts, became less visible as the art museum, the public facing dimension of their display, became visible. He writes,

> The emergence of these institutions had the effect of hiving conservation off from the larger processes I have been describing, sending it out of view eventually into the lab. And it remains largely out of view to this day, in the sense that it remains separate, specialized, and in a strangely subservient relation to the more public-facing institutions of the museum, the gallery, the auction house, and the publications they produce.[29]

One of the ways that conservation and preservation became invisible was to separate them from the realm of creative production (studios) and curatorial practice (museums) and locate them in science and technology (laboratories) in order to keep them separate from the concerns of the arts and humanities. Yet Nagel hopes that the lab can be made more visible and integrated more broadly into more public-facing aspects of the artworld as well as of the study of the arts.

> As conservation and preservation…are reconnected with this longer history and side array of practices, they are not only seen anew but, in fact, change direction, as they are brought into open dialogue with ephemerality, loss and contingency.[30]

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[28]Alexander Nagel, "Introduction: Conservation as Performance," in *The Expanded Field of Conservation*, eds. Caroline Fowler & Alexander Nagel (Clark Art Institute; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 8.

[29]Alexander Nagel, "Introduction: Conservation as Performance," 9-10.

[30]Alexander Nagel, "Introduction: Conservation as Performance," 11.

To bring "ephemerality, loss, and contingency" into greater visibility in relation to works of art, like the *Ghent Altarpiece*, is to smudge the distinctions between what is seen and unseen, visible and invisible. At the same time it suggests that conservation and preservation are part of the museological and curatorial means by which such visibilities are generated and maintained. It also enables theological reflection at the museological point where the visible and invisible meet. Moreover, it suggests that conservation and preservation, as a scientific or technical practice, is itself *theological* and thus in part driven by belief not science, even if its instruments are scientific, technological.

An instance of conservation and preservation coming into greater visibility—out of the scientific lab and into the public sphere to start a theological debate—is on display with the comprehensive restoration project of the *Ghent Altarpiece* in Brussels in 1950. This conservation project was initiated just five years after the altarpiece had been recovered by the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives division (MFAA) of the Allied Forces and was the first work of art to be repatriated to its country of origin through the Munich Central Collecting Point. And on 21 August 1945 a Beligian delegate was there to receive the work.[31] And that delegate was Paul Coremans (1908-65), head of the laboratory of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels.

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[31]This section relies primarily on the research presented by Jenny Graham, "The Ghent altarpiece after World War II: Restitution, Restoration, and Redemption," *International Journal of Cultural Property* 28 (2021): 343-367.



Photograph of *The Ghent Altarpiece* on display in the Palais Royal, Brussels, September 1945 (courtesy of the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, Brussels / KIK-IRPA

The *Ghent Altarpiece* was celebrated like a returning war hero. Jenny Graham writes that

> the painting was ceremonially displayed in a lavish reception room with piles of laurel leaves gathered below it to denote a status of the highest order…The symbolism of the laurel—of victory and, in Christian iconography, of the resurrection—evoked a script perfectly suited to an artwork that had undergone its own apotheosis through its safe delivery from the Nazis by the largely American personnel of the MFAA.[32]

Moreover, on 6 September a reception in honor of General Dwight D. Eisenhower and his military chief-of-staff in Europe, General Walter Bedell Smith, was held in front of the altarpiece, in which Smith was awarded the Belgian Order of the Crown. Graham observes that "The altarpiece was not merely scenery in this context, then, but a highly resonant receptacle endowed with multiple meanings and representations regarding

[32]Graham, "The Ghent Altarpiece after World War II: Restitution, Restoration, and Redemption," 346.

Belgian national identity and pro-American relations in the aftermath of World War II."[33] Just as it had served as the site for the daily mass for the souls of the donors and their ancestors in Ghent, the altarpiece now served as the site for a secular sacrament, the transformation (or transubstantiation) of the polyptych into an icon of Belgian national identity, European culture, internationalism, and American involvment in post-war Europe. The altarpiece became one of the first theological images for a post-war European secular consensus. Indeed, Brussels took a leading role in the development of a European union and what would become NATO in 1949, which would be led by Eisenhower himself in 1951. The celebration of the re-opening of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris on 7 Dec 2024 as a monument to European culture has its antecedent in the secular celebration of the *Ghent Altarpiece* as the first secular monument to a unified post-war Europe and Belgian national identity.

After its reception in Brussels, a formal repatriation service was held at the Cathedral in Ghent on 30 October 1945 to celebrate its return home (one day before All Soul's Day). Graham notes that following the altarpiece's recovery and the various celebrations around its return to Belgium and Ghent specifically, newspaper accounts began to refer to the altarpiece as *The Lamb* or the *Mystic Lamb*, which used its Christian iconography as a redemptive sacrificial victim to refer to Belgium national identity and European suffering.

Yet Belgium as a unified nation was at the time a rhetorical secular construction given the deep-seated tensions and resentments between the Dutch-speaking Flemish north and the French-speaking south, with the latter marked by the use of French in law,

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[33]Graham, "The Ghent Altarpiece after World War II: Restitution, Restoration, and Redemption," 347.

culture, and science, even in Flanders. Brussels was eager to claim for the altarpiece its status as national treasure and cultural heritage as part of an emerging post-war European national identity, given its emergence as the capital of a nascent European Union. The Flemish north, however, primarily through the leadership of the Catholic diocese in Ghent, was reluctant to cede its symbolic value for such secular forms of national and international use, even as post-war Belgium prospered economically because of funding from the Marshall Plan and American tourism to such (unbombed) medieval towns as Bruges and Ghent.

The *Ghent Altarpiece* as a secular site for these theeological tensions was played out over the next few years over the question of the deteriorating condition of the panels after their return to Brussels. Upon their arrival to Brussels, conservator Paul Coremans had initiated a vast and detailed photographic documentation of the panels, resulting in over 200 high-resolution black-and-white details, which in 1948 were published along with an essay on its history, interpretation, and condition. Coremans was adamant that the panels were in a precarious condition and their restoration was urgent. However, since the altarpiece was under the jurisdiction of the cathedral chapter in Ghent and not the Central Laboratory of Belgian Museums/Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), he needed the permission of the church administration. And so, while its ownership by the Church expeditated its speedy return to Brussels after the war, it now presented a signficiant challenge for Coremans. "Thus, Coremans's fight to get the altarpiece the expert treatment it needed" as Graham observes,

> had to be political from the outset—explicitly outward facing and rooted in the langauge of cultural patrimony. Necessarily, it had to win over the favor of the

> conservative naysayers among the clergy at Ghent who opposed the removal of the altarpiece.[34]

Coremans's efforts included working with two newly established international organizations that were concerned with the protection and treatment of cultural objects after the war, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1945 and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1946. Coremans's campaign, which ultimately proved successful, included bringing Church administration into the process and hosting symposia with international experts, organizing expert advisory committees, and communicating to the public.

And on 13 October 1950, the altarpiece was dismantled once again, leaving St. Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent for the laboratories at the Royal Academy in Brussels. The departure of the altarpiece caused anxiety in the news media in the Flemish region, which called this departure "the fourth time it had been confiscated," the others being in 1794, 1816, and 1940. The media also lamented that it had just returned from its "wanderings" and deserved to rest at home. And there were fears that once it left Ghent for Brussels, it would never return, that it would be displayed as a work of art in an art museum rather than as a religious artifact in the Cathedral chapel where it was originally intended.

Compounding the concern that the altarpiece would never return to its original home, fears ignited about the details of the conservation project itself, especially the practices of the new conservation. These practices sought to remove more of the old varnishes, or "patina," that had been applied to the surface in an attempt to protect the original painted surfaces had often dulled the color of the pigments. Subjected to "clumsily restored" and heavy-handed overpainting projects, the altarpiece was again

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[34]Graham, "The Ghent Altarpiece after World War II: Restitution, Restoration, and Redemption," 351.

faced with a potentially over-aggressive and heavy-handed restoration process in the service of revealing its "original state." These fears over the fate of the altarpiece were couched in theological terms by the media.

> An additional and recurrent theme was the near-providential nature of the altarpiece's survival in the face of its many ordeals. This script emerged in the press in the form of an implicit redemption narrative in which the altarpiece had been saved– up to then– by miraculous means rather than by circumstance. The divine or supernatural language employed in these accounts suggests a larger popular internalization of the altarpiece's visual content whereby the image of the "Lamb" had entered the general consciousness as a mystical symbol of its own fateful journey. Such a script also drew sharp attention to the perceived new danger posed by the controversial restoration project.[35]

The controversial resoration project was given more fuel due to the so-called National Gallery cleaning controversy in London in 1947 when the gallery exhibited seventy Old Masters paintings. The removal of discolored varnish from these paintings over a ten-year period resulted in such surpringly bright pictures that it became the object of criticism from such important figures as Ernst Gombrich, the director of the Warburg Institute, and also resulted in a government inquiry. The controvery in London, as it was in Brussels, pitted *science* vs *art* or the cold unfeeling endeavor of scientific inquiry against the humanism and aesthetics of art, of curatorial and museological expertise. The debate coalesced into two opposing sides: the harsh artificial lighting of modern science and the secular museum, and the international future in modern Brussels in one corner and in the other, the soft cosy atmosphere of spirituality, with the flickering candlelight of religion, tradition, humanism, and the cathedral in medieval Ghent.

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[35]Graham, "The Ghent Altarpiece after World War II: Restitution, Restoration, and Redemption," 357-58.

And for some commentators, including the former director of the National Gallery of Ireland, Thomas Bodklin, the Cathedral personnel had not proven themselves worthy curators and caretakers of the altarpiece. In 1945 Bodklin stated,

> The city of Ghent can scarcely be said to have deserved… the van Eyck altarpiece… The ecclesiastical authorities had not proved themselves worthy custodians of this treasure in the past.... Though in most cases it is eminently desirable that monumental pictures should hang in their original site, the van Eyck altar-piece, if it survives the war, might be made an exception to the rule. Were it sent to the Royal Museum at Brussels it could be displayed to much greater advantage, be better preserved and looked after, and be seen by far more people than at Ghent.[36]

Bodklin argues that the altarpiece is better cared for in the art museum by art curators and conservators rather than in the Cathedral, where it had been carlessly looked after by a well-meaning but unqualified church administration. The question is, however, does the altarpiece serve a religious or cultural function at St. Bavo's Cathedral?

Despite the polemical opposition of Cathedral and Museum, priests and curators, religion and science, faith and knowledge, past and future, Coremans engaged in a proactive promotion campaign with public hearings, which succeeded in developing a relationship—albeit tense and complex—between Brussels and Ghent, between the cultural and religious leadership that resulted in the agreement of a moderate restoration project in which it was agreed that the sixteenth-century varnishes were not to be removed and the only varnish that would be removed would be where it threatened the orginal paint layers. As Graham concludes, "the middle way in conservation—the 'do-no-harm' school of thought that has become standard—had found an early and powerful

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[36]Graham, "The Ghent Altarpiece after World War II: Restitution, Restoration, and Redemption," 360.

expression in Belgium during a decisive moment in the reaffirmation of its cultural identity."[37]

One of the more challenging aspects of the conservation project was the uneven condition of the nineteen panels and the need to achieve an even color tonality across the polyptych. Although Coremans and his team could not make the promised Easter 1951 deadline, he was able to finish the project by November of the same year, much to the satisfaction of all parties, Brussels and Ghent. Although he believed that the one year project was only a stop-gap measure to serve temporary stabilization, Coremans's team's extensive research and documentation over this period resulted in a landmark publication in 1953, entitled *L'Agneau mystique au Laboratoire*.[38]

One of the more visible discoveries of Coremans's restoration project was located in the central panel of the *Mystic Lamb*. As she concludes her essay on the restoration project, Jenny Graham writes,

> In a neatly discernable way, although few may have thought about it in such terms, the renewed symbolism of the dove, with its message of hope and more usual association with the baptism of Christ, mirrored the re-blessing of the altarpiece as it emerged from its latest challenge.[39]

Caitlin Desilvey offers an important observation that speaks directly to the *Ghent Altarpiece* and this conservation project, "With each act of preservation, the vulnerable object becomes (a little bit of) us, and its unmaking threatens to unmake our identities as well."[40] Coremans's efforts brought conservation and restoration into the forefront of

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[37]Graham, "The Ghent Altarpiece after World War II: Restitution, Restoration, and Redemption," 365.

[38]Paul Coremans, *L'Agneau mystique au laboratoire: examen et traitement* (De Sikkel, Anvers, 1953).

[39]Graham, "The Ghent Altarpiece after World War II: Restitution, Restoration, and Redemption," 365.

[40]Caitlin Desilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

cultural politics and in an interesting way, mediating the polemical positions (and invisible images) represented by modernity and tradition, science and religion, museum and cathedral that Brussels and Ghent embodied through the altarpiece. Although it might be too much of a stretch to compare Coremans to Nicholas of Cusa, it might be instructive, however, to consider Coremans's advocacy in the light of Cusa's own bureaucratic and administrative leadership as both had to navigate and curate their respective economic households. Coremans's success consisted of taking the altarpiece and the latest technologies of conservation out of the lab and into the public arena, subjected science (and the invisible images that sustain it) into to the vulnerability of debate in order to build a consensus through public demonstration and conversation—seeing, speaking, and hearing. Although it might go too far to compare Coremans to Cusa, I will claim Coremans's work for my emergent museal theology given his ability to curate the complicated *Oikonomia* of the altarpiece.

But the conservation history of the *Ghent Altarpiece* continues. In an effort to protect the polyptych from increased tourism in 1986, it was moved from the intimate Vijd Chapel, which was its original and intended site, to the more spacious baptistry chapel where it was fitted with a climate-controlled vitrine made of steel and unbreakable bullet-proof glass. However, in addition to the vitrine preventing the opening and closing of the altarpiece, it caused climate problems, further threatening the stability of the altarpiece. A preliminary examination of its condition was undertaken from 2010-2012, which precipitated a more comprehensive and ambitious conservation and restoration project was carried out by the KIK-IRPA at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent,

initiated in 2012 and in three phases, with the third and final phase projected to be completed by the spring of 2027.

The second phase of this conservation project, which focused on the lower open register of the altarpiece, made visible a dramatic change in the identity of the mystic lamb, a lamb whose head became a face during the cleaning process. The following section gathers the previous sections, which have focused considerable attention on the history of the altarpiece, through its constant dissembling through theft, sale, and storage and its conservation history. Both histories reveal its precarity and vulnerability on one hand and its seductive power on the other. The following section offers a theological reflection on these histories as well as approaches the process of this new visibility of the face of the lamb theologically as well, through which the main concerns of this project are worked out.

## THE APOCOLYPSE OF THE MYSTIC LAMB



The spectacular and dangerous life that the altarpiece had lived for nearly six hundred years since its public unveiling means that it is probably not a surprise that in 2020 the lamb itself would become a social media star with its own Twitter account. And

the reason it came to public attention in 2020 was due to the completion of the second of three stages of a comprehensive conservation and preservation campaign that Coremans and his team were not able to give it in 1950. While the altarpiece was enjoying its new location in the larger baptistry chapel and within a bullet-proof glass vitrine, its condition was regularly examined by specialists. Amidst concern that its condition was deteriorating, the Cathedral initiated a comprehensive examination in 2010 of the altarpiece, with funding from the Getty Foundation in Los Angeles. At the conclusion of the examination in 2012 it was determined that a conservation and preservation project was indeed necessary, which would take place in three phases, the first consisting of the exterior panels of the closed altarpiece (2012-2016), followed by the second phase that would focus on the interior panels of the lower register (2016-2020), and the third phase consisting of the upper register (2023-2027). While Coremans's conservation project in 1950-51 required intense political and public relations work, including a public theology campaign, this fifteen-year project has from the start consisted of a close collaboration with the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), Getty Foundation, University of Ghent and University of Antwerp, Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent *and* St. Bavo's Cathedral.

Given the fact that it had come to be referred to as the *Mystic Lamb* or in Dutch, *Lam Gods*, and that during its return to Ghent from Brussels in 1950 it came to be regarded as "victim," it is perhaps not surprising that the revelation of the lamb's face in the lower register of the altarpiece would become a viral sensation. Yet the reality that a lamb, especially a sacrificial lamb, would become the image of a painting that flexed every conceivable muscle of late medieval Christendom and which would become a

major participant in the geopolitical battlefield for European dominion, from Napoleon and Hitler to Dwight D. Eisenhower, might appear unusual—or, rather, *all too usual*. That such a painting, which Gabriel Van de Gheyn (1881-1961), the warden of the Cathedral's treasures during the two world wars, could refer to as "*mon Agneau*," warrents a closer theological look.

Most art historical scholarship has placed fluffy *mon Agneau* comfortably within an iconographical program that focuses on the Eucharist as the site where the divine-human relationship is mediated and through which The End itself is manifest as the fullfillment of history as judgment and redemption.[41] Art historian Dana Goodgal suggests that the Prior of Church when the altarpiece was being produced, Olivier de Langhe, and his book on the Eucharist, entitled "Tractatus de corpore Cristi" "is tremendously useful as a gloss on both inscriptions and images in the *Ghent Altarpiece*...So far as possible, the interpretation of the *Ghent Altarpiece* will be left to Olivier."[42] Whether or not Olivier and this book directly influenced the inscriptions from diverse sources that "could easily have been collected in the St. Bavo's monastery library" and the images of the altarpiece, they seem nevertheless to "overlap." But what lies behind the Eucharist as an ecclesial management of salvation or the lamb as symbol of the New Jerusalem is the Book of Revelation, a book that has made ecclesial authorities nervous since it became a part of the biblical canon.

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[41] While Jonathan Anderson is correct that there has been little attention on its participation in the liturgical dimension of the Eucharist, the presence of the lamb as a symbolic figure has done little to disturb iconographical analysis.

[42] Goodgal, 227.

The Book of Revelation

Despite—or, perhaps because of—its potential radicality, the Eucharist has been an instrument for ecclesial control. But to yoke the altarpiece to Olivier's book on the Eucharist is further, I argue, to domesticate van Eyck's imagery, *especially the image of the lamb*. However, one way to loosen the grip of ecclesial sacramental control on *mon Agneau* is to return this animal to its biblical context, which means returning it to its origins in the Book of Revelation, without a doubt one of the most sensationally unruly of books in the biblical canon.

Perhaps one of the reasons that the Book of Revelation has been so influential in forming a Western European Christian imagination is that it is unlike nearly all other writings in the New Testament. The English novelist D. H. Lawrence believed that it betrayed the message of Jesus: "And just as inevitably as Jesus had to have a Judas Iscariot among his disciples, so did there have to be a Revelation in the New Testament."[43] Lawrence goes on,

> When we come to read it critically and seriously, we realize that the Apocalypse reveals a profoundly important Christian doctrine which has in it none of the real Christ, none of the real Gospel, none of the creative breath of Christianity, and is nevertheless perhaps the most effectual doctrine in the Bible.[44]

The Book of Revelation for Lawrence is Christ-less, grace-less, and possessing none of the creative subtlety of the rest of New Testament. "The Apocalypse," Gilles Deleuze argues in an essay on Lawrence's text, "is a monstrous ego grafted onto Christ."[45] And

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[43]D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (New York: Norton, 1931), 20.

[44]D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, 10.

[45]Gilles Deleuze, "Nietzsche and Saint Paul, Lawrence and John of Patmos," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (New York: Verso, 1998).

perhaps for those very reasons, this marginal text, which entered the canon of the Christian Bible by the skin of its teeth, has become one of its more culturally influential ones. Timothy Beal offers an explanation.

> Revelation is not so much a literary text, let alone a book to be received in later works, as it is a multimedia constellation of images, stories, and story-shaped images…it becomes part of different cultural works in unanticipated ways—ways that biblical scholars would often judge to be misuses, abuses, poor receptions, or no receptions at all.[46]

And certainly, it is the "unanticipated ways" that the text's almost impossible imagery, its "multimedia constellation of images" has generated other cultural works, formed social imaginations that so offends Lawrence. "If it is imagery," Lawrence suggests, "it is imagery which cannot be imagined."[47]

It is precisely its "unrelenting visibility," as Maia Kotrosits describes it, that has seduced, provoked, and influenced poets, painters, musicians, and other artists.[48] The reader of the Book of Revelation is flooded—one might even call it waterboarded—with images that threaten to drown us. The book's imagery, then, defies visual representation. This unrelenting "too muchness" renders the imagery *apophatic*, denying and defying its embodiment or capture in stable, conceptual imagery. Moreover, these images are tricksters, they cannot be trusted. As Kotrosits writes, "Images do not speak for themselves as much as they speak out of both sides of their mouths."[49] Catherine Keller describes this imagery as "violently oppositional, occasionally beautiful, always vivid

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[46]Timothy Beal, *Revelation: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 6.

[47]D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, 9.

[48]Maia Kotrosits, "Seeing is Feeling: Revelation's Enthroned Lamb and Ancient Visual Affects," *Biblical Interpretation* 22 (2014): 500.

[49]Maia Kotrosits, "Seeing is Feeling, 482.

phantasmagoria."[50] Keller also wonders if this rapid vision imagery generates its own "literalism," forcing and fueling, encouraging a flattened diagrammatic "reading" of its imagery, a selective reductionism that simplifies, thus rendering the text more useful for ideological and political deployment.

"Write what you see!" the loud voice tells John (Rev. 1: 11). And it is this "writing," this inscription that encloses the imagery in language that creates a polarity of literalism and apophaticism. And clearly the imperial face of Christendom has sought the former while the revolutionary dimensions of Christianity have gravitated toward the latter. The text refuses to behave; its raw life force that pulses through it even escapes the imperial power that has sought to contain it, discipline it, use it. Keller registers the complexity of the Book of Revelation, repulsed by its toxic masculinity and violence while unable to leave it alone by describing it as manifesting an "operative ambiguity, capable of both revolution and reaction, and often of combustions of the two."[51] Kotrosits observes the expressive and creative fecundity of such textual narratives as the Book of Revelation, which has seduced painters throughout Christendom.

> This sliding from image to image with little, and sometimes conflicting narrative instructions for how to receive such images signals neither some kind of existential confusion nor exact agenda, but rather the narrative's affective expressiveness.[52]

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[50]Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Beacon Hill, 1996), 82.

[51]Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Beacon Hill, 1996), 85.

[52]Maia Kotrosits, "Seeing is Feeling: Revelation's Enthroned Lamb and Ancient Visual Affects," *Biblical Interpretation* 22 (2014); 487.

And perhaps nowhere in this text is such "operative ambiguity" and "sliding from image to image" on display than with the Lamb, which makes it appearance in Rev 5:6:

> And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as if it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.

Let us finally move up closer to what Biblical scholar Stephen D. Moore calls, "the elephant in the room of Revelation scholarship," which is the lamb, the "quadrupedal Christ."[53]

The overwhelming challenge of the Lamb to our interpretive desires to pin down meaning in the Book of Revelation is its affective and emotional force, its "expressiveness" as Kotrosits calls it. The Lamb defies such representational logic, even a logic of a "most pregnant moment," for this "wooly bundle of mixed metaphors" refuses/resists it. This Lamb has seven eyes and seven horns; it stands "as if slain," yet it is the only creature that can open the scroll that has remained closed; it unleashes violence and fury that would make Constantine blush; it shape-shifts from/to a lion. It marries the Bride. It cannot be captured in a singular stable image, and that, for Kotrosits, marks the Lamb's capacity for social and political critique.

Painters working in the Western Christian tradition, within and under the patronage of the Church as their client and serving its doctrinal purposes, then, have chosen to depict the Lamb, not as it has functioned solely in Revelation. Rather, they conflate it, "domesticate" it with other images. One such example is the figure of the "*agnus dei*" of John the Baptist's "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1: 29) which identifies Jesus with Christ and transforms the Jesus of the

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[53]Stephen D. Moore, Quadrupedal Christ," in *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology* (SBL Press, 2014).

Gospels into the Eucharistic apparatus that has been used to found Christology, Inc, after Constantine, which underwriting sovereignty, ecclesial authority, and which requires sacrifice and violence for redemption.

In addition, and more importantly, when we finally arrive at van Eyck's Lamb, is that this Lamb, in whatever its form, from Revelation to John the Baptist's "*agnus dei*" designates the end or goal of the narrative, and in Revelation, quite literally, The End. Keller is again insightful in this context. And it is thus worth quoting her at length. "John," Keller writes,

> could not tolerate some jubilant generosity of an open ending. An editor himself, he understood what it means to mess with a text. He won't have it done to him: let the final dis/closure close down history, nature, revelation, and book. Forever.[54]

Keller continues,

> The security of a single history numbered from The Beginning to The End is an effect of the text of Revelation—but only as placed by pro-imperial theologians long after its composition and placement in its canonical location.[55]

The Lamb comes to designate, then, the end of time, enclosing all of history and the earth itself, in the logic of Christological sacrifice, redemption, judgment, and "New Jerusalem." Much of the work of Christendom, from the Crusades to its imperialistic "missionary" work has been to facilitate and hasten this End. "The point," Keller continues, "is that this particular inscription of the future as though it has already transpired, this strange privilege of The End, has framed the Western story. It at once

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[54]Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Beacon Hill, 1996), 80.

[55]Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Beacon Hill, 1996), 87.

wedges open and slams shut the future."[56] As Moore concludes, "At the center of the throne room that is the locus of absolute power in Revelation is a curious nonpower, an abject inability, whose emblem is a butchered animal."[57] And Kotrosits argues that

> The lamb denaturalizes sovereignty at the moment it claims it, making sovereignty perhaps even more prone to extravagant and impossible imaginations, but also bringing a very untidy knot of contradictory affects along with it.[58]

The Book of Revelation is part of a literary genre called *Apokalypsis*, which is not simply about the End, but rather deals with "disclosure," "unveiling," or "revelation." And certainly, the conservation project of 2020 amounted to an apocalypse, an unveiling of the face of van Eyck's lamb, which is where we must turn, from the fountain of images that the text generates to the single image on a wood panel painted in 1432.



The Lamb's Face Unveiled

In the first paragraph of the introduction to the monograph on the second conservation phase, the project leaders write that Coremans and his conservation team in

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[56]Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Beacon Hill, 1996), 88.

[57]Stephen D. Moore, Quadrupedal Christ," in *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology* (SBL Press, 2014).

[58]Maia Kotrosits, "Sovereignty and Vulnerability in Revelation's Lamb on the Throne," 45.

1950 "lacked one key piece of information that hindered their conclusions: the fact that the panels were largely covered by very early overpaints, most dating back to the sixteenth century."[59] The obscuring, smudging—even repainting—of the lamb's face occurred during this very early overpainting, which was probably less than one hundred years after the work was completed. Moreover, since Coremans's project, the lamb has been left with *four* ears. The project leaders state,

> [Albert] Philippot uncovered the original ears of the lamb when removing some sixteenth- and nineteenth-century overpaints in the surrounding meadow. As a result the Mystic Lamb has ever since sported four ears: the original pair, revealed by Philippot, and those added higher up on the head in the sixteenth century, which were not removed in 1950-51.[60]

Philipport and Coremans obviously decided to leave the two pairs of ears because of their fear of overcleaning (i.e., "do no harm") and so felt that making visible such an anomaly would be a better option than making a mistake and removing original paint, no matter where it was and what form it took, no matter how strange. And so, for nearly seventy years, then, the beloved *Mystic Lamb*, the "*mon Agneau*," *Lams God*, was a deformed monster *with four ears*.

Why did the early sixteenth-century restorers repaint the lamb's head? "The reasons why the lamb's head was overpainted with a less evocative version," the project leaders observed, "with eyes placed more laterally and ears higher up, are still under

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[59]"Introduction," in *The Ghent Altarpiece: Research and Conservation of the Interior: the Lower Register,* eds. Griet Steyaert, Marie Postec, Jana Sanyova, Hélène Dubois (Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, Brussels, 2021), 1.

[60]"Introduction," in *The Ghent Altarpiece: Research and Conservation of the Interior: the Lower Register,* eds. Griet Steyaert, Marie Postec, Jana Sanyova, Hélène Dubois (Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, Brussels, 2021), 13.

investigation."[61] What the project leaders meant when they described the lamb's eyes as "placed more laterally" meant that what the conservators revealed when they removed this very early overpainting was that the van Eycks had painted the eyes facing forward, that is looking straight ahead rather than on either side as a lamb and other animals of prey would. In this way the lamb's gaze became more human, and the lamb then, in answer to the question that Derrida put to Levinas, "does the animal have a face?" would be answered in the affirmative. Yes, indeed, this animal, this sacrificial lamb has a face, and thus a gaze that addresses the viewer, not unlike the portrait painting Cusa sent his friends in the previous chapter. Just as Cusa's painting, introduced in the previous chapter, which was either a self-portrait or a portrait of Christ painted by a painter that Jan would have known well from the court in Bruges, Rogier van der Weyden. And so the van Eycks' lamb has more than a face, *it has the face of an icon*. Could Cusa have sent his monastic friends a painting like van Eyck's lamb with its face? Would the curatorial experiment, Cusa's *sensibile experimentum*, have worked with an animal's face, with a lamb's face? That the answer to this question could be in the affirmative might lead us some way into a potential reason why our early sixteenth century overpainters did what they did.

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[61]"Introduction," in *The Ghent Altarpiece: Research and Conservation of the Interior: the Lower Register,* eds. Griet Steyaert, Marie Postec, Jana Sanyova, Hélène Dubois (Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, Brussels, 2021), 22; 25.



However, the van Eycks were not satisfied with simply positioning these eyes in such a way as to give our lamb a face, with a gaze, a gaze that could potentially follow us as we walked around it. They also gave these eyes "horizontal slit pupils typical of prey animals." And so, as they made the lamb more human—Christ icon-like—they also made the lamb more animalistic, with a kind of vision, a sharp and penetrating and hyper-vigilent vision of an animal of prey, an animal that possesses a kind of sight that is *supra-human*. Yet another reason, perhaps, why our creeped out restorers might have tried to interpret our lamb in a more *conventionally theological* way. Their overpainting transformed this queer, monstrous animal-human-divine animal, back to a more palatable, *interpretable* Eucharistic symbol rather than the destabilizing hybrid, uncanny other than human creature that the van Eyck's produced.

The conservation team also discovered that the lamb's body had been enlarged and made more solid by what is believed to be a mysterious third phase of the "original" painted surface. Hubert painted the first phase, Jan the second, and then the third phase, which the researchers distinguish from the early overpainters, enlarged the lamb's body.[62]

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[62]"The Van Eycks' Creative Process," in *The Ghent Altarpiece: Research and Conservation of the Interior: the Lower Register,* eds. Griet Steyaert, Marie Postec, Jana Sanyova, Hélène Dubois (Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, Brussels), 94.

That the body of the lamb was enlarged, made more substantial, more materially visible is less interesting than the fact that there is an anonymous, nameless, painter between the van Eycks and the overpainters, which smudges the sharp line between artist and conservator, creator and overpainter. Belgian art historian Barbara Baert has published an insightful and provocative study of this new lamb, one which explores its theological implications. "Instead of the 'natural' lamb," she writes, "the Masters [Hubert & Jan] painted the 'theological' lamb of the Revelation, including a halo of golden rays."[63] Baert's "theological" lamb is the lamb of Revelation, not the lamb of a Eucharistic iconography restricted to ecclesial structure or eschaton, but an image of a lamb that is as queer, and uncanny, and monstrously divine as Biblical scholars Moore and Kotrosits claim.

> With the Van Eycks, the lamb of the apocalypse becomes a unique, piercing figure, bestowed with an almost human gaze as if it were that of the Son of Man himself. The painters did bestow the lamb's eyes with one animal detail: the horizontal pupils that goats, sheep, and deer have…[64]

Baert however makes another observation and interpretation of the lambs ears—not that there were four but that the original pair that the conservators have revealed are located in a quite unusual and unnatural position and that they are *prominent*. Baert continues,

> And now we may understand that one anomaly nobody wants to speak about: the new ears of the lamb…No. They are not positioned incorrectly. They are planted on both sides of the skull, between eyes and mouth, between seeing and speaking, at the same altitude where the human ears is located. The lamb is listening. He has just opened his tender ears as a flower, and full of diligence they blossom toward the praying beholder.[65]

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[63]Barbara Baert, "The New Lamb and the Iconic Gaze," *Iconographica* 20 (2021).

[64]Barbara Baert, "The New Lamb and the Iconic Gaze," *Iconographica* 20 (2021).

[65]Barbara Baert, "The New Lamb and the Iconic Gaze," *Iconographica* 20 (2021).

Van Eyck's lamb already sees more than humans do and it also listens more closely. The listening is important since it contrasts so starkly with the seeing, which is an important part of the symbolism of the altarpiece and of the Book of Revelation. Listening is also an important part of Cusa's curatorial experiment, in which listening accompanies speaking.[66] Remarkably, the uncannily surreal and divine nature of this image of the lamb, a lamb not with seven eyes and seven horns as the Book of Revelation tells us, but with two ears—and *four ears* for seventy years—and two eyes that penetrate, that see and listen beyond human capacity. Baert asks,

> Isn't this andoid lamb with its correct optical expansion on the limitations of humans combined with the "theological" lamb and its bold artistic resonance of a human gaze and ears not an incredible metaphor for the iconography of the altarpiece as a whole?[67]

If this "theological" lamb is such a metaphor for the altarpiece, it is a metaphor that has caused some anxiety among those tasked to care for it during the first centuries of its afterlife. But this woolly and theological metaphor, however, only came to the surface through the restoration. The conservation project was, quite literally, *apocalyptic*, in that it revealed, *unveiled*, what had been hidden. It is also *theological*, in that it manages and reflects on what is visible and invisible, seen and unseen and how it is managed in the service of generating images that are believable.

Baert's short but impactful essay, full of insights, makes a final observation. It is the detail of the splash of blood on altar cloth that is the result of the splashing blood sloshing out of the chalice as it pours from the slain lamb. She writes,

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[66]Although it is nearly one hundred years before the Reformation, the prominence of the lamb's ears brings to mind Martin Luther's claim that the ears are the most important organ of the Christian.

[67]Barbara Baert, "The New Lamb and the Iconic Gaze," *Iconographica* 20 (2021).

> Blood stains the white immaculate altar cloth in tiny spotches, uncontrolled and almost coincidentally. But in the Van Eycks' painted world, where the eye does not blink, there is no such thing as accidental spills. The allegory of the Eurcharistic sacrifice—the chalice—subtly branches off into an allegory of the *acheiropoietos*.[68]

The blood stained altar cloth becomes a sign of God's overwhelming grace, which cannot be contained by the chalice of the church, by the Eucharistic liturgy, and thus spills out over the world. The blood stained altar cloth also becomes an *acheiropoietos*—that is, an image not made with human hands—a theological concept that underwrote the Byzantine iconographic tradition and evolved over time from an adaptation of the Jesus healing the bleeding woman in the gospels (Mt. 9:20-22; Mk. 5:25-34; and Lk.. 8: 43-48) and evolved into the so-called Veronica legend, when Jesus was given a cloth by Veronica to wipe his sweating and bleeding face on his way to Golgotha.[69] Might our lamb with its face be incorporated into this *vera icon* tradition?

But to return to this blood-stained cloth, an image, a splash not made with human hands (or ovine hoof), brings to mind perhaps the most famous—and notorious—stained cloth in the history of Christendom, the so-called *Shroud of Turin*.[70] And it is to this controversial cloth we will turn in order to gain another perspective on *notre Agneau*, a perspective related directly to Baert's question, "What kind of eye contact does the audience experience when they view the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb?[71] *What do we*

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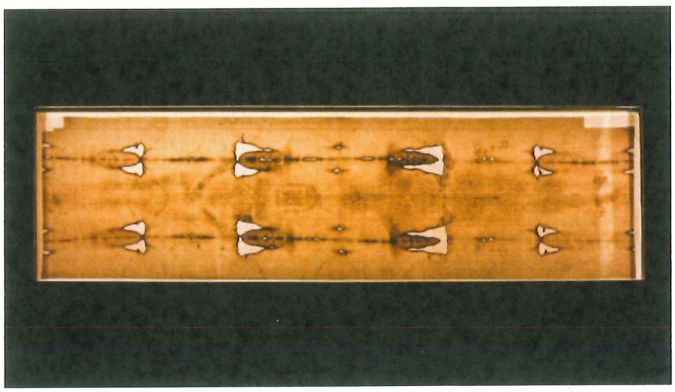
[68]Barbara Baert, "The New Lamb and the Iconic Gaze," *Iconographica* 20 (2021).

[69]For the complicated history of the vera icon and the *acheiropoietos*, see Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica & Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and Structure of a "True" Image* (Basil Blackwell, 1991).

[70]Andrew R. Casper, *An Artful Relic: The Shroud of Turin in Baroque Italy* (Penn State University Press, 2021); Andrea Nicolotti, *The Shroud of Turin: The History and legends of the World's Most Famous Relic* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2020).

[71]Barbara Baert, "The New Lamb and the Iconic Gaze," *Iconographica* 20 (2021).

*see when we say we see and are seen by the gaze of the Lamb?* Before we can answer this question, we need to visit Turin in 1898 to consider another artifact with a colorful afterlife.



**THE MYSTIC LAMB THROUGH THE SHROUD**

The *Shroud of Turin* has a complex history. It is purported to be the blood-stained sheets in which the crucified Jesus was wrapped for burial. It first appears in documentary evidence in the mid-1300s when a chivalric knight Geoffroi de Charny displayed it to pilgrims in the collegiate church of Lirey, France. And by 1453 it came into the possession of the House of Savoy, a royal house in the kingdom of Burgundy in the south of France. Even then, however, doubts about its authenticity as a relic were raised. A papal bull of 6 January 1390 declared that the *Shroud* could be displayed, through public ostension, that is, for purposes of veneration, but only on the condition that it would be presented not as a shroud—a holy relic—but a painting: *Pictura seu table*.[72] Yet, as Andrew R. Casper writes,

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[72]Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Franses, (1996; Stanford University Press, 2005), 196.

> The eventual acceptance of the Shroud of Turin's authenticity is due in part to the power and influence of its owners. Upon acquiring the Shroud in 1453, the House of Savoy combated the relic's reputation as a symbol or representation through a concentrated campaign to promote it as a holy relic worthy of a widespread cult.[73]

But it was not until the *Shroud*—where it had been locked away in a reliquary in Saint-Chapelle in Cambéry Savoy— left its home for Turin that it began to gain widespread attention as a holy relic. In 1578 Carlo Borromeo, archbishop of Milan, in response to an outbreak of the plague, decided to make a pilgrimage to Saint-Chapelle. But the Shroud's owner, Duke Emanuele Filiberto of Savoy sent it across the Alps to Turin, which represented a more convenient halfway point between the Duke and Carlo in order to shorten the archbishop's arduous journey. Over 40,000 pilgrims joined the archbishop in public veneration of the artifact. And it has remained in Turin ever since. In 1657 a Chapel was commissioned for the *Shroud*, which was finished in 1694.

Yet the *Shroud* is not an "authenticated" holy relic, although, as will be discussed below, it operates under the auspices of its own "distinctive holiness," that is, its own category of material and visual authority. Carbon 14 tests on the fabric in the mid-1980s have proved conclusively that this over four-meter-long linen cloth dates between 1260-1390. The image on the cloth features yellowing patches and a *barely visible* outline of a figure. And because there is so little for the pilgrim to see in the cloth it has been kept out of sight. An important part of the power of the *Shroud* came to have as an authentic holy relic is through its inaccessibility, its *invisibility*. Marie-José Mondzain observes,

> In the centuries that follow, many stories evidence a belief in the existence and authenticity of the shroud. None of these stories could be challenged, however,

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[73]Andrew R. Casper, *An Artful Relic: The Shroud of Turin in Baroque Italy* (Penn State University Press, 2021), 10.

> because the object itself was locked in a reliquary, immured, protected by iron gates at Chambéry's Sainte-Chapelle.[74]

The spectacular, domed, centrally planned chapel designed by Guarini, which towers above the cathedral, consisted of an elaborate apparatus to host pilgrims as well as shield the *Shroud* from view. Mondzain observes, "As a relic, its only value in its crypt was the devotion of those who adored it without seeing it."[75] Despite its long history of attracting veneration and inspiring pilgrimage, the Church has remained relatively silent about its "true identity," not publicly denouncing its authenticity while affirming its importance. On 24 May1998 Pope John Paul II called the Shroud "a challenge to our intelligence" and that it is "a mirror of the Gospel."[76] Mondzain puts it this way: "Long embarrassed by a suspect relic that it had no means of rendering fruitful, it [the Church] left it sheltered in reliquaries, awaiting its moment. And that moment came one night in 1898."[77]

In 1898 Turin hosted an exhibition of Italian industry and culture and the Catholic Church petitioned the city to host a parallel event, one which included an exhibition of sacred art, Catholic missions, and works of Christian charity, intending to celebrate several anniversaries, including the 1500 anniversary of the Council of Turin, four

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[74]Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Franses, (1996; Stanford University Press, 2005), 196.

[75]Marie-José Mondzain, "The Holy Shroud/How Invisible Hands Weave the Undecidable," in *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, Bruno Latour & Peter Weibel, eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

[76]See Pope John Paul II at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/travels/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_24051998_sindone.html

[77]Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (1996; Stanford University Press, 2005), 197.

hundredth anniversary of the construction of the cathedral, and the three hundredth anniversary of the Confraternity of the Holy Shroud. And as part of the celebration, the Church decided that the *Shroud of Turin* should be photographed. Secondo Pia, an amateur photographer whose images had caught the attention of the organizing committee, was chosen to produce a photographic image. Pia had this to say about what happened. "Enclosed in my darkroom, I experienced such intense emotion when I saw the Holy Face appear on the plate for the first time that I was paralyzed."[78] Pia's photographs, which produced a negative of the original image, made it possible to see what could not be—but desired to be—seen, that is, the face of Christ. In Mondzain's reflection on photography, it "inscribes the visible in the invisible" because it generates belief in the (invisible) images (of Christ) it makes present, images that might be similar to the painted face that Cusa sent to his colleagues. In short, the photograph offers *proof* for those who already believed, or, perhaps willing to believe.[79]

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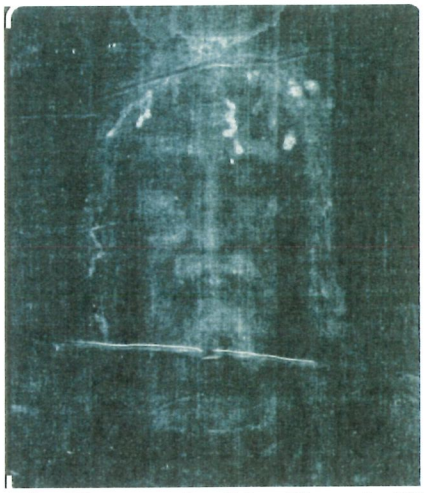
[78]Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (1996; Stanford University Press, 2005), 197.

[79]The image of the face that Pia's photograph revealed was the product of creating a positive image from the negative which, in the process, creating a semblance of physical presence that made it much easier to read the faint markings as a human face.



Secondo Pia, Photograph of the *Shroud of Turin*, 1898.

And what the Church needed, according to Mondzain, was proof through the unique iconic magic of photographic evidence was a means by which it could justify what had in fact *already happened*, that is, the *Shroud* attracts attention; it has a devotional following; it has spiritual power.

> It is because this image has power that it is necessary to defend and protect it. It is not because it is true that it has power. It is because it has power that it becomes true, *that it must be true*.[80]

It is the photographic reproduction of the *Shroud*, rather than the shroud itself, that demonstrates its truth. Moreover, it gives the faithful something to see, even if that something to see, is *something and somewhere else*. Mondzain observes that

> The Holy Shroud offers absolutely nothing substantial and unquestionable to see, and that is precisely why it is a fascinating image, that is, it displays the passion of saying what we want to see, what we want to show.[81]

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[80]Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (1996; Stanford University Press, 2005), 201.

[81]Marie-José Mondzain, "The Holy Shroud/How Invisible Hands Weave the Undecidable," in *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, Bruno Latour & Peter Weibel, eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

Rather than satisfy the faithful, however, with proof, the photograph works to ignite and keep this desire unsatisfied, as it were. Didi-Huberman stresses that a visit to see the *Shroud* generates disappointment because they have already seen the photographs.

> All the faithful express the same dissatisfaction....But the dissatisfaction and the attempt to see constitute *something*. In fact, *almost* nothing was visible...." Almost nothing was visible, that is to say: already something other than *nothing* was visible in that *almost*. One actually saw, then, something else, simply in the looking forward to it or the desire of it.[82]

This "something else" that we must look for is neither a failure nor merely an incidental part of mechanism and apparatuses of display at the reliquary in Turin. It is a crucial part of the curatorial exhibition that manages what is visible and invisible, seen and unseen that produces images that can be believed that is a crucial dimension of the public display apparatus of the museum and at the sites of holy relics, with their chapels and reliquaries. The *Shroud*

> has been carefully rolled up and placed in a silver reliquary. The reliquary itself is locked behind a metal grating within a monumental altar that stands beneath Guarini's soaring black marble dome in Turin. None of the sheet itself, therefore is visible. One kneels before a photographic negative, as it were, enshrined in the altar and illuminated from within.[83]

One kneels before a photographic negative, indeed, since Pia's photographs are displayed throughout the chapel to help visitors to see—to give them something else to look at. And yet, one also kneels in front of the reliquary, which hides the *Shroud* yet displays a full-length reproduction. As Alexander Nagel argues, the reliquary is an elaborate display apparatus, like the photographic negative, the mechanical reproduction, which assists in

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[82]Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)," trans. Thomas Repensek *October* 29 (Summer 1984): 63-81.

[83]Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)," trans. Thomas Repensek *October* 29 (Summer 1984): 63-81.

offering proof to those who already believe and thus need no proof. "The reliquary provides authentication and thus a guarantee that one is not mistakenly venerating a thief, or a prostitute."[84] The photograph and the reliquary both reveal and conceal, make present what is absent (or even non-existent) in the effort to generate and sustain belief.

The photograph is a form of mechanical reproduction that generates an image without human hands, becoming in the process, a kind of an *acheiropoietic* practice, which makes the photograph of the *Shroud* a powerful demonstration of the image's *acheiropoietic* authenticity, as the blood of Christ stains the linen, a linen that is demonstrably from the fourteenth century, and therefore a fake relic, yet is transformed into a true image, a *vera icon*, a true image that nevertheless suggests that there is something more, something else, somewhere else. Mondzain suggests that in photography, "Negative theology has at last found its photochemical double."[85] She continues, linking the photograph with the Eucharist.

> Photography, without word or gesture, but rather by the effect of light only, performs a nonsacramental eucharistic operation because it can manage without transformative words and can actually show the body and the blood.[86]

The description of mechanical reproduction—the technology of photography—as Eucharistic undermines Benjamin's view that the photograph would strip the artifact of its aura. In the case of the *Shroud*, the photograph is precisely what has generated its aura. But the photograph did not do so alone. Aura is the result of the entire display apparatus. Yet as we have already discussed, Duchamp's readymades, especially *Fountain*, required

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[84]Alexander Nagel, "The Afterlife of the Reliquary," in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (Walters Art Museum; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 211.

[85]Marie-José Mondzain, 202.

[86]Marie-José Mondzain, 203.

the photograph to produce a similar operation, an operation that transformed an absent artifact into a work of art that was present in its absence, or through its absence became present. Whether Duchamp's *Fountain*, Klein's *Le Vide*, the *Shroud*, or the *Mystic Lamb*, photography participates in veiling the invisible, veiling the void.



Mondzain's description of the photograph of the *Shroud* in Eucharistic terms returns us to the blood-stained linen on the altar of the *Mystic Lamb* and the transformation—indeed even transubstantiation—of the lamb's blood into an *acheiropoietos*, an image not made with human hands, an image not even made with human blood. Does the blood-soaked altar cloth function as a kind of *Shroud*? The relationship comes into focus through the assistance of photography, for it is only in the magic of the photograph and its negative that these blood stains become visible. The *Ghent Altarpiece* has enjoyed an intimate relationship with photography, from its discovery in the salt mines after World War II and its triumphal return to Belgium in 1945 to the high-resolution photographs that Paul Coremans and his research team took as well as the countless close-up photographs of conservators working on this most recent project. In addition, Jan van Eyck's *oeuvre* more generally has often been described as photographic. In fact, Jenny Graham observes that "the link being made between van Eyck and the camera in the 1840s represents one of the earliest points at which the

audience began to experience its modernity."[87] That the reception of van Eyck at the advent of photography as a proto-modern painter suggests that his afterlife, and the afterlives of his paintings since the mid-nineteenth century were inseparable from mechanical reproduction. Yet what these blood stains and the lamb's face—what Baert refers to as the "wound and the pupil"—is that without photography and the close-up details that mechanical reproduction offers, including X-ray images, the blood-stained cloth and the lamb's face could not be seen. And so, not unlike the *Shroud* after Pia's photograph in 1898, the photograph is a crucial apparatus to render visible what is not. The photograph makes present what is absent. But it also makes what *already is* present visible in a new way, one that draws from the invisible image, which is the face of Christ, which literally is, as St. Paul writes, "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1: 15).

It is at this time that we should return to Baert's question, "What kind of eye contact does the audience experience when they view the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*?[88] *What do we see when we say we see and are seen by the gaze of Lamb?* These are two very different questions and the remaining section of this chapter will address each. The answer to the first question is simple. *There is no eye contact*. The viewer standing in front of the *Ghent Altarpiece* cannot see the lamb's face. The only way that a viewer can see the lamb's face is through the mediation of mechanical reproduction—through the close-up photograph. And so, unlike Cusa's curatorial experient, we cannot walk around the *Mystic Lamb* and have its eyes track ours. We are also unable to

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[87]Jenny Graham, *Inventing Van Eyck: The Remaking of an Artist for the Modern Age* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 94.

[88]Barbara Baert, "The New Lamb and the Iconic Gaze," *Iconographica* 20 (2021).

experience the uncanny gaze of the lamb's non-human vision. And so, we are unable to make eye contact with the lamb when standing in front of the work, even as it sees us. However, the second question, *what do we see when we say we see and are seen by the gaze of the Lamb?* suggests a different, more complex answer, one that might resemble the disappointed visitors to the reliquary of the *Shroud*: we have to look *elsewhere*, for *something else*. Another question, related to the resonances between the *Mystic Lamb* and the *Shroud* thus emerges. *Could the bullet-proof vitrine that protects the altarpiece become a reliquary?* That is, is the altarpiece itself a relic? And so, does the logic of pilgrimage and relgious devotion to a sacred shrine offer insight into the display of the *Ghent Altarpiece*? Moreover, is it possible also to consider that after the unveiling of the lamb's face, that the *altarpiece itself*—this twenty-panel polyptych that opens and closes—has been transformed into a reliquary? These panels now protect, even hide the lamb's face, a face that we cannot see. And yet the altarpiece as reliquary and the photographic reproductions participate to produce images—images that we come to believe, that we can, like Cusa's monastic brothers, say, *yes, I believe that the eyes do follow me*. But, unlike Cusa's brothers, we might believe because we already believe, already believe because we have seen the close-up photographs, produced in the conservation laboratory.

## PILGRIM, TOURIST, MYSTIC

Hélène Dubois begins her analysis of the altarpiece's afterlife in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with a simple and in some ways obvious observation that "disconnected from its initial liturgical functions, the polyptych is now exhibited as a

museum masterpiece in an artifically illuminated and secured glass casing."[89] How does the St. Bavo's Cathedral present the altarpiece as a "museum masterpiece?" Does the vitrine transform the work into a museum masterpiece? Does the fact that since 1794 the altarpiece has not functioned liturgically as it was intended mean that it has become a work of art? The conceptual distinctions of *cathedral* and *museum* that this project works with, of being inside and outside the cathedral, which Benjamin underscores through his distinctions between cult and exhibition value, contemplation and distraction, are smudged in the case of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Moreover, this project argues that both conceptual poles, religion and art, cathedral and museum, are iterations of a broader cultural museification that Agamben developed, through which I am exploring how a theology emerges from this museification might behave. In addition, the *Ghent Altarpiece* has been entangled with theological implications in all aspects of its afterlife.

The complex case of the afterlife of the *Ghent Altarpiece* does not dissolve the distinctions between cathedral and museum, religion and art, sacred and secular. It only reveals a more fluid and dynamic relationship between them since both sides are defined by distance, loss, and a sense of *arriving late* and perhaps, following our (only slightly) disappointed visitors to the *Shroud, a need to look elsewhere and for something else*. And it seems that even by the early sixteenth century the distinction between pilgrim and tourist, between religion and art, between participant and observer, was already mingled. Dubois notes that by 1529 it was a well-established tradition to show the altarpiece to tourists, in fact, it seems that there was a fee attached to opening and closing it for

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[89]Hélène Dubois, "Transformations in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *The Ghent Altarpiece: Research and Conservation of the Exterior,* eds. Bart Fransen & Cyriel Stroo (Brussels: Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, 2020), 11.

visitors.[90] Simon Coleman argues that the cathedral has always had a unique capacity to offer *multiple* experiences. He writes, "Cathedrals, then, serve as contexts not of anti-structure but of multivalent infrastructure, playing on the porosity between spiritual engagement and cultural curiosity."[91] And this multivalent infrastructure enables religious believers, curious observers, tourists, and pilgrims to find their way into the space. In cathedrals

> their *internal divisions* into nave, altar, crypt, saints' shrines, side chapels, and so on enable numerous behavioral frames for multiple and simultaneous activities to be juxtaposed or even conjoined. Such partitions encourage the tourist, passer-by, or undecided semi-believer to move and out of the times and spaces of liturgy, experiencing adjacencies with conventional ritual forms.[92]

The cathedral, then, already functions like a museum with its multiple gallery spaces filled with different exhibitions. Coleman's research into pilgrimage is part of a growing field of study that addresses the liminal, lateral, porous, and penumbral dimension of pilgrimage and sacred sites, which are locations of contestation, complexity, ambivalence, and movement in which pilgrim and tourist, believer and observer shift and evolve and are in continual flux, friction, and negotiation.[93]

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[90]Dubois, 755.

[91]Simon Coleman, *Powers of Pilgrimage: Religion in a World of Movement* (New York: NYU Press, 2021). 158.

[92]Simon Coleman, *Powers of Pilgrimage: Religion in a World of Movement* (New York: NYU Press, 2021). 158.

[93]The current formulation of the field is shaped by the classic work by Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (Columbia, 1978) and responses to it, for example, John Eade and Michael Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London: Routledge, 1991). The Turners emphasized that pilgrimage focused on created a "*communitas*" movement outside the pilgrims' everyday structures while subsequent research has addressed the multivalent, contested nature of travel to sacred sites.

Baert's question about the *viewer's* experience of the *Mystic Lamb* opens onto pilgrimage and tourism and the mechanisms and apparatuses by which such a viewer can actually *see* the painting, *see* the face of the lamb. It is relevant to return to Didi-Huberman's observation, quoted just a few paragraphs above in relation to viewers seeking to see the *Shroud of Turin*. He emphasizes their disappointment.

> All the faithful express the same dissatisfaction....But the dissatisfaction and the attempt to see constitute *something*. In fact, *almost* nothing was visible."...Almost nothing was visible, that is to say: already something other than *nothing* was visible in that *almost*. One actually saw, then, something else, simply in the looking forward to it or the desire of it.[94]

The visitor simply cannot see the *Shroud*. They see a contemporary reproduction. But they also see the magnificent historical Baroque reliquary, which includes the elaborate monstrance, or display apparatus, which protects (or hides) the relic. They are able to meditate in the chapel surrounded by reproductions not only of the *Shroud* as an artifact but reproductions of the *photographs*, offer images of the relic that could not be seen otherwise, remainging imperceptible invisible, non-existent without the assistance of photographic magic.

St Bavo's Cathedral mediates the public presentation of its altarpiece in strikingly similar ways, because *neither faces can be seen by the viewer*.[95] Despite the fact that St. Bavo's Cathedral and the city of Ghent use the freshly unveiled, uncovered face of the *Mystic Lamb* to promote tourism, this face simply cannot be seen by the viewer. However, the viewer does see an aggressive visual campaign of the Lamb's face, from

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[94]Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)," trans. Thomas Repensek *October* 29 (Summer 1984): 63-81.

[95]This section is derived from my two visits to the *Ghent Altarpiece*, once on 16 June 2022 and again on 8 Nov 2025.

the cathedral's promotion to the merchandice in the gift shop. And so while the actual face of the *Mystic Lamb* is not visible, although present, the Cathedral compensates with a robust presence of close-up photographs throughout the experience.



In addition, the Cathedral manages the process by which the viewer visits the altarpiece through a specially designed ticket booth, lobby, and staircases that is reminiscent not of medieval churches but of modern art museums.



The visitor moves through several flights of stairs and then enters a gold door that opens automatically and leads the viewer to the chapel where the altarpiece is located, protected

by the large glass vitrine. The process seems gratuitous because, unlike some sites, such as Giotto's fresco paintings in the Arena Chapel in Padua, such entrance and exit precautions have nothing to do with maintaining the proper climate conditions (temperature and relative humidity) given the fact that the vitrine provides this control. It appears that this process is in part an effort to intensify and sacralize the experience of seeing the altarpiece, of providing suspense, delaying and prolonging the anticipation by separating the experience of seeing the altarpiece from other forms of tourism, pilgrimage, and devotion in the Cathedral. The Cathedral has essentially created a museum and curated a museum exhibition and experience *within* it. With a mind and imagination full of closeup high-resolution photographs of the Mystic Lamb's face as well as the overwhelming number of microscopic images, such as a detail of the reflection of the Vijd chapel in one of the jewels of the heavenly musicians, what exactly does one see when one looks at this altarpiece, in person, negotiating other tourists, navigating the reflection and refraction of light from inside and outside the vitrine?

In the synoptic gospels the women who come to Jesus's tomb to care for his body are confronted by an angel who tells them that whom they "are looking for is not here" (Matt 28:5-6; Mk 16:6; Lk 24:5-6). The pilgrim in the Cathedral seems to occupy the position of the women at the tomb: look elsewhere. It is a central teaching in the Christian tradition, to be *in* the world but not *of* it (Rom 12:1) and the practice of pilgrimage gives a particular form to this sense of not being home, not being in the right place, and the necessity of enacting a journey that is in search of a transformative experience, Crucial to this conception of the life of a Christian is that whatever the pilgrim seeks, it is never *here*, in this or that location, but to be found *in the journey itself.*

In his analysis of the concept of the pilgrim in relation to other modern and post-modern forms, like tourist, vagabond, stroller, and player, Zygmunt Bauman suggests,

> For pilgrims through time, the truth is elsewhere; the true place is always some distance, some time away. Wherever the pilgrim may be now, it is not where he ought to be, and not where he dreams of being. The distance between the true world and this world here and now is made of the mismatch between what is to be achieved and what has been. The glory and gravity of the future destination debases the present and makes light of it.[96]

What the pilgrim is looking for is always elsewhere, which is why they leave their day to day lives to go to a sacred place to find something extraordinary as a way of living a metaphor of the life of one who is in the world but not of it, who is on a journey to God. Whatever it is that affirms or strengthens their faith, or gives them encouragement, peace, healing. But in the case of the *Shroud of Turin*, what one goes to see, *cannot be seen* since it is literally hidden away in the reliquary, with only reproductions to look at. And so, as Didi-Huberman observes, the disappointed pilgrim to the shrine of the *Shroud of Turin* has to find other things to look at, somewhere else to direct their visual, intellectual, and emotional attention. This is especially so if the holy relic or the sacred site veils a void. Anthropologists John Eade and Michael Sallnow write that

> The power of a shrine…derives in large part from its character as a religious void, a ritual space capable of accommodating diverse meanings and practices…The sacred centre…appears as a vessel into which pilgrims devoutly pour their hopes, prayers, and aspirations.[97]

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[96]Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist—Or a Short History of Identity," in Stuart Hall & Paul du Gay, eds. *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Sage, 1996), 20.

[97]John Eade and Michael Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (New York: Routledge,1991), 15-16.

This empty vessel provides the opportunity for each pilgrim to construct, create, improvise their own spiritual experience. In a personal account of his experience with pilgrimage, theologian and philosopher of religion Colby Dickinson has suggests that

> The presence or absence of ostensibly false or dubious relics says very little about what else is possible in such locations, and I take this consideration to heart when I ease my own burdens within their confines.[98]

It is the "what else is possible" that generates the energy of pilgrimage, which includes but is not limited to the relic or the artifact, the authenticity or inauthenticity of which bears little on the importance of the pilgrimage itself.

But the *Ghent Altarpiece* offers another iteration of the pilgrimage, one more associated with cultural tourism. There is a robust research field that explores the relationships and distinctions between *pilgrimage* and *tourism*, the former authentically religious and spiritual but the latter defined by capitalism and consumerism. Bauman defines the tourist in contrast to pilgrim in terms of a search for aesthetic experience that adds a frisson of the new, of the strange, of the exotic within a context that is safe, comfortable, even cozy.[99] The distinction between the tourist and the pilgrim has much to do with their interior disposition:

> A key basis for distinguishing between pilgrimage and tourism involves assumptions about the beliefs and motivations of travelers who undertake journeys to religious shrines. One of the perennial problems in ethnography has been precisely the difficulty of attaining clear insight into the motivations and inner experiences of Others.[100]

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[98]Colby Dickinson, *Sacred Pilgrim, Secular Pilgrim: A Roman Journey* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2025), 121.

[99]Zygmunt Bauman, 30.

[100]Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman, *Approaches to the Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism," Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (University of Illinois Press, 2004), 2.

Theological reflection in and of the museum complicates these distinctions inasmuch as it does not pit the cathedral against the museum, thus emphasizing how religious shrines are sites for both pilgrims and tourists, religious believers and museum viewers. A museum theology also smudges the distinctions between such interior beliefs or motivations and the ease with which pilgrimage and tourism, religion and art, coexist and are thus continually defined and redefined, inhabited and performed. Perhaps one way to distinguish pilgrimage from tourism is that in the latter one finds what one is looking for while in the former, one does not. Pilgrimage is about dissatisfaction, or cultivating the desire for somewhere else, or to find something else to look at while tourism offers satisfaction. Perhaps one can begin as a tourist and end as a pilgrim, or *vice-versa*. And yet, *faith-belief* itself, as an artifact of the museum, a product of museification, can also be viewed as an iteration of pilgrimage and tourism. And perhaps in Agamben's museified world, it is the management of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, the capacity to combine or offer both experiences—to manage their visibilities and invisibilities—that generates *faith-belief*. In a post-Christian and post-secular world, Colby Dickinson observes,

> I do not think either art or poetry, taken alone, can replace the multifaceted entity that religion has been throughout the years. But these things can replace parts of religious practice, leaving so many other modern phenomena to replace other aspects of what religion once seemed to solely possess…There will be no single, secular substitute for religion, only a plurality of practices that form a composite picture of the religious dimensions of human existence.[101]

The *Ghent Altarpiece* becomes a site that accommodates pilgrimage *and* tourism, dissatisfaction *and* satisfaction. Whether it is a religious or cultural shrine, pilgrimage or tourist site, the churches in Turin and Ghent manage what is visible and what remains

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[101]Colby Dickinson, 42.

invisible, although present through gestures that embrace the absence through visual culture, through visible images that affirm the invisible image, whether that image is the face of Christ or the face of the lamb, stains of divine, human, or ovine blood.

Cusa's curatorial experiment, his *sensibile experimentum*, is interesting in the context of pilgrimage since it and the text that accompanies it addresses the desire for a mystical vision to see God. And so, Cusa sets the monks on a pilgrimage around the painting, which suggests to each of them that what they desire, what they are looking for cannot be found where they are, standing still, in isolation. They need to move. And they need the testimony of others, speaking and being spoken to.

Is it possible that the *Ghent Altarpiece*, as exemplified by its itinerant theological afterlife "wanderings," overpainting, and restorations is an icon of the *museification* of Christianity in a post-Christian and post-secular culture, of faith and practice, in which modern secularism as well as medieval Christendom are both museum artifacts? Perhaps pilgrimage in this context is a knowing search for what will not be there? Perhaps it is *how* we discover that absence that is important, how we experience this distance, this lateness, this absence and build a faith that is neither believing nor disbelieving, but, in the words of Colby Dickinson,

> Ironically, then, it was only after losing my faith and knowing with certainty that it was gone that I found myself open to something like a new type of faith. It was only then that I felt almost compelled to go back to such churches, to become a pilgrim as often as I can allow myself.[102]

Perhaps for Dickinson, to revisit faith, to return to the churches, also includes becoming a tourist to a faith he once had and a faith he can approach again from a different posture. And perhaps this new type of faith is one borne of the museum, where the pilgrims and

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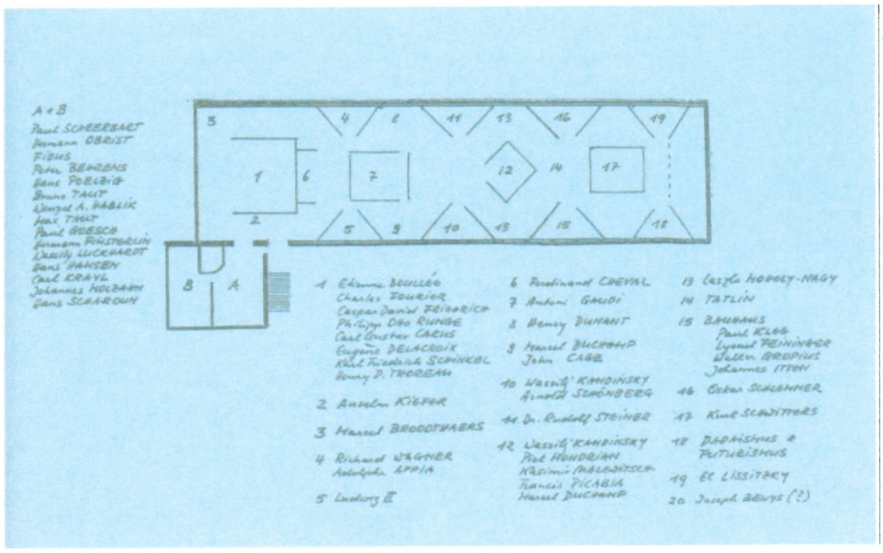
[102]Colby Dickinson, 67.

tourists converge and their identity impossible to distinguish. Whether we begin or end as pilgrims or tourists, we are always museum visitors.

CHAPTER SIX

THE AFTERLIFE OF RUINS IN HANOVER AND BARJAC



"It's all crap…"
—Kurt Schwitters

"Rubble is the future."
—Anselm Kiefer

***GESAMTKUNSTWERK***

Swiss curator Harald Szeemann presented an ambitious exhibition Kunsthaus Zürich in 1983 that included the work of the two artists featured in this chapter. It was the third and final iteration of a trilogy of exhibitions that the curator produced that "sought to recover patterns of creativity that had been repressed within formalist histories of modernism in the visual arts," practices that addressed the erotic, the occult, and the

theological.[1] Entitled *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk: Europäische Utopien seit 1800*, the exhibition included nearly three hundred artifacts. Szeemann revived and reinterpreted the nineteenth-century Romantic concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total work of art" as a way to think about an aspiration which always arrives at meaning, experience, presence, and faith *too late*, after what Agamben describes as the "spiritual potentialities" of art, religion, philosophy, nature and politics have "withdrawn into the Museum."[2] For Szeemann, *Gesamtkunstwerk* always eludes the dreams of its makers, always fails, and can ultimately never be achieved or completed. The concept, conceived by the German writer and philosopher Karl Friedrich Eusebius Trahndorff in 1827 and popularized by Richard Wagner's writings and operas in the later quarter of the century, sought to describe art forms that embraced all dimensions of the arts within the emotional framework of empathy (*Einfühlung*) that sought the immediacy and unity of aesthetic and spiritual presence.[3] The concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Szeemann's curatorial hands, however, "could only ever be known through its absence."[4] Szeemann's exhibition, in response to this apophatic approach to this totalizing concept, was to express this absence, this failure, this impossibility through the production of "a series of models, replicas, and reconstructions that gave form to immersive environments that had either

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[1]This section depends on the insightful analysis of Szeemann's exhibition by Megan R. Luke, "An Art History of Intensive Intentions," in *Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions,* eds. Glenn Phillips, Phillipp Kaiser, Doris Chon, Pietro Rigolo (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018), 185.

[2]Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone, 2007), 83.

[3]See Juliet Koss, *Modernism after Wagner* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

[4]Megan R. Luke, "An Art History of Intensive Intentions," in *Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions,* eds. Glenn Phillips, Phillipp Kaiser, Doris Chon, Pietro Rigolo (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018), 196.

been destroyed or were too vast to be contained in or moved to a gallery, or had never been realized to begin with."[5] The unsettling aspect of the exhibition was that what was on display were to be seen as merely the fragments or shards, bits and pieces, of the impossibility of the utopian aspirations of the artists that had imagined them. Art historian Megan R. Luke observes that

> it is difficult to avoid the impression that these assorted models, replicas, and reconstructions were impoverished approximations of the outsize ambitions that had once motivated the utopian fantasies that they were intended to vivify. And yet, in retrospect, the disappointment that accompanies these rather inadequate objects seems to be precisely the point. Szeemann harnessed this disappointment to underscore how the medium of the model was in fact that most appropriate vehicle for an aesthetic idea that both craves and resists concrete realization…[6]

Szeemann's exhibition embraced the inadequacy of the small-scale models and replicas, the shards and fragments of these colossal projects, enacting dissatisfaction and disappointment as an epistemological tool that, viewed through the lens of Cusa's *sensibile experimentum*, presents a curatorial experiment that reveals the lack and the limits of the singular, autonomous viewer, to encourage them to start moving, speaking and responding. Szeemann's exhibition is a similar curatorial experiment, an apophatic one that makes present the impossibility of presence, exhibiting absence, distance, and invisibility, a variation of the Cusan *sensibile experimentum* that is more than seeing and knowing wholes and unities, that dwells through the verbal, the auditory, and the mobile, and which can only be imagined. And like the experience of the *Ghent Altarpiece* and the

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[5]Megan R. Luke, "An Art History of Intensive Intentions," in *Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions,* eds. Glenn Phillips, Phillipp Kaiser, Doris Chon, Pietro Rigolo (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018), 186

[6]Megan R. Luke, "An Art History of Intensive Intentions," in *Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions,* eds. Glenn Phillips, Phillipp Kaiser, Doris Chon, Pietro Rigolo (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018), 190.

Chapel of the Shroud in Turin, the viewer must look at something else, must look elsewhere.

Szeemann's project amounted to a self-conscious acknowledgement of the impossible nature of the exhibition itself as a medium, a curatorial *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which the aspirations of the curator reveal the *exhibition itself* to be a medium that expresses the ideals and aspirations of the concept in its form as well as content. In other words, the thesis that is presented is as much about *how* it presents as *what* it presents. Szeemann's ambitious exhibition, viewed in this way, is an exercise in negative theology, for the models that he had fabricated stood not as analogous to the original intentions of their creators, but to their *impossibility*; they are not parts of a whole. Luke describes the work in the exhibition in this way:

> Sketches by Carl Gustav Carus or Eugène Delacroix stood in for Goethe's poetry and philosophy, while diagrams rather than monumental paintings communicated the universal color symbolism of Philipp Otto Runge. In this context the watercolors, drawings, photographs, sculptures, assemblages, and paintings that filled out the exhibition all took on the character of proposals, drafts, notes, or test objects, setting aside any identity that they might otherwise have as finished, autonomous works.[7]

Szeemann referred to these and other works as *Nebenwege* ("side-routes") that would, as Luke described them, "frame an absent center"—or, to put it in the language of this project, *veil a void.*

Adorno returns again, this time with thoughts on *Gesamtkunstwerk.* His authorship is characterized by significant concerns about the fascist implications of the concept, especially as it is embodied in Wagner's operas, especially as they are staged at his festival theatre in Bayreuth. For Adorno, the problem consisted in how the experience

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[7]Quoted in Luke, 190.

of Wagnerian operas at Bayreuth that "substitute emotional, psychological, and aesthetic absorption for critical thinking."[8] Adorno's critique is relevant for two reasons. First, it suggests that the tendency of the *Gestamtkunstwerk* to seek a *unifying* artistic experience presumes the possibility of achieving an aesthetic totality that plasters over the cracks and fissures of experience can be weaponized by authoritarian regimes. The second reason is that Adorno suggests that Wagner attempts to overwhelm "critical thinking" through theatrical stagecraft, through the mechanisms and apparatuses that manage what is visible and what is invisible. And for Adorno this is exemplified by hiding the conductor and the orchestra under the stage as part of Wagner's efforts to eliminate the visibility of social and architectural distractions. For Adorno, critical thinking necessitates the visibility of how the experience is constructed.[9] Significantly, Szeemann's curatorial project is an effort to reveal the curatorial and museological mechanisms and apparatuses of display that establish a critical distance. This exhibition offers a way to think about both theological discourse and belief, both of which, like *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which seek and strive for an all-encompassing unity.

*Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* is thus an assemblage of isolated and "secondary" artifacts, whether fragments or models and replicas, what Luke calls "absolute particularity, even monadic identity."[10] Szeemann's exhibition becomes a loose assemblage, a polyptych similar to the *Ghent Altarpiece*, which so easily is torn apart,

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[8]Juliet Koss, *Modernism after Wagner* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 253.

[9]Juliet Koss, *Modernism after Wagner* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 253.

[10]Megan R. Luke, "An Art History of Intensive Intentions," in *Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions,* eds. Glenn Phillips, Phillipp Kaiser, Doris Chon, Pietro Rigolo (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018).

possesses a *centrifugal* force, whose energy is disintegration, dispersal, collapse. The Cusan nature of the exhibition is further justified in part by Szeemann's desire to "transform the enormous hall into a kind of church with side chapels."[11]

Of all the replicas, models, and reconstructions, the one, as Luke claims, that "came to function as a synecdoche for the entire exhibition" was Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*, a sprawling environment that began as a cluttered corner in the artist's studio in the early 1920s. It

> ironizes the exalted contents of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* prior to 1914 (God, Fatherland, nationalism, Germanism, 'world war") and, in their place, inserts autonomous artistic production as the claim to totality for a creativity that ranges from seriousness to play.[12]

Szeemann collaborated with Peter Bissegger, a Swiss stage designer, to build a 1:20 scale model of *Merzbau* based solely on a handful of documentary photographs. The reason Bissegger could only work from these photographs is that *the work had been destroyed in a British bombing raid over Hanover in 1943*. Unlike some of the projects referred to and included in the exhibition, Schwitters's *Merzbau* had at one time existed. Both the reconstruction and the selection of photographs frame and veil a void. In this case, the void amounts to a pile of rubble.

Szeemann also included a painting by a German artist from a younger generation who was only an infant when *Merzbau* was destroyed, Anselm Kiefer. Entitled *Deutschlands Geisteshelden,* 1973 ["Germany's Spiritual Heroes"], the painting depicts a huge empty hall with torches burning in some kind of vigil with the names of influential artists and philosophers written along the floorboards of the space, a space modeled on

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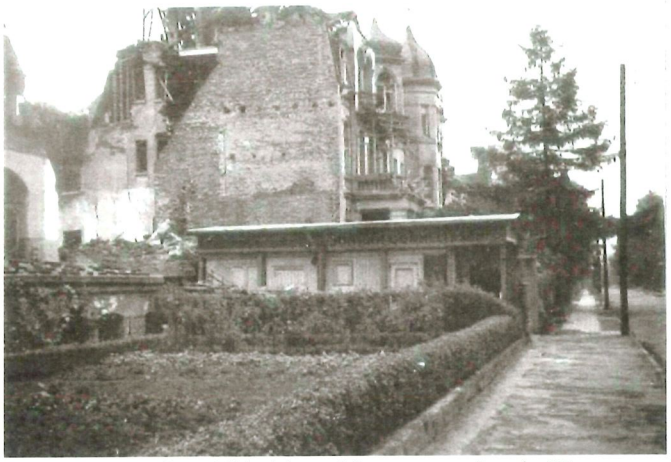
[11]Quoted in Luke, 189.

[12]Quoted in Luke, 192.

Kiefer's own studio in Germany and a hunting lodge where the Nazis kept looted art. In addition to Wagner, Kiefer includes the names of artists Joseph Beuys and Casper David Friedrich, theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, poet Friedrich Hölderlin, and philosopher Joan Gottlieb Fichte among others, whose work form a constellation that defines Germany's artistic and philosophical greatness. The painting gestures toward the darker side of this tradition and the uses to which Hitler's regime put it. The painting presents German art and philosophy as itself a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and it is a concept around which Kiefer's work orbits for the next forty-five years.

The following chapter explores Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* (1923-1936) and Anselm Kiefer's *La Ribaute* (1992-2007), two studio environments that no longer exist. Schwitters's was destroyed by a bomb and only survives in a handful of photographs, Bissegger's Hanover model, and second-hand accounts of visitors. After moving his studio to another location, Kiefer turned La Ribaute into a museum. Szeemann's curatorial interpretation of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which stresses its impossibility, its untimeliness, opens itself onto a theological horizon that resonates with the museological approach to theology that this project is developing. What follows are profiles of each of the locations and the theological implications that they generate. This chapter concludes with a focus on the friction generated by this curatorial juxtaposition.

## *MERZBAU* IN HANOVER



Waldhausenstrasse 5 after Allied bombing campaign in Hanover, 1943.

"Wherever there is an idea of a fixed truth," Petra Carlsson Redell observes, "there is theology."[13] Such a theology, whether Christian theology, atheism, or belief in science or art, secularism, or democracy, venerates the objects and artifacts that (temporarily and provisionally) veil the *tehomic* void by placing vitrines over these ideas. Such theological energy saturates (American) post-Christian, post-secular culture, roaming about in politics, the artworld, political debates, and the academy in addition to churches, synagogues, seminar rooms, political conventions, mosques. Yet this theological energy can also be found, albeit in less potentially violent ways in Sweden, through such secularized spaces as government, academic research, higher education and the artworld. In other words, secularism begins to look and behave a lot like Carlsson Redell's characterization of theology. This project is an attempt to develop another

[13]Petra Carlsson Redell, *Mysticism as Revolt: Foucault, Deleuze and Theology Beyond Representation* (Davies Group, 2014).

approach to theology, one that finds another way to respond to, engage with, and embrace the fissures and gaps in thought and experience by constructing, improvising, curating a faith in the unknown, not belief *in* or veneration *of* the dogmatic certainties about or beyond the unknown (i.e., "fixed truths"). The project experiments with developing a theological approach that recognizes its own impossibility, its own inability to link truth to faith, faith to understanding, thus acknowledging and embracing its lateness and distance, a lateness and distance embodied by the museum. Instead of attempting to transcend or overcome it, this approach, which I have been calling a *museological* or *museal* approach, works with theological concepts curatorially, transforming the vitrines into veils, and managing what is visible and invisible, seen and unseen. But it does so not from the perspective of achieving the immediacy of faith but acknowledging and working with and through museal distance. It considers every image that museal theology generates to be a photograph of the image, a snapshot *of* distance, mediation, pastness, lateness, absence. Yet this project argues that through this museological and curatorial practice another kind of faith might be possible, a *museal* faith, a faith that can never be immediate, spontaneous, unselfconscious. Yet a faith nevertheless, a museal *faith-belief.*

Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*—both through a consideration of its construction and its afterlife—might be helpful in the development of such a theological practice for which the spontaneity and directness of faith, and the potential of theology to buttress and strengthen that faith, is no longer accessible, no longer possible. Megan R. Luke suggests that Schwitters faced a similar challenge with respect to engaging in the nineteenth-century Romantic aspiration and satisfaction offered by the *Gesamtkunswerk.*

> Romantic catharsis was, Schwitters recognized, an experience that was no longer directly available to him, and the subject autonomy on which it was predicated could be only approximated and set in quotation marks.[14]

*Merzbau* is Schwitters's response to engaging in a tradition without the belief that such synthesis of all the arts and the arts and society is possible or, as he was experiencing after the first world war and with the rise of National Socialism, even desirable. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a theological concept as it aspires to unity, a synthesis that is immediate, comprehensive, and so one that is a faith that seeks understanding, that presumes the existence of a possible synthesis between what Mattias Martinson calls the truth of faith. Schwitters response to this impossibility is *Merzbau*, Kiefer's response is La Ribaute; one builds an environment from detritus and rubble and trash. The other transforms the studio into a museum.

Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* began in the early 1920s with a constructed column in a corner of his studio, which featured collaged images and text as well as numerous material artifacts, that he often referred to as the *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*. But it was also an outgrowth of his far-ranging artistic practice, which included poetry and performance, collage, and paintings as well as design and typography and put him in contact with the most influential avant-garde artists and movements in post-war Germany, from Expressionism and Constructivism to Dada and Surrealism. His practice also began to coalesce around a concept that he developed, called *Merz.* In a statement published in 1924, Schwitters defined it as a "worldview" and a "coherence." It is "the creation of relationships, preferably between all the things of the world."[15] Taken from

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[14]Luke, 192.

[15]Kurt Schwitters, "Merz," in *Myself and My Aims: Writings on Art and Criticism*, ed. Megan R. Luke (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 171.

the word, *Kommerzbank,* which he had cut from an advertisement and included in one of his collage works, *Merz* stitched together his many and diverse artistic practices into a comprehensive approach to the world of things, sounds, ideas, trash, family, friends, and colleagues for whom the creation of relationships was primary.[16] Merz becomes Schwitters's iteration of the *Gesamtkunswerk*, which he called *Merzgesamtweltbild* (the Merz total world-view) advocated for the "principle equality of all materials," a principle, which Schwitters stretched in all his endeavors, forging relationships and connections and associations with the most unusual materials.[17] Art historian Graham Bader describes it in this way:

> Unapologetically abstract in its form and declaratively prosaic in its constitute elements, Merz presented the basest of everyday matter, with no figurative suggestion and only the sparest formal manipulation, as its essential substance.[18]

The everyday matter from which Schwitters built his life as an artist was unusual for someone connected to the avant-garde. He and his wife and young son lived in the second floor flat in a house that they shared with his parents where he had lived since he was very young child. In addition to showing his paintings in avant-garde galleries in Berlin, Munich, and Dresden and performing his radical sound poetry, he had consistent work with the Hannover City Council, redesigning the city's logo, letter type and standardizing

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[16]John Elderfield, Kurt Schwitters (New York: MoMA, 1985); Graham Bader, "Photographic Memory," *Poisoned Abstraction: Kurt Schwitters Between Revolution and Exile* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021). Gwendolyn Webster "Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau," (PhD diss, Open University, 2007); Roger Cardinal, "The Hanover Merzbau: Tracing a Lost Masterwork," in *Conjunctions, Verbal-Visual Relations*, eds. Laurie Edson (San Diego State University Press, 1996): 187-210; Gwendolen Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters: A Biographical Study* (Cardiff: Univ of Wales Press, 1997).

[17]Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 71.

[18]Graham Bader, *Poisoned Abstraction: Kurt Schwitters Between Exile and Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

municipal letterheads, official forms, and documents. As Gwendolen Webster observes, "perhaps the world's largest collection of work by Kurt Schwitters is to be found not in any museum or library but in the mountains of official documents in the Hanover city archive."[19] What is also unusual is that Schwitters did not keep his two worlds apart, his conventional bourgeois life and his bohemian, avant-garde creative life. In fact, Schwitters hosted regular poetry readings and performances at his home, in which the leading avant-garde artists in Europe mingled with the most conventional city governmental and military leaders in a parlor room next to his parents' room. Moreover, artists, curators, collectors and museum directors throughout Europe and from the USA who arrived for a studio visit could be, as one visitor recounts in 1919, welcomed by the artist's mother, and greeted with an odor of "hot glue and starch, plaster of Paris and clay, smells of cooking and guinea pigs and finally a 'just plain baby' smell."[20] Despite these occasional collisions,

> Few were permitted to catch a glimpse of the man who displayed an almost child-like reliance on the safe haven of Waldhausenstrasse 5, second floor. He was deeply attached to his family…and the security of home life was the still point of his turning world, the pivot around which the whole of his unconventional existence revolved.[21]

Schwitters's studio becomes the messy and chaotic site for this dichotomy and tangled nettle of contradictions. Berlin Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck, a skeptical colleague of Schwitters who never felt comfortable with his conventional side, described his visit to the studio in 1919:

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[19]Gwendolen Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 229.

[20]Webster, 101.

[21]Webster, 100-101.

> The room was a mixture of hopeless disarray and meticulous accuracy. You could see incipient collages, wooden sculptures, pictures of stone and plaster. Books, whose pages rustled in time to our steps, were lying about. Materials of all kinds, rages, limestone, cufflinks, logs of all sizes, newspaper clippings.
>
> We asked him for details, but Schwitters shrugged: "It's all crap..."[22]

It is this environment, which consisted of a messy and chaotic collision between extended family and art, convention and radicality, where he negotiated the trauma of World War I, his desire to pursue his poetry and art, care for wife and young child, and mourn the loss of their first-born son, who, a few years before, had died as an infant. He also sought to negotiate his creative isolation in Hanover, from which Schwitters sought to connect with the most imaginative and radical artists across Europe. It is *also* the environment from which *Merzbau* emerged. Schwitters son, Ernst, who literally grew up with *Merzbau*, described its beginnings in this way:

> He started by tying strings to emphasize this interaction [between pictures]. Eventually they became wires, then were replaced with wooden structures which, in turn, were joined with plaster of Paris. This structure grew and grew and eventually filled several rooms on various floors of our home, resembling a huge abstract grotto.[23]

*Merzbau* thus develops from Schwitters's interest in making connections between and among the artifacts in his studio space, connections that gradually become *spatial*. As art historian Graham Bader writes, *Merzbau* "was conceived as an expansive and mutating environment that was to be traversed and experienced from within."[24] It is significant that the work did not simply begin in the studio, it overtook the studio, transforming into the

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[22]Quoted in John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters* (New York: MoMA, 1985), 145.

[23]Quoted in John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters* (New York: MoMA, 1985), 148.

[24]Graham Bader, "Photographic Memory," *Poisoned Abstraction: Kurt Schwitters Between Revolution and Exile* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 125.

work, and it gradually, over time—as tenants moved out or passed away and other rooms became available—consumed more of the living space, thus transforming it into the work as it "spawned subsidiaries, extending downwards, outwards and upwards to the basement, the balcony and the attic."[25] And what did this growing environment consist of? It included grottos filled with mementos collected from friends, "found and filched scraps," photographs, "inhabitable cavities" and "was to be entered into rather than just looked at from the outside."[26] The grottoes and caves, which might have numbered over forty, featured *The Nibelung Treasure Cave*, *Goethe Grotto*, *Sex Crime Cave*, *Grotto of Love*, *Luther Corner*, *Cave of Deprecated Heroes*, *Caves of Hero Worship*, *Caves of Friendship*, *Cave of Murderers*, and grottoes dedicated to his artist friends, Hannah Höch, Mies van der Rohe, Hans Richter, Theo van Doesburg, Hans Arp, Moholy-Nagy, Noam Gabo, Piet Mondrian, and many others. Built in the center of his conventional bourgeois life in a city on the margins of culture, *Merzbau* is a material manifestation, a monument in paper, cardboard, plaster, paint, and wood, to his personal relationships and creative collaborators throughout Europe.

*Merzbau* not only smudged the distinctions between the public and the private, of the world and Schwitters' life "outside" his home, it *consumed* it. And it is this private dimension and the fact that it could only be experienced by entering his home, which is part of its uniqueness. This "private universe built from and modelled upon the world outside," as John Elderfield described it, puzzled his supporters and troubled his

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[25]Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 209.

[26]Graham Bader, "Photographic Memory," *Poisoned Abstraction: Kurt Schwitters Between Revolution and Exile* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 124.

colleagues. Alexander Dorner, Director of the Hanover Art Museum and a strong supporter of Schwitters, was "simply appalled," accusing the artist of a kind of child-like regression in the face of trauma and fear and a retreat from the most advanced avant-garde practice of Constructivism, which Dorner advocated.[27] It became Schwitters's creative response to the world around him, his personal and public life, and his navigation of the politics and culture of postwar Germany. Art historian Graham Bader observes that Schwitters became increasingly aware that *Merzbau* documented "the process by which his present was rapidly becoming past."[28] Bader continues,

> The *Merzbau* became nothing less than a sustaining activity for Schwitters. The project functioned, particularly after 1933, as a means of imaginary transport through time and space by which the artist could confront—and create and inhabit an alternative to—the disintegration then mounting outside its windows.[29]

Bader's observation that "particularly after 1933" is significant. At this time Schwitters is enduring the emigration of many of his closest artist friends, like El Lissitsky, Naum Gabo, Richter, Gropius, Kandinsky, Moholy-Nagy, and Herwath Walden, Josef Albers, and one of his closest friends, Theo van Doesburg, had died suddenly in 1931 and his father passed away the same year. Bader continues that Schwitters

> formulated his environmental construction as a means both to reinhabit his increasingly distant past—entering through the gateway of specific material encounters rather than expansive personal longing—and, in this act, to reanimate the past's traces as potentially active flashes for the present, and thus the future.[30]

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[27]John Elderfield, 162.

[28]Graham Bader, 126.

[29]Graham Bader, 157.

[30]Graham Bader, 159.

*Merzbau* manifested this tension between past and future through his relentless scavenging of objects. His friend from Berlin Dada Raoul Hausmann observed that "he always kept his eyes to the ground; he was looking for objects, material for his collages..."[31] And in this way he embodied Walter Benjamin's understanding of the collector as a "dialectical materialist" and the role that works of art and other material artifacts to offer a "given experience with the past—an experience that is unique."[32] This experience, however, is only possible through material artifacts and the artist's or collector's ability to take them from their original environments, whether in the artist's studio or their historical context, or in the case of Schwitters's materials, the detritus and trash or disposable objects he pilfered from his friends' studios or homes. Dislodged from their intended uses or original contexts, these artifacts are liberated in order to live different lives. If this resembles the workings of the museum as this project has developed it, it is because many visitors described *Merzbau* as a museum exhibition. Yet it is a museum exhibition that Schwitters's himself moved into, allowing his wife to take over his room as he moved his bed into *Merzbau*. After he and his son had emigrated to Norway to escape the Nazis, Schwitters wrote to the American collector, Katherine Dreier, "What most fills me with sorrow is that I can't live in my *Merz* room."[33]

The *Merzbau* became a way to negotiate a past that was becoming increasingly more distant, perhaps even more *museified*, and thus less accessible, laden with grief and nostalgia. Yet art historian Patricia Falguières interprets it differently. She writes, "The

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[31]Gwendolyn Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 106.

[32]Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector & Historian" *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975).

[33]Gwendolyn Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 281.

*Merzbau* is first and foremost a machine for forgetting"[34] A key feature of the environment is that many of the grottoes and secret caves and caverns are eventually plastered over and boarded up, sealed away under wood and paint and frequent visitors often described their surprise at how these features would disappear and open up new ones elsewhere. Another way of describing *Merzbau* as a forgetting machine is that that it manages what becomes present and absent, and, like the photograph, it brings not what is absent to the present, but fills this absence with presence while managing what is visible and invisible and thus what is remembered and what is forgotten. Whether it operates as a forgetting machine or a contraption for dealing with the grief and nostalgia of a passing world, *Merzbau* was a curatorial practice in response to the museification of a world becoming less directly accessible.

Liturgy

Although it bears witness to loss, death, sorrow, and nostalgia, *Merzbau* was intended to function socially. Not only was it a monument to his relationships, Schwitters also intended to share it with his network of friends and family, colleagues and collaborators. And so, if it was not necessarily a "public" work, per se, *it was a social one*, one that encouraged and welcomed visitors and which seemed to feed on and grow through the attention it received. And as many of the researchers suggest, *Merzbau* invites, even demands participation "in which visitors, both wittingly and unwittingly, contributed through their passage to its growing reliquary assemblage."[35] The use of the

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[34]Quoted in Roger Cardinal, "The Hanover Merzbau," 200.

[35]Graham Bader, 144.

term "reliquary" is relevant, for as Alexander Nagel defines it in the previous chapter, the reliquary is intended to protect, hide, and also ensure the provenance of that which it contains, usually a relic.[36] *If it does function like a reliquary, what does it protect, what does it authenticate?*

It appears that from the beginning, Schwitters described *Merzbau* in religious terms. The work begins as an iteration of a column that he called *The Cathedral of Erotic Misery*, and Schwitters described the components of the *Merzbau* as grottoes, relics, and reliquaries. Moreover, the process of visiting the environment is often described through the language and concepts of liturgy. Graham Bader suggests that such language is *Eucharistic*.

> The artist's interest in and evocation of Christian religiosity is here again relevant; for with what mimetic ritual would Schwitters have been more familiar than the Eucharist, grounded as it is in the bodily merger of worshipper and Christ through the miraculously analogical taking of bread and wine?[37]

While Preziosi addresses it as the concept that generates and sustains meaning and interpretation in the European intellectual tradition, the Eucharist as a practice is more than an abstract philosophical or theological hermeneutic. It is a *practice* that mediates and manages the spiritual and the material, what is seen and unseen, visible and invisible. It is also a site of ecclesial power, as we saw in the *Ghent Altarpiece* as well as the site of creative scandal, of artistic imagination, as Brannon Hancock has shown.[38] And because

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[36]See Alexander Nagel, "The Afterlife of the Reliquary," in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, eds. Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann, and James Robinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

[37]Graham Bader, 158.

[38]Brannon Hancock, *The Scandal of Sacramentality: The Eucharist in Literary and Theological Perspectives* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014).

it invites the use of religious concepts in describing it and the experience of visiting it, *Merzbau* can productively be interpreted as Eucharistic, as a sacramental mediation of the material and spiritual, of making present what is absent, in the transformation of ordinary elements—indeed, detritus and refuse—into an enactment of community *in communion* across space and time. In addition to its liturgical function, in which *Merzbau* becomes an elaborate altarpiece which collaborates with the priest (Schwitters) and the congregants (visitors) in the sacrament, it is also serves as a shrine.

The personal testimonies of those who visited *Merzbau* often describe an experience that resonates with a religious service or a pilgrimage to a sacred site. Artist Rudolf Jahns described his visit in this way:

> Then we entered the column itself through a narrow door, which was more like a grotto: plaster construction was hanging over the door-paneling…Schwitters asked me to go through the grotto alone…Right at the back, to the left of the entrance, hung a bottle containing Schwitters' urine, in which everlasting flowers were floating. Then there were grottos of various types and shapes, whose entrances were not always on the same level…. [39]

And another visitor commented that the "tour through the giant work lasted four hours, guided and illuminated by Schwitters himself…"[40] Both accounts are common. Schwitters played an active role in guiding his visitors through the environment, creating expectations and curating their experience while they make their own discoveries, connections, associations. Schwitters played the role not only of museum tour guide of an exhibition he curated but also a priest that mediates the experience through gestures, instructions, invocations, incantations. He did not simply make the work available to be visited, he mediated the experience. And given the care he took to document the visitors,

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[39]Quoted in John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, 153.

[40]Gwendolyn Webster, 205.

it is clearly evident that the work did not simply exist for him to enjoy alone in isolation, into which he could retreat, but that it was crucial that he share it and that others participate in the world he created, that they too participated in a monument to loss, nostalgia, and the irrecoverable past, perhaps even a monument to forgetting.

The religious implications of the *Merzbau* are also evident in other, less explicitly Christian liturgical or sacramental. Gwendolyn Webster suggests that the overwhelming visual dimension of the *Merzbau*—that there were images, texts, objects, and fabrications everywhere— was a symptom of Schwitters's fear of empty space and empty walls. Whether it was regressive or otherwise, that part of his practice was evidence of his "fear of the void." Webster's observation opens up the opportunity to discuss the environment as a creative response to the existential void that seeps through the cracks and fissures of the symbolic order that is an important formulation for *their* project. If liturgical and sacramental practice is a response to this *tehomic* void and the *veil* and *vitrine* offer two different responses, how might we understand *Merzbau*, as a veil or a vitrine, as a response that is temporary and improvisational or one that attempts to function more dogmatically through veneration, thus concentrating attention?

Given its elaborate and impressively material presence, its unfolding through much of Schwitters's home and the consistent use of terms like grotto and relic and reliquary, it seems obvious that *Merzbau* functions as a vitrine. And there is a vitrine-like dimension to *Merzbau*, in which his memories could be preserved, relations stabilized. And yet, the written accounts that exist of visitors' descriptions from Schwitters, his wife, Helma, and son Ernst, is that it was continually changing, growing, adapting, advancing throughout the house. Moreover, the reliquaries, or grottoes, the caves, would continually

change, as new artifacts were added, others closed up and were painted over. This suggests a kind of improvisational monument that *veils* rather than *vitrines* the material artifacts that the void generates. Or, put different, it is a vitrine that opens up, or a reliquary that can be entered.

It would appear there is enough material already to develop our theological approach, to reflect on Schwitters's environment as the kind of scavenging, smuggling, curating of images, concepts, and artifacts that characterizes the approach with which this project experiments. But a theology of the museum, a theology that is museological, that is curated from the site of lateness, loss, of the inaccessibility of a direct experience, direct faith, must wait for what is most important about *Merzbau* for this experiment:

*Its non-existence.*

## The Afterlife



Exhibition view of "Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1936 with photographs of Schwitters's *Merzbau.*

Kurt Schwitters and his son departed Hanover for Norway on 2 January 1937, leaving his wife at home to care for their parents and five properties. And he never

returned. They then fled to Norway in 1940 for England and after spending over a year in an internment camp on the Isle of Man, they were released. *Merzbau* is destroyed in a British bombing raid in October 1943 and he dies in 1948 at 61 years of age. A few photographs of the main room in the *Merzbau* had been published in 1933 and six photographs were exhibited in 1936 by Alfred H. Barr, Jr at the Museum of Modern Art in the influential exhibition, *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism*. Before he left for Norway Schwitters had documented the environment with detailed photographs but they too were destroyed in the bombing attack, along with the guest book and other archival materials.

*Merzbau*'s afterlife began in earnest after Schwitters died, and through a handful of photographs and divergent and contradictory accounts from visitors, which Robert Cardinal referred to as a "disparate amalgam of recollection, hearsay and conjecture."[41] Gwendolyn Webster makes a similar observation: "Many anecdotes and legends attached to the *Merzbau*, whether in original or modified form, seem inconsequential in themselves, but taken together, they are of considerable significance."[42] Their significance, as a collection of personal testimonies, is found in their capacity to expand and generate new images, new conceptions of the environment that need not be judged true or false, accurate or inaccurate—they simply contribute to the texture of the work that now existed as a constellation of memories or hazy recollections by its historical reality or material existence. In fact, Roger Cardinal claims that "*Merzbau* was unconsciously designed to become inaccessible—that its destruction, however

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[41]Roger Cardinal, "The Hanover *Merzbau*: Tracing a Lost Masterwork," 193.

[42]Gwendolyn Webster, 164.

regrettable, simply gave expression to an inbuilt proclivity...."[43] Its inaccessibility is one of the signs of its role as a reliquary, which makes inaccessible what it ostensibly and ostentatiously protects. Design theorist and historian Uta Brandes has even gone so far as to state that it "exists most authentically through its absence."[44] It is this void that opens up through its inaccessibility, its absence, that makes *Merzbau* ripe for the kind of theological reflection attempted here, since theology builds its elaborate discursive structures on the non-existent, invisible, unrepresentable, unknowable—on what can only be believed or once believed. But it is through the handful of photographs taken by Wilhelm Redemann from the 1930s and a reconstruction built by the Swiss designer Peter Bissegger in 1983 that *Merzbau* can contribute to the development of a museal theology.

Photographs & Models

Photography played an important role in the *Merzbau*. In addition to the inclusion of photographic images in the environment, Schwitters was careful to have the work documented. However, art historian Graham Bader has argued that photography played an even greater role, that *Merzbau* is uniquely oriented *toward* photography, that the project is "a kind of inhabitable photograph in which the past's traces could remain active and alive, entwined—as in the most piercing photographic image—with present experience."[45] Bader thus argues that *Merzbau* is inherently photographic and was conceived to function photographically. He writes, "Schwitters sought to activate the

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[43]Roger Cardinal, "The Hanover *Merzbau*: Tracing a Lost Masterwork," 203.

[44]Quoted in Roger Cardinal, "The Hanover *Merzbau*: Tracing a Lost Masterwork," 193.

[45]Graham Bader, *Poisoned Abstraction*, 126.

particular semiotic and mnemonic force of the photographic image in the form of an inhabitable environment…."[46] This mnemonic force consisted of making the past or the absence of the past present as the viewer moved through the space, in and out of the corridors and caves. Bader suggests that Schwitters conceived of the *Merzbau* to function like a photograph, or a series of photographs, replicating the effects of photography as a "form of writing by light."[47] Bader shows how Schwitters had experimented with photograms in the 1930s and that he was thinking about photographic effects when he said that: "I create hollows and planes for the light and augment them through colors…It's not the objects that are important to me but the music that the light plays on them."[48] The *Merzbau* featured natural illumination from nearby windows and internal lighting in the spaces, including the grottoes and caves, were planned for different times of the day to create different visual effects. Moreover, *Merzbau*, like the photographic surface, became a means by which traces could be recorded, traces, like those on the surface of Secondo Pia's photographs of the *Shroud of Turin*, could take on a substantiality, shape, presence. "Schwitters built his memory structure from submerged relics and imagined and real residues, ranging from visitors' comments in his guestbook to the smudges, touches, detritus, and lingering impressions these guests left behind…."[49] Just as the camera lens records or picks up traces, so too does *Merzbau* accrue or

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[46]Graham Bader, *Poisoned Abstraction*, 141.

[47]Graham Bader, *Poisoned Abstraction*, 141.

[48]Graham Bader, *Poisoned Abstraction,* 137.

[49]Graham Bader, *Poisoned Abstraction*, 147.

accumulate the presence of visitors, left intentionally or unintentionally, like the dust that accumulates in Duchamp's studio.

> Schwitters would have moved through its rooms, assembled its reliquary fragments, and experienced its traces of past visits and events as a means to travel through both time and space: to not just revisit but reanimate past relations, in and for the present.[50]

Yet what are we to do with the handful of photographs, fragments from a time machine, whether it is a memory machine or a forgetting machine, a machine that was made to function like a photograph itself? Roger Cardinal concludes that "we cannot lay hold of it except within language."[51] Whatever kind of machine it is, *Merzbau* is now, through the photographs and the recorded testimonies of its viewers, its participants, its travelers, it has been and continues to be, a *speaking machine*, an image that, following Marie-José Mondzain, creates seeing subjects who speak. These photographs spawn speech, interpretations, and other utterances that, as Cardinal provocatively suggests, say more about our own desires, or as he puts it, "our delight in connotation encourages us to collect partial similitudes, when we may only be drawing up a star map of our own fantasies."[52] Yet this is in no way limits the significance of *Merzbau* as a constellation of photographic and literary fragments, ruins, or rubble, or even "crap," that, not unlike Schwitters himself, we scavenge and pilfer and hoard as we construct own idiosyncratic environments. Cardinal continues,

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[50]Graham Bader, *Poisoned Abstraction,* 144-45.

[51]Roger Cardinal, "The Hanover *Merzbau*: Tracing a Lost Masterwork," 203.

[52]Roger Cardinal, "The Hanover *Merzbau*: Tracing a Lost Masterwork," 203.

> we are fascinated by the fact that the work we reconstruct in our minds embodies both the sacred and the profane, the cozy and the macabre, the innovative and the regressive, the social and the private, the purposeful and the aleatory.[53]

The image of *Merzbau* that these photographs and the published testimonies conjure, fuels our own fantasies, our own desires, our own imaginations, our own creative constructions, images, that, unlike *Merzbau*, never were or will be, at least in the form of Schwitters's work in Hanover and the written accounts it provoked. Yet it is the image from which theological constructions, discursive and material, might emerge, which think through faith from nostalgia, loss, and distance, an impossibility to recapture what was once expressed directly and unselfconsciously, the relationships that could only have been experienced but now reflected on later, after the fact, as a museological event, *after the truth of faith*.

The photographs and the written accounts of *Merzbau* collaborate to produce a material artifact, a scale model in 1983 by the Swiss designer Peter Bissegger, at the direction of curator Harald Szeemann for his exhibition on the *Gestamtkunswerk* at the Kunsthalle Zürich. Szeemann approached Bissegger in 1981 to build a model of *Merzbau*, which would be designed from the existing photographs and with advice from Schwitters's son, Ernst. Bader notes that the model "is itself a kind of photograph-made-flesh, an attempt to make something real that exists only as image."[54] Bissegger's model brings out a characteristic of *Merzbau* in a similar way that the photographs do. Indeed, it is interesting to consider that, following Bader, that the photographic nature of the Merzbau resembles the photographic nature of museum exhibitions that seem to welcome

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[53]Roger Cardinal, "The Hanover *Merzbau*: Tracing a Lost Masterwork," 203-204.

[54]Graham Bader, *Poisoned Abstraction*, 126.

and even are produced to yield installation photographs, that crucial medium of museological documentation. Roger Cardinal suggests that the environment resembled an "archaeological model of an ancient metropolis" and that

> its relation to the world at large is somewhat that of an architect's small maquette to his huge actual building. This is to suggest that the *Merzbau* may be the microcosm of other spaces beyond itself. Did not Schwitters once joke about applying the Merz treatment to the entire city of Berlin?[55]

That *Merzbau* functions like a maquette or a model for an unknown city (Hanover, Berlin) or an imagined city or a city yet to come, resonates with the van Eycks's depiction of the New Jerusalem in the panel of the *Mystic Lamb*. Its theological desire for a redemptive and reconciled future also relates it to other utopian avant-garde monuments, like architect Vladimir Tatlin's unrealized *Monument to the Third International* (1919-20). But it is also reminiscent of children's toys, smaller-scale models, similar in fact to one of Schwitters's earliest assemblages is a work he calls, *Haus Merz* (1920), which resembles a cathedral. Cardinal's observations about the maquette or model-like characteristic of *Merzbau* suggests that Schwitters's environment could be considered to be a model for an unrealizable original, perhaps generated by an invisible image of hope, and thus a construction that was as future-oriented as it was past-looking.

But what is the relationship of Bissegger's model to the destroyed original, a model not build from the original, but based only on a handful of photographs and visitors' recollections? Cardinal, for one, finds the model unconvincing as a reconstruction or representation of the original.

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[55]Roger Cardinal, "The Hanover *Merzbau*: Tracing a Lost Masterwork," 201.

> Bissegger's simulacrum is a little too clean, a little too circumspect to be entirely persuasive. For one thing, it is based almost exclusively on three crisp photographs taken in the 1933...Inevitably, the replica remains mute about what lay beneath the surface in the original. Moreover, its visual information relates strictly to the rear studio room, ignoring the adjoining room, the balcony, and other extensions of the structure.[56]

While Cardinal's criticism is predicated on its inability to capture the nuances ("lay beneath the surface in the original"), I would argue that the model attempts to do something other than represent what cannot be represented. In fact, the significance of the reconstruction is precisely to demonstrate this inability, to perform its failure, and perhaps even to make visible Schwitters's failure. Moreover, the model can also be regarded as an example of what Mattias Martinson called a monument to faith.[57] It is the curatorial context for the reconstruction that opens up the possibility to think of the model not as a failed or unsuccessful reconstruction or representation but, following Carlsson Redell, as a performative artifact that *interprets* the original after the truth (existence) of the original has passed. To return to the curatorial thesis of Harald Szeemann's ambitious exhibition, *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*, enables us to consider the model not only to be a performative rather than representational one, but that it is also a *theological* one as well.

There is no question that the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* lends itself to theological reflection, or, perhaps it is itself a thoroughly theological concept. And by that, I mean that it generates a practice that is inextricably woven with faith, with what is impossible conceptually and pragmatically, but which underwrites a particular practice or a particular project, and so the theological dimension of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a

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[56]Roger Cardinal, "The Hanover *Merzbau*: Tracing a Lost Masterwork," 193.

[57]Mattias Martinson, "Inifrån ett utanför: Teologi, verklighet, vetenskap," unpublished manuscript.

creative idea is as an aspiration, a belief in its possibility derived from an invisible image of unity, reconciliation, redemption, resolution, and restoration, not unlike the image of the New Jerusalem in the *Mystic Lamb*. Yet there is another way to think about the concept theologically that resonates with the museal or museological nature of theology that this project is developing. This theological approach stresses its impossibility as a belief, that the aspiration to produce such a work, an aspiration that motivated Wagner, for example, may not have been accessible (i.e., as a believable practice) for Schwitters. And it is certainly not available to Szeemann, for whom the museum exhibition, as a mode of embodied curatorial thinking, is museal from the start, and thus at a critical distance, which already presupposes impossibility. Moreover, Szeemann's exhibition, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is organized around models. The failure of these models to even approximate their idealistic and romantic originals (*Merzbau*, Tatlin's *Monument*, Antoni Gaudí's church of *Colònia Güell*, Ferdinand Cheval's *Palais Idéal*, et al) *is the theological dimension of the project*. Put differently, the museological theology that this exhibition makes visible is not located in the failure of the models to represent the original. Their inability to be a model, therefore, means that they are performative, creative, imaginative artifacts on their own terms, even if some sense of an original beyond the exhibition exists, or did exist temporarily, or even could have existed. Or, to put it yet another way, it is Szeemann's exhibition and his models, including Bissegger's reconstruction of *Merzbau* that is the theological dimension of the museological register this project is exploring and with which it is experimenting. The theological dimension that is the primary interest of this project is not necessarily Schwitters's, Cheval's, Tatlin's. *It is Szeemann's*.

A Simple Dreamer

How do we think theologically about these models, of which Bissegger's model of *Merzbau* is just one iteration? Marcel Proust arrives again with a useful perspective. In an essay originally published in *Le Figaro* in 1904, Proust argues against the French government's separation of Church and State which would enable the government to sell off or abandon historical churches. Proust begins his essay with a thought experiment, "assuming Catholicism has been dead for centuries and all the tradition of its rites wholly forgotten." He continues:

> Only the cathedrals remain, dumb, alienated from their purpose, monuments, now unintelligible, of an unremembered creed. One day a number of archaeologists decide to reconstruct the ceremonies once held in them, the very ceremonies for which they were built, and without which they can be nothing but a dead letter. Artist's, indulging in the sweet dream of giving back a momentary life to these great, stranded vessels, try to make of them, for one brief hour, the theatres of that mysterious drama which was formerly played out within their walls in a mist of perfume and a drone of chants....[58]

Proust argues that the French government would most certainly provide financial support for artists and researchers to do historical research and re-perform the rituals *as art*, as part of France's research and presentation of its *cultural heritage*. Yet Proust suggests that there will be something missing.

> It matters not that the artists engaged to sing the chants, the actors brought to play the priests, have been ably coached, have absorbed the spirit of their parts. In spite of all they may do, we cannot help feeling how much more beautiful the festivals must have been when real priests said the Office, not with the object of giving to sophisticated onlookers an idea of what it was all like, but because they believed in the virtue of their rites...[59]

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[58]Marcel Proust, "Death Comes to the Cathedrals," in *Marcel Proust: A Selection from His Miscellaneous Writings* (London: Wingate, 1948), 97-98.

[59]Marcel Proust, "Death Comes to the Cathedrals," in *Marcel Proust: A Selection from His Miscellaneous Writings* (London: Wingate, 1948), 98.

What is missing is *belief* in the "virtue of their rites," which Proust claims would have made them "much more beautiful." For an agnostic like Proust, whose love of the church is wider than a belief in the doctrines and dogmas from which such rituals and practices emerge, it seems an unusual and perhaps unnecessary gesture to defend such belief. What is important for my purposes is that the sharp distinction between performer and liturgist, art and religion, aesthetics and spirituality, sacred and secular, audience and congregation need not be maintained one-hundred and twenty-five years later, after the bloody and catastrophic twentieth-century, after Christendom, after secularism, as well. Proust's thought experiment offers a way to think about *Merzbau*, where what is lost, destroyed, is not "reconstructed" or "represented," but reperformed in a different way, a way that embraces discontinuity and rupture, break and fissures by *not seeking continuity*. Is it possible that the liturgies, the rites, the sacraments performed by artists and gestures of cultural heritage in cathedrals in France, in Sweden, in the United States, are no less archaeological excavations that, despite the rubrics, the orders, the "traditions" that are handed down, are still less received as continuous but are created, performed, constructed, again and again, building new models made after—made as monuments to the impossible, to once believed in, to the pastness of faith, to the no longer extant? Significantly, Proust concludes his essay with this important admission:

> It is no less true, however, as we all of us know, that a man wholly ignorant of these things, a simple dreamer, may enter a cathedral without trying in any way to understand, content to let his emotions take charge, and get from what he sees and hears an impression which, though it will doubtless be less clear-cut, may be no less powerful.[60]

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[60]Marcel Proust, "Death Comes to the Cathedrals," in *Marcel Proust: A Selection from His Miscellaneous Writings* (London: Wingate, 1948),104.

A simple dreamer. Perhaps a believer. Perhaps not. A pilgrim or a tourist. Perhaps an cultured aesthete. Perhaps not. A congregant. Or audience member. *Merzbau* is a single artist's attempt to respond creatively and imaginatively to a world that was passing way—that was becoming museified. The words of the father to his son in Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road* come to mind, "like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. When you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them."[61]

But what are we to do with one man's attempt to "evoke the forms" in the form of *Merzbau*? Schwitters's example might offer a way to think about how to build our own from the detritus and debris of our spiritual and religious lives, our own *Merz*-religion in response to our own museified world. How might we then think about theology from this perspective? Perhaps it would consist of building models based on a few snapshots and textual fragments that have survived from the rubble of religious practice.

**LA RIBAUTE IN BARJAC**



[61]Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 74.

Harald Szeemann included a painting by Anselm Kiefer in his *Gesamtkunstwerk* exhibition, entitled *Deutschlands Geisteshelden,* 1973 ["Germany's Spiritual Heroes"], which presented German art and philosophy as a colossal *Gestamtkunstwerk.* Szeemann installed Kiefer's painting near a model of the unrealized Wagner festival theatre designed by Gottfried Semper for Ludwig II and intended to re-affirm the abiding influence of Wagner's utopian vision. Yet Kiefer's own practice after Szeemann's exhibition only expanded and, it could be argued, *grew into* Szeemann's curatorial thesis, extending beyond the limits of his already expansive studio in an industrial hangar in Odenwald, Germany to an even larger property, an abandoned silkworm breeding factory near Avignon, France in 1993, a decade after Szeemann's exhibition, where he remained until 2007.

The Famous Artist

Anselm Kiefer's work presents a particular challenge to anyone who attempts to write about it. So much has already been said. Both Kiefer and his work now appear beyond critique, impervious to new interpretations, and resistant to any response other than veneration. As the most well-known living artist in the world, he has ascended to a level of fame that novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard described as having "long since been canonized, and his name has become a kind of trademark."[62] All of this would seem to suggest that the trademark that generates this endless production of paintings, sculptures,

[62]Karl Ove Knausgaard, "Into the Black Forest With the Greatest Living Artist," *The New York Times Magazine* (Feb 22, 2020).

and public installations would care little about whether another word was ever said or written about him or them.

And yet Kiefer and his work seem to behave in the *opposite way*. They seem to invite, elicit, even *need* interpretation, discourse, conversation, speech. As one of his early and more trenchant critics, theorist Andreas Huyssen, put it in 1989, "one of the characteristics of Kiefer's work seems to be that it is both easily accessible and subtly hermetic."[63] This combination affirms what Huyssen calls "the transcendence of art and the universally human" that became irresistible to an (American-centric) global art world. Kiefer and his work became a seductive blend of inaccessibility and familiarity—that is, inaccessible in its arcane and obscure references yet familiar enough to be able to assimilate into one's emotional and intellectual landscape. This phenomenon has only intensified over the decades, as Kiefer's work and his studio operation have become ever more ambitious, expansive and theatrical as the narratives through which he constructs them have drifted away from the particular political and cultural themes related to German history, Hitler, and Auschwitz and have in turn become increasingly more religious, mythological, abstract, and cosmological in their scope and character. In addition to this turn to these abstract narratives, Kiefer has also begun to stage his work in ever more dramatic locations, such as the Ducal Palace in Venice, Opéra Bastille and Panthéon in Paris, and other cultural institutions and has begun "collaborating" with historical figures, like writers (James Joyce), poets (Paul Celan) and scientists and philosophers (Robert Flood, Andrea Emo) that place his work beyond the confines of the artworld and into a broader cultural history. This shift in practice, which appears to have

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[63]Andreas Huyssen, "The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth," *October* 48 (Spring 1989): 25-45.

taken place after he moved his studio from Barjac to Paris, has turned off many critics and commentators, for whom it appears that Kiefer is merely taking a victory lap and serving to enhance his legacy. But it is precisely this post-Barjac period that invites and is useful for a theology that comes on the scene late, arriving *after*—after international success, even after the achievement of celebrity.

Kiefer himself is not immune to the seductive powers of his works' capacity to elicit speech. He talks about his work and the ideas that generate them—a lot. Kiefer's verbal production is as prolific, expansive and complex as his visual artifacts, which suggests that they serve less as an "explanation" of his work as yet another form that his studio practice takes.[64] In fact, Kiefer is a voracious forager of ideas and concepts that he harvests from the labyrinth of religious, philosophical, historical, and esoteric traditions he scours. But he is not a systematic thinker. "People think I read a lot, but I read [just] enough to capture images."[65] He thus appropriates images from the texts and books he has scavenged, which are lying about his studio grounds among the sheets of lead or piles of steel and concrete fragments that await his use. Curator Michael Auping has described his studios as "warehouses of everything from dead plants and human teeth to sprawling stacks of lead."[66] He is also not a linear thinker, claiming "I can only think cyclically."[67] He thus speaks in a manner similar to his visual works, which consists primarily of assemblages of found objects, bits and pieces salvaged here and there and attached to

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[64]For a discussion of Kiefer's discourse around his work, see Daniel A. Siedell, "Where Do You Stand? Anselm Kiefer's Visual and Verbal Artifacts," *IMAGE* 77 (2012).

[65]Germano Celant, *Anselm Kiefer* (Milan: Skira, 2007), 339.

[66]Michael Auping, ed. *Heaven and Earth* (Munich: Prestel, 2005), 173.

[67]Celant, *Anselm Kiefer*, 471.

surfaces, oxidized by melted lead and other chemical methods, or left outside to be exposed to and to "collaborate with" the elements. And like his material constructions, his words are neither stable nor consistent. What Kiefer has said about his paintings also applies to his ideas. "For me," Kiefer has often claimed, "my pictures are never finished. They sit outside in containers and wait."[68] They can be stripped for parts, added onto, reworked, and then subsequently re-appear in different contexts to assume new roles in new configurations that generate new conversations. The same can also be said about his words. "Language is a house that surrounds you, that protects you," Kiefer observes, "that you carry with you, that offers support and protection."[69] Yet the support and protection that Kiefer receives by talking about his work seems only temporary and provisional, applicable only on a project-by-project basis, thus requiring him to construct ever new situations to build new discursive dwellings. So, just as his works are never really finished, there also seems to be no limit to what can be said about them—a continual flow of speech is brought forth by them.

Kiefer has asked *a lot* from art over the course of his fifty-year public career. The conceptual weight and ambition that he forces it to bear is often embodied in and exemplified by its sheer physical size and scope. His work is "heavy" in every conceivable way. He has forced it to bear the cultural weight of German identity, the historical burden of Nazism and anti-Semitism, and transgressing the cultural prohibitions against addressing them. It also has borne the iconographic weight of

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[68]Anselm Kiefer, *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, trans. Tess Lewis (2010; New York: Seagull Books, 2022), 85.

[69]*In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, 20.

European Christendom—especially Roman Catholicism; Judaism, the Old Testament, Near Eastern mysticism and cosmology, Kabbala, and Jewish mysticism. He has deployed it to search the limits of words and images, pursued the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and the relationships between creativity and alchemy. He also uses his work to experiment with the spiritual and symbolic potentiality of lead, concrete, and ash. He insists on using traditional subjects such as fire, sea, earth, clouds, stars, trees, poppies, and sunflowers—each charged with their own complex cultural associations and which he often connects to various religious traditions. And he also incorporates recognizable and common cultural artifacts such books, airplanes, ships and submarines, vitrines, and palettes, many of which weigh several tons. He has built large buildings and towers of concrete slabs that litter his expansive studio grounds. The conceptual, thematic, and material heaviness of his work and his deployment of religious, mythological, and cosmological narratives, themes, and traditions has made his work increasingly *theological*.[70] Yet this theological dimension, in which his work affirms the reality of unrepresentable reconciliations and unities that defy visibility and invisibility, is not the ultimate focus in this section. Rather, there is a mechanism at play in Kiefer's recent projects that are theological in ways that resonate with the museological orientation of *Exhibiting God*. And it just so happens that this theological dimension is enacted through a curatorial practice that begins from and returns to his studio.

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[70]Michael Auping, *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth* (2005). See also Deborah Lewer, "Paradox and Play in the Ruins of Theology," in *Anselm Kiefer: Opus Magnum* (Tokyo: Fergus McCaffrey, 2024).

*Exodus*, in New York and Los Angeles



Exhibition view, Anselm Kiefer, *Exodus*, Gagosian, Los Angeles, 2023

*Exodus* is a two-part exhibition project, presented simultaneously at Gagosian in New York City and Los Angeles, in 2022-23.[71] The Los Angeles installation utilizes the enormous and dramatically lit space at the Marciano Art Foundation, a former Scottish Rite Masonic Temple building designed by Millard Sheets in 1961. The installation, which includes eight monumental paintings and two sculptures, is, like all of his recent installations, curated primarily by Kiefer himself. The paintings, set against black curtains and lit dramatically, converts the cavernous space into a stage set, transforming the paintings into gigantic stage designs. Given his desire for vast expanses of empty space and his urge to fill them with his material artifacts, it is no wonder that the artist found the MAF an attractive collaborator.

Kiefer connects his interest in space and his unique manner of filling it to growing up in the Black Forest region in southern Germany amidst the bombed-out buildings and

[71]I had the opportunity to visit the installation in Los Angeles at the invitation of Gagosian in July 2023 to give a series of talks about the exhibition. The exhibition in New York was on view from Nov 11-Dec 23, 2022 and the Los Angeles exhibition was on view from Nov 11-June 16, 2023.

craters of World War II. And he has often identified his own work as something like the efforts of the *Trümmerfrauen* ("rubble women"), the legendary women who picked through the rubble to salvage useable bricks throughout German cities to be used as materials for the rebuild. "Rubble is nothing final to me," Kiefer thus concludes, "but rather it represents a process, a cycle."[72] In fact, Kiefer sees rubble as the future—as a necessary part of the process of becoming something else. And crucially, this process is a *creative* one, one that not only builds new things, but makes new signification, new meaning, even from those abandoned or rendered useless. "I dreamt of huge, enormous spaces. Where I grew up, I was very constrained, boxed in by the situation and by the architecture…I dreamt of vast spaces and transported myself to another world."[73]

The title of the exhibition comes from the Book of Exodus, a foundational sacred text for all three great monotheistic religions that narrate God's deliverance of the Israelites through the prophet Moses from slavery in Egypt to a promised land "flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3: 8). The installation thus *invites theological reflection.* The idea of being called out of one's homeland in search of another is a constant theme throughout the biblical tradition, whether that is through exile (Adam and Eve or Cain) or special calling (Abraham, Jonah, Jesus, apostle Paul). The passage used as the epigraph for the exhibition, which quotes Moses that "I am a stranger in a strange land" (Exodus 2:22) suggests broader associations, such as immigration provoked by political violence, economic injustice, or ecological catastrophe as well as the existential anxiety of the apocalypses that characterize contemporary life.

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[72]Celant, *Anselm Kiefer*, 471.

[73]*In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, 91.

The broader arc of Kiefer's work consists of curating the always tenuous balance between chaos and order that generates a cycle of endings and beginnings, destruction and creation, and being that is always in the process of becoming. This describes the *mythological cosmology* which underwrites his studio practice. Kiefer embraces the artist's role as a mythmaker, a conjurer of images that captivate, seduce, and attract our attention and stimulate our imagination. But these can easily deceive. This tension is suggested—both an invitation and a warning—in *Phoenix* (2018-19) a large-scale sculpture located outside in the courtyard. It consists of a winged painter's palette on a supporting column, as a snake, coiled around its base, rises upward toward the palette. The sculpture alerts the viewer that there are creative enchantments of myth and mythmaking inside.

Before entering the room of paintings, the viewer passes *Melancholia* (2008-2011) from Kiefer's *Women of Antiquity* series that has been an ongoing series since the 1990s. The empty dress construction, made from resign, plaster, steel with a vitrine-like polyhedron made of glass propped atop its neckline. The polyhedron is a common presence in Kiefer's work, appearing in numerous works and installations. It is a reference to Albrecht Dürer's well-known engraving, *Melancholia I* (1514), a Renaissance image that became a symbol of the perils of creative achievement that must struggle to alchemize loss and memory.

Kiefer's *Melancholia* is also reminder that he refuses to celebrate "progress," which presumes either political or theological redemption. This Kiefer emphatically denies. "No, there's no eschaton, no," Kiefer states. "That's an idea we came up with to

reassure ourselves: that things are headed towards a goal and fulfilment...."[74] This "idea" finds its beginnings in the book of Exodus. And while he writes the title of his installation, "Exodus" across the wall, the dress construction is a reminder that it is *melancholia* that underlies it; that exodus has no fulfillment, no progress nor redemption, neither from the gods nor governments.[75] Kiefer's *Exodus* transforms the Judeo-Christian tradition, with its teleological trajectory into a *cyclical movement*, an eternal recurrence, an ongoing process that alchemizes history into mythology; progress, teleology, and eschaton into an endless circulation of destruction and reconstruction; endings and beginnings as part of the energy of the *process of* the continual becoming of being, signification, and meaning. Rather than a source of despair or nihilism, however, for Kiefer it is liberating. "When God withdraws, an empty space is left, in which something can develop."[76] *Exodus* fills this empty space.

To enter the enormous and dramatically lit empty space around which eight gigantic paintings stand at attention or on watch is to experience the strange sensation that *something* is about to happen. And what happens depends largely on how the viewer activates the paintings by transacting the vast space between them. To refer to these eights works as *paintings*, however, does not seem quite right. They are moveable walls—most of them nearly thirty feet high and thirty feet long—onto which such objects as artist palettes, shopping carts, ladders, ships, stones, twine, a television satellite disk,

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[74]*In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, 84.

[75]The literature on melancholia is vast and complex. For two helpful approaches, see Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholy: Marxism, History, and Memory* (Columbia, 2017). See also Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

[76]*In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, 138.

and a bicycle are attached to lead-covered, chemically rendered, and painted surfaces, many which feature Hebrew words written across them. They consist of dramatic cloud configurations, turbulent waters, and scorched fields that yoke the stellar with the terrestrial, transcendent with the immanent, the sky with the earth.

Bodies of water also feature prominently in these works, just as they do in the exodus narrative in the Bible. The waters that appear in these works, such as in *Wolkensäule (Column of Clouds)*, *En Sof*, *Parabole*, and *Thou didst blow with thy wind, the sea covered them: they sank as lead* are not well-behaved, picturesque gentle bodies of water. They are turbulent, tumultuous, and threatening. And according to the ancient Near Eastern traditions, the very embodiment of chaos. As theologian Catherine Keller writes,

> The author of Genesis, like virtually the entire ancient world, assumed that the universe was created from, a primal chaos: something uncreated, something Other, something that a creator could mold, form, or call to order.[77]

Keller argues that the Genesis creation story is not the story of God creating out of nothing, that is, *creatio ex nihilo*, but rather out of and with the depths, in collaboration with the chaos that is the turbulent and formless salty waters: *creatio de profundis*. According to Keller, classical theism—the sovereign all powerful creator God that Kiefer rejects—"creates itself in the space of the erased chaos." Keller argues that Christian theology could not tolerate such chaos as a constraint by chaos upon God's transcendent power. But this collaborative, immanent divinity is the source of Keller's process theology, what she has called *tehomic* theology, (*tehom* is Hebrew for "deep" or "the

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[77]Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xvii.

depths"). And it resonates with Kiefer's cosmology. "If I am not careful," Kiefer has claimed, "chaos takes over here in my studio. But the other danger is equally great: that order takes over." As curator Michael Auping observes,

> Creation myths, which form a subtext to many of Kiefer's fragmented allegories, and which the artist describes as being 'about forgotten beginnings,' often involve metals as a symbolic element.[78]

And indeed, Kiefer seems to embrace a watery, *tehomic* worldview. "I actually prefer the condition when everything is covered with water, all mixed together."[79] These threatening, turbulent waters of Kiefer's paintings that, given their size, overwhelms the viewer, are the source of life, of creativity and thus must be navigated, collaborated with. But unlike the story of Yahweh parting the Red Sea, from which Kiefer's "golden submarine" painting quotes in Hebrew (Exodus 15:10), the seas of life, the chaotic forces of the cosmos will not be parted by an omnipotent and transcendent deity, we must navigate them on our own. And in the case of this painting, this human navigation is suggested by the submarine. It is not a ship that moves on top of the waters, like, say, Noah's ark, but a submarine, a truly *tehomic* vessel that plumbs the darkest and most perilous depths. In each of these watery chaos paintings, Kiefer has attached particular artifacts—a cloud, the ladder, the satellite dish, the submarine—that suggest means to collaborate with the destructive chaos of the seas, transforming them, if only temporarily, into sources of creation, insight, new beginnings.

These paintings are also screens. They are not just products of Kiefer's ideas, his concepts. They are images with which the viewer might collaborate, onto which *we* might

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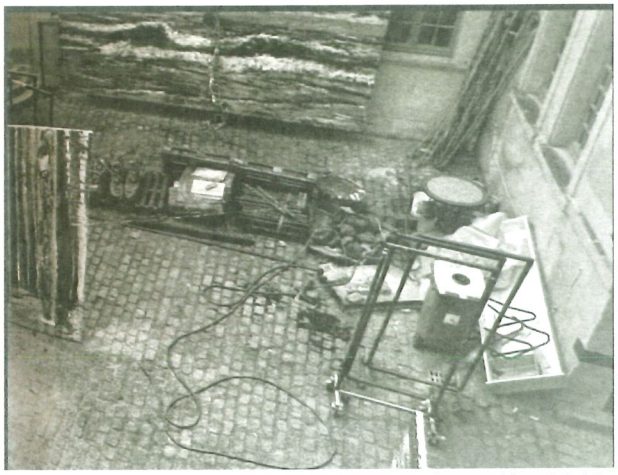
[78]Auping, *Heaven and Earth*, 37.

[79]Auping, *Heaven and Earth*, 209.

project *our* images, *our* mythologies, *our* theologies that inform *our* personal exoduses, *our* journeys of escape, deliverance, exploration, and wandering, and the endless process of becoming. *Exodus* shows us that it is through our creative curation of endings and beginnings, through destruction and creation, we live our lives, and can do it collectively, no matter the circumstances. These installations were curated from Kiefer's studio, to which they ostensibly returned. And it is to the role that the studio plays in Kiefer's practice that we now turn.

Studio as Worldview



Photograph of Anselm Kiefer's Paris studio, 2011

Anselm Kiefer's life began in the rubble from Allied bombing that also destroyed Schwitters's *Merzbau* in Hanover. Kiefer was born in 1945, just months before the end of the Second World War, in Donaueschingen, a small village in the Black Forest in the south of Germany. The town was occupied by the French and littered with the remains of destroyed buildings that left an indelible mark on his imagination. "As a child," Kiefer recalls, "I had no toys; our house was bombed. So, I built all these houses with the bricks

from the ruin."[80] Kiefer connects his interest in space and his unique manner of filling it to growing up in these bombed-out buildings and craters. And he has often identified his own work as something like the efforts of the *Trümmerfrauen* ("rubble women"), the legendary women who picked through the rubble to salvage useable bricks throughout German cities to be used as materials for the rebuild. "Rubble is nothing final to me," Kiefer thus concludes, "but rather it represents a process, a cycle."[81] In fact, Kiefer sees rubble not as the past but as a possible *future*—as a necessary part of the process of becoming something else. And crucially, this process is a *creative* one, one that not only builds new things, but makes new signification, new meaning, even from those abandoned or rendered useless. As a child, "I dreamt of huge, enormous spaces. Where I grew up, I was very constrained, boxed in by the situation and by the architecture…I dreamt of vast spaces and transported myself to another world."[82] The vast spaces that Kiefer dreamt of have been realized in two ways. First, through the ambitious size of his paintings and scope of installations, as evidence in *Exodus*. Second, through the development of his studio space, such as the industrial hanger he transformed in Buchen, Germany (1982-93), abandoned silk worm breeding factory in Barjac, France (1993-2007), and an old warehouse in Croissy-Beauboug (2007-13). The studio space has become more than merely a location where Kiefer works. Over time it has taken on conceptual as well as existential and conceptual significance, operating as a worldview, in which, from which, and through which his work emerges and within which it takes up its

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[80]Quoted in Jonathan Jones, "'Our house was bombed the night I was born': Anselm Kiefer on the nightmares he can't escape," *The Guardian* (June 8, 2023).

[81]Kiefer quote, Celant, *Anselm Kiefer*, 471

[82]*In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, 91.

distinctive existence in relation to everything else that is encompassed by the studio. "The studios," Danièle Cohn suggests,

> exemplify how Kiefer imagines his work as a continuum. They are spatial configurations in which time accretes, where what has been preserved, used, and worn is repeatedly renewed, reused, reemployed, reconfigured.[83]

It has become the material manifestation of Kiefer's claim that *all things* are connected and inter-related, that destruction is necessary for creation, history is cyclical and in motion, and that meaning is made up of disparate fragments, shards of religion, science, philosophy, and art. And these bits and pieces of ideas, concepts, and images lay about Kiefer's studios like sheets of lead, canvases, barrels of paint, chunks of concrete, bull dozers, and cranes for use in his paintings and installations. "I never throw anything away, everything is transformed, everything finds meaning in another picture, another sculpture..."[84] It is from this environment of self-generated rubble that Kiefer curates a balance between order and chaos. Kiefer has suggested that "I endure life by creating order in a small sphere. Order is not the right term—by creating coherence with my artistic work."[85] However, this desire to maintain order, or "coherence," as he calls it, must be balanced with the energy of "chaos." Fifteen years earlier, Kiefer had warned, "If I am not careful, chaos takes over here in my studio. But the other danger is equally great: that order takes over."[86] One of the ways that Kiefer creates forms of order—or coherence—is through the production and curation of installations in public spaces

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[83]Danièle Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer Studios* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 23.

[84]Quoted in Danièle Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer Studios* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 16.

[85]Celant, *Anselm Kiefer*, 2005.

[86]Celant, *Anselm Kiefer*, 160.

throughout the world, which have seemed only to increase over the last two decades after he left his studio in Barjac. These multiple and diverse iterations—many of which take place simultaneously—present different forms that coalesce around particular themes. They function like small-scale and temporary studio dioramas. Kiefer claims, "My work that you see in galleries and museums is only a trace of that which happens in my area in Barjac. A relic."[87] These relics, however, last only as long as the duration of the exhibition before they return to the studio once again to become part of the flux, the chaos, the rubble, the fragments that might be used as material for other iterations in the future. The importance of the studio as a particular landscape and evolving environment with its own life that charges the works is suggested in his efforts toward curating *more* of this environment, whether in the form of an opera-performance-exhibition at the Bastille Opera in Paris, *Am Anfang* (2009) or in the film made by Sophie Fiennes, *Over Your Cities Grass will Grow* (2011). A relic only comes alive, becomes a compelling witness, as we have already explored, through the intersection of the artifact's distant history and the creative and imaginative energy of the observer's faith (or, rather, *desire* for faith) that gives it life. Kiefer's studio has, since the mid-1990s, begun to play a more visible role in his practice to the extent that since he moved his studio from Germany to France in 1992, it has become the invisible presence in his work, transforming his installations and exhibitions into something like signifiers that point to the studio. And his artistic practice has consisted of managing the visibility and invisibility of the studio as a sacred, creative, even mythological site. It is this particular studio, on 200-acres of

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[87]Celant, *Anselm Kiefer*, 474.

rolling hills around an abandoned silk-worm factory near Avignon, that we must turn, for it is here that Kiefer's practice became more curatorial *as it became more theological.*

Kiefer's studio from 1993-2007, which he calls *La Ribaute*, which is what the locals call this sprawling area of hills and valleys, consists of over fifty buildings, structures, many of which were built to house, protect, or to display his paintings and sculptures. Kiefer states, "The paintings need their own buildings to work. They require their own site of action. Only from this site can they have an effect in the world."[88] In this assemblage of studio spaces and other buildings spread across this property, he is able to experiment freely with new contexts and curatorial relationships between works. Kiefer observes,

> One painting is never one painting in my studio. Each is always seen in the context of others...So what I do in Barjac is give them a space. I didn't want to bring them to a space, I want to give a space to the painting. First the painting, then the space.[89]

The paintings and sculptural constructions *generate* the spaces. The implications of this conception of the work are that it is the paintings and sculptures *as material artifacts* that determine the landscape.

> I need nature to help me, to collaborate with me. I use the weather, the heat, and the cold, sometimes leaving my canvases out in the rain. I put acid, earth, and water on them. I don't use conventional colour. I don't even use paint. I use substances…[90]

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[88]Quoted in Danièle Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer Studios* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 20.

[89]Celant, *Anselm Kiefer*, 446.

[90]Karen White, "The Ruins of Barjac: Politics, Alchemy, and Learning to Dance in Anselm Kiefer's World," *Modern Painters: The International Art Magazine* (Nov 2006).

His collaborative relationship to nature expanded at La Ribaute. Reflecting on the challenges of leaving Germany to relocate in a tiny village in southern France, Kiefer observed, "Feeling at the time alien to this place—the landscape has never inspired a single painting—I started building with real energy that I suppose was in proportion to my desire to appropriate the location."[91] What began as appropriation, putting his mark on the property, evolved into something more consequential.

> I've built roads, buildings, planted trees, sown plants, laid out enclosures...And then one day I had the idea of tunnels. Since there was nothing left to see on the surface, I went downwards. To tell the truth, it wasn't an idea, it was a reflex. This ceaseless earthwork was like extending the dwelling by constructing underground.[92]

The result is something approximating a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as the work on the grounds—including underground—become inextricably entangled and inseparable from the paintings and the sculpture.

> What the studio at Barjac demonstrates is that building is not—not primarily, not in principle, not primordially—constructing at all, but interconnecting....The unity presented by Barjac, which cannot be taken in at a single glance, is an articulation of its parts.[93]

Kiefer's work on the property is to connect the studio—the workshop—to the topology of the landscape, to connect the site where paintings are made, books are read, interviews conducted, throughout La Ribaute. The land includes glass greenhouses, concrete bunkers, soaring steel sheds and he has cut roads through trees, and excavating a new lake. Kiefer describes the subterranean—indeed, it can even be described as the *mycelial*—component of this work.

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[91]Danièle Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer Studios* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 38.

[92]Danièle Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer Studios* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 45.

[93]Danièle Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer Studios* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 50.

> I have made a large crypt. One tunnel, which is about a kilometer long, opens into a crypt under the mountain. And underneath I drilled many columns, filled them with concrete, poured a concrete slab over them and then hollowed them out. The excavation work has been going on for several years. It will be a crypt of almost 2,000 square meters and eight meters deep in parts.[94]

And so, Kiefer's works bear the mark of the studio from which they have only been seemingly *temporarily* displaced. And moreover, each of his installations bring with it a part of his studio, whether it is La Ribaute or his more recent ones near Paris.

It is from this studio-centric context in which the works emerge from and inhabit that *Exodus* is assembled, curated, and installed in New York City and in Los Angeles in 2022-23. The studio environment thus charges and re-charges the works as they circulate through public exhibitions and back into the studio. When they return Kiefer can use them in new ways. "When I move them, they generate new combinations and relations. One painting is never one painting in my studio. Each is always seen in the context of others."[95] His work lives so comfortably in his studios in the context that he designs for them that he admits, "it can sometimes be disillusioning to see my paintings outside the spaces in which they were made."[96] This circularity, this endless recycling, connecting, interconnecting, re-assembling, re-using, re-cycling, exemplified and no doubt influenced Kiefer's developing views on the cosmos. In fact, his studio spaces appear to serve as *models of the interconnected and cyclical cosmos*, in which everything

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[94]Quoted in *Anselm Kiefer: Palazzo Ducale Venice*, eds. Gabriella Belli and Janne Sirén (Marsilio Arte, 2022), 154.

[95]Karen White, "The Ruins of Barjac: Politics, Alchemy, and Learning to Dance in Anselm Kiefer's World," *Modern Painters: The International Art Magazine* (Nov 2006).

[96]Karen White, "The Ruins of Barjac: Politics, Alchemy, and Learning to Dance in Anselm Kiefer's World," *Modern Painters: The International Art Magazine* (Nov 2006).

on his grounds, from the buildings, art works, materials, tunnels, crypts, lakes, paths, trees, et al are connected.

The role that the studio plays in his work might appear to suggest that Kiefer's artistic practice is the ideal embodiment of Paul Valéry's claim that the work of art dies if it is stripped from the initial creative context from which it emerged. His practice then is to keep his work alive by limiting its exposure to and presence in art museums and galleries. As long as his work is in the studio, Kiefer claims, it remains alive, in process. "For me," Kiefer states, "pictures are never finished. They sit outside in containers and wait."[97] And so La Ribaute functions not only as Kiefer's meta-artwork, his *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but as the worldview for his paintings, sculptures, and installations—their natural topographical and hermeneutical habitat.

However, Kiefer left La Ribaute in 2007 for a studio closer to Paris and his relationship to this property reveals another iteration of his evolving relationship to his work, a relationship that shifts focus from use to disuse, intimacy to distance, connection to disconnection, visibility to invisibility. In short, Kiefer *museified* La Ribaute. And he did so in the process of transforming his studio into a *Gesamtkunstwerk.*

Museological Eschatologies




[97] *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, 85.

While he was transforming the topography of La Ribaute, Kiefer was changing his relationship to the artwork he produced. Both practices, taking place simultaneously, were responding to the challenges of distance and fragmentation that continue to have an effect on his practice after leaving Barjac nearly twenty years ago. Danièle Cohn observes,

> If Barjac is, strictly speaking, the second studio in time, it might be the first, perhaps, because it is here that Kiefer builds, far from the landscape. Such a distinction would open a newfound perspective on Kiefer's entire creative activity.[98]

Cohn argues that Kiefer's building on La Ribaute reveals his "distance" from the landscape, from "nature." Cohn suggests that this is why the beauty of the landscape seemed not to inspire Kiefer to paint it, to incorporate it into his work in a way that he had with his previous studio environments. And significantly, she places Kiefer's response in the broader context of the Enlightenment.

> This may be the reason for writing about the landscapes of Barjac, as their natural beauty obliges the painter to eschew the task of painting them. The idea that our separation from nature, from the natural world, the nostalgia we feel for that lost unity, characterizes the modern spirit dates form the philosophy of the Enlightenment…[99]

Kiefer's arrival at Barjac, his transformation of the topography of La Ribaute, his construction, destruction, building and painting, was a response to arriving late, his experience of disconnection from the land and isolation in France. These experiences resonate with Agamben's concept of museification. At the height of his international reputation, Knausgaard observed that Kiefer had become "Kiefer," a trademark beyond

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[98]Danièle Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer Studios* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 38.

[99]Danièle Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer Studios* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 42.

"life," beyond its spontaneity and flux, and even cut off from it. Another way of describing this is that Kiefer embraced this process of *museification* as he transformed La Ribaute into a museum artifact.



Vitrines have played an important role in Kiefer's practice since 1986.[100] Curator Mark Rosenthal, who curated the first large-scale museum exhibition of Kiefer's work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1986, has recently associated Kiefer's use of the vitrine as a format with "a poem, a word, a fragment, or a linguistic image located in a small space" which "commands exquisite attention, even adoration."[101] His use of the vitrine is, as Rosenthal argues, "one more manifestation of Kiefer's poetic outlook and practice." He continues,

> By focusing on a single, meaningful moment, he creates a likeness to the aesthetic impact of a poem, in which singular impressions are emphasized and elaborated upon. In so doing, he changes his point of view from the macrocosmic to the microcosmic.[102]

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[100]See Mark Rosenthal, "Anselm Kiefer—On an Unexpected Scale," *Anselm Kiefer: Opus Magnum* (Tokyo: Fergus McCaffrey, 2024), 5-11.

[101]Mark Rosenthal, "Anselm Kiefer—On an Unexpected Scale," *Anselm Kiefer: Opus Magnum* (Tokyo: Fergus McCaffrey, 2024), 6.

[102]Mark Rosenthal, "Anselm Kiefer—On an Unexpected Scale," *Anselm Kiefer: Opus Magnum* (Tokyo: Fergus McCaffrey, 2024), 8.

Granting the poetic dimension of the vitrine and Kiefer's interest in previous artistic deployments of the form, such as Joseph Cornell and Joseph Beuys, in the context of this project, the vitrine creates intimacy *and* distance, reveals precarity and preciousness, as well as inaccessibility.

Kiefer places La Ribaute under a vitrine by embracing distance and inaccessibility. The sheds, barracks, and other containers he builds for his paintings make them invisible and render them unusable. He has stated that

> It's important to be able to shut paintings away when you want to: so that they can rest from time to time. So they can recover their secret. Or so they can change in seclusion because what is hidden often changes greatly.[103]

La Ribaute has enabled Kiefer to rest his paintings, to hide them until he is ready to discover them again. To make them invisible and inaccessible, is to create an obstacle to experience them, create a distance that needs to be transversed, not unlike the winding path up flights of stairs and through a pair of sliding gold-plated doors to see the *Ghent Altarpiece* at St. Bavo's Cathedral or the reliquary in the Chapel of Shroud in Turin. The work needs a barrier. Kiefer states, "It's also necessary to have a threshold before the painting."[104] This threshold is the barrier that generates desire for what is hidden, if only veiled partially and temporarily. In fact, Kiefer says precisely this. He acknowledges, "A secret is something veiled. I don't unveil the secret—I create the secret"[105] But Kiefer also recognizes the dynamic between what is seen and unseen, what is visible and invisible also means that secrecy is not restricted to invisibility. "I make matter secretive

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[103] *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, 21.

[104] *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, 20.

[105] *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, 170.

again by exposing it."[106] The dynamic that Kiefer describes his relationship to his paintings and sculpture, which entails veiling and unveiling, exposure and concealment, visibility and invisibility is how he conceives of La Ribaute in general. He has somewhere observed, "It's not easy to bring art to a standstill—it's always in motion." And yet, Kiefer has found a way to do so by leaving La Ribaute. Kiefer has claimed,

> My work is an unbroken continuum, one thing arises from another, the chronology is dissolved. I alone am its evolution in both directions: forwards and backwards. From time to time, the tip of an iceberg emerges from this reiver, something congeals when it makes it into the museum where it is preserved. It has little to do with active work, with the continuum; it is the "remnant" of something far more beautiful than the frozen piece that is delivered. What has stopped, has frozen, becomes reified, objectified. This needs to be accepted, borne; and, if one is lucky, in spite of the limitation of what has occurred, something new will have surged up from the tip of the iceberg, something that has never existed before, and which differs from life.[107]

Kiefer's departure from La Ribaute and his self-museification *broke this continuum.* What is interesting is that Kiefer has in the past lamented that he is separated from his work when it leaves his studio and is installed in museums or galleries. He states,

> Works now in museums or collections are out of my hands, they are on another planet. When I manage to lend something for an exhibition, I lose the right to handle the work, it arrives with two curators who are alone authorized to hang the work in question. I'm not allowed to touch, to intervene in anyway way.[108]

What Kiefer laments, he has, whether consciously or unconsciously, *also initiated* in La Ribaute by not only leaving Barjac and moving his studio closer to Paris, but also by transforming the studio into a foundation, and thus a museum, of sorts, which was announced in 2022. Danièle Cohn, writing a decade earlier, predicted "if Barjac is no

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[106]*In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, 171.

[107]Danièle Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer Studios* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 16.

[108]Danièle Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer Studios* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 13.

longer a working studio, Kiefer cannot bear to see it die...."[109] Contrary to Cohn's formulation, Kiefer transformed his relationship to it by museifying it, by putting a vitrine over it, bringing it to a standstill, and thus treating everything on the property into a museum artifact, from the buildings to the art works, to the landscape, a cultural heritage site. And it is this distance that Kiefer was able to generate the distance necessary into order to develop new relationships to it, to use it in a *museified* way. Kiefer enabled La Ribaute to experience an afterlife.

Upon the announcement of the new Anselm Kiefer Foundation at La Ribaute, the founding president, Janne Sirén stated, "This is not a place for mass tourism, more of a pilgrimage site."[110] It could only become a pilgrimage site through the museification that Kiefer initiated, through the management of intimacy and accessibility, what is visible and what is invisible. This also includes generating believable images of La Ribaute as a working studio, a place of connection, interpretation, spontaneity, and the spirit of creation. It is this museification process, developed after Kiefer left La Ribaute in 2007—like Duchamp letting the dust settle in his studio—that has underwritten his artistic practice over the past decade. It was a project that transformed Kiefer into a curator, working with his own work as museum artifacts, like the two curators who, he lamented, prohibited him from handling his own work. Instead of lamenting this distance and inaccessibility, Kiefer is able to embrace it through the museification of La Ribaute, which is not merely the museification of that particular studio, but it incorporates and incapsulates all of his previous *and subsequent* studio workshops. Kiefer's transformation

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[109]Danièle Cohn, *Anselm Kiefer Studios* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 51.

[110]Jay Cheshes, "The Artwork That Took 30 Years and 200 Acres to Create," *Smithsonian Magazine* (Nov/Dec 2022).

of the studio into a museum-foundation, within the context of this project, becomes a theological gesture similar to Szeemann's model of *Merzbau*. That Knausgaard observed a curious inaccessible distance to "Kiefer" as a trademark and thus immune to the vicissitudes of life's spontaneity, suggests the museification extended to the artist himself, that he too had become, in some way, a museum artifact (pre-Barjac Kiefer and post-Barjac Kiefer). Yet this status, however, does not, contra Adorno's Valéry, constitute his death or the death of his work, but a different creativity and imagination, a different relationship to his work, a different relationship to his past statements and interpretations of his work—an afterlife for both La Ribaute and for Kiefer. Perhaps the most vivid example of this is Kiefer's claim, documented in 2008, that that there is "no eschaton," no end or fulfillment of history, no linear trajectory towards redemption, or a Final Judgment, or in the visual imagery of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, no New Jerusalem.[111]

What did Kiefer name the foundation, his studio-turned museum? He named it, *Eschaton*. I suggest that Kiefer's shift in focus is not a contradiction but a transformation, a theological transformation in which distance and inaccessibility are embraced through a gesture of museification that enables Kiefer and his work, including his studio, his *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to enjoy an *afterlife in the midst of life*, free of the burden of a relentless cycle of change, of interconnection, of spontaneity and presence. The theological implications of La Ribaute are not found in his symbolism and iconography or what philosophers or cosmologists or poets he's reading and thinking about, but the museification process of his *Gesamtkunstwerk*, not as a result of abandonment but as a creative gesture of curatorial and museological liberation.

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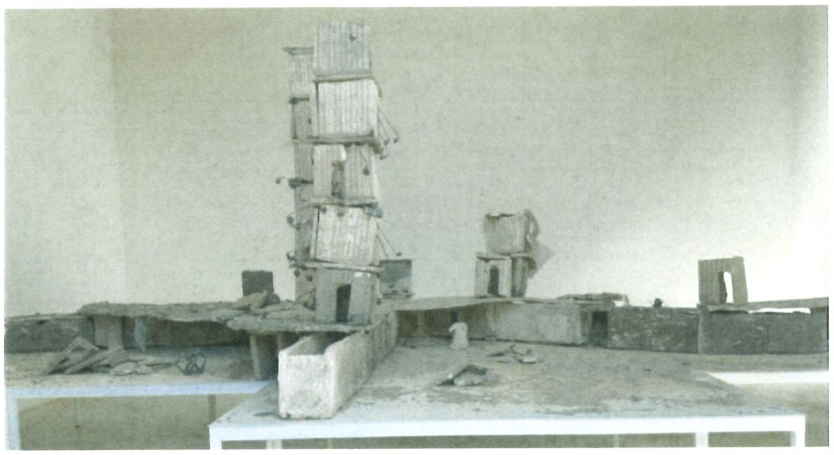
[111]Kiefer states, "No, there's no eschaton, no. That's an idea we came up with to reassure ourselves: that things are headed towards a goal and fulfilment…" Quoted in Cohn, 84.

## CONCLUSION



What does Kiefer's La Ribaute have to do with Schwitters's *Merzbau*, a site that has been transformed into a museum and a site that was destroyed? And how do we think about them theologically? Both participate in the conceptual horizon of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the desire to create a work of art that unites and synthesizes all the art forms, utilizes all the senses, transcends boundaries and distinctions, a work that unites art and life, that subsumes the latter in the former, that heals the wounds of alienation, disunity, and fragmentation. And yet, both *Merzbau* and La Ribaute are exemplary of Harald Szeemann's curatorial interpretation of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, an apophatic interpretation that reveals the concept to exist only in fragments, shards, incompleteness, impossibility, inaccessibility, and lateness. Both Schwitters's work, including his *Merzbau*, and Kiefer's work addresses religious imagery and theological themes. And as sites, as specific locations, both *Merzbau* and La Ribaute are creative responses to separation, disjunction, loss and expressions of faith and hope that can be interpreted as religious, as liturgical and sacramental practices, with theological implications.

Yet for the purposes of this project, their theological relevance and resonance is in their role and function *after the fact*. In the case of Schwitters's *Merzbau*, it is after its destruction and its subsequent afterlife as a handful of photographs and published recollections of visitor experiences. But most importantly, however, it is in the model that Szeemann had constructed for the exhibition. It is a model that is unconvincing as a replica or representation of the original. In short, the theological gesture that is important in this context is that the model is *not a reconstruction.* In the case of Kiefer's studio in Barjac, La Ribaute is of theological relevance as an abandoned studio turned museum artifact, a *museified studio*. And in fact, it becomes a *Gesamtkunstwerk* only after it is abandoned, in retrospect, as a museological gesture. Indeed, the process of museifying La Ribaute consists in making a model of it, putting it on a pedestal—not as a reconstruction or replica, but as a new artifact.

In a series of interviews conducted shortly after he left La Ribaute, Kiefer confessed that despite all the evidence to the contrary, he had harbored a fantasy to "free myself from materiality" and "liquidate" his work. Kiefer expressed the "hope that someone will come [to Barjac] and finish what I wasn't able to, that is, create works that have no matter."[112] Twenty-five years later, Kiefer "liquidated" or dissolved La Ribaute, not by bombing it or destroying it physically, but by transforming it and its contents into a museum artifact, placing a vitrine over the sprawling property. Kiefer continues to return to La Ribaute, shifting and changing the contents, transferring work between Barjac and Paris locations. But he does so *as curator*. He liquified and de-materialized the studio by museifying it, reifying it, putting a vitrine over it and its contents in order to

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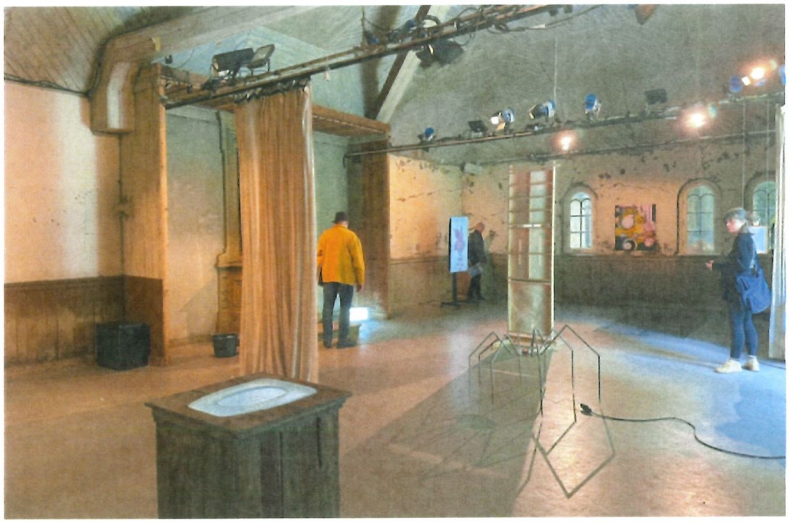
[112] *In Conversation with Klaus Dermutz*, 135.

generate a new relationship to it, one that participates in its afterlife, not as the artist, but as a curator. It is a relationship that Schwitters did not have the opportunity to experience. While in Norway, in exile, Schwitters expressed to collector Katherine Dreier, "what fills me with sorrow is that I can't live in my *Merz* room."[113] I like to think that Schwitters's spirit spends a few nights in the model at the Sprengel Museum in Hanover now and then, where it is on permanent public display. And he takes pleasure in knowing that even though it isn't his, it is inspired by it, and perhaps the non-existent *Merzbau* now serves as an imaginary reliquary for Schwitters's memory, his past, preserved as the invisible relic that *Merzbau* was built to preserve. Perhaps it is that pleasure, wrought from loss, distance, lateness and the passage of time that is the invisible image that has driven this project. Perhaps it is the building of such models, inspired by but can in no way be reconstructions or replicas of the inaccessible and non-existent originals, that characterizes a museal theology.

[113]Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 281.

# CONCLUSION

## AFTERLIVES IN SWEDEN



> I like the word believe. In general, when one says, "I know," one doesn't know, one believes.
>
> —Marcel Duchamp[1]

*Exhibiting God* has been motivated by the question that Jewish philosopher Martin Buber posed to the Lutheran theologian Dorothee Sölle: "theology—how do you do that?" This project does not treat theology merely as a research subject or an object of study, but an academic discourse to *practice* beyond the theological department and beyond the academy. Put another way, the theologian is not simply a researcher but also a practitioner. And as this project argues, the theologian, as *museal* theologian, is a curator, which encompassed *both* researcher and practitioner. Buber's question to Sölle also brought with it another question: how can *you*—a Lutheran theologian—practice

[1]Quoted in David Levi Strauss, *Photography and Belief* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2020), 13.

theology now, *after* Auschwitz, *after* the death of God, after the complicity of Lutheran theology and the Lutheran Church?

Buber's invitation to my project, however, is different. In his question I hear, "what *is* theology, anyway?" And this implies another: "how do *you* do whatever theology is *today* in a *museified* world, as you claim, in which, "what was once—but no longer—felt as true and decisive has moved?"[2] The answer that this project has sought to develop is that theology in a museified world is a curatorial discourse and a museological practice. *Exhibiting God* is not a project that fills a gap in established theological research. Rather, it shifts the terrain on which theological research takes place in a world "dense with things left behind by those who came before us," a terrain littered with material and cultural artifacts, from works of art and churches, to immaterial cultural artifacts, like belief.[3] From this museified position in which theology arrives late and is practiced from a distance through various mediations, like photographs, models, and fragments, *Exhibiting God* has pursued two research questions. The first relates to what such a museal theology might look like, how it would behave. and how it might relate to other theological discourses and to other academic discourses in the humanities. The second research question explores how and in what ways curating and the curatorial might be a useful method for such a theology in which "the spiritual potentialities that defined the people's lives—art, religion, philosophy, the idea of nature, even politics—have docilely withdrawn into the Museum."[4] The curatorial becomes, then, a method for

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[2]Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone, 2007), 83.

[3]Caitlin Desilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017). 2-3.

[4]Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone, 2007), 83.

practicing a theology *within* this museified situation, a situation in which all cultural artifacts have been dislocated from original contexts and dislodged from their intended purposes and thus have the potential for afterlives, that is, to participate in new practices, new discourses, new projects. Curating is thus what creativity looks like in the museum, in a museal theology.

This project also developed a handful of concepts to serve museal theology and the curatorial, which are worth reintroducing. A crucial image for a theology that works from distance, absence, and "after" is the *photograph*, which makes absence present, opening up a gap between what was and is. A museal theology embraces and works with this gap, and it is a visual form that appears often in this project, from Alfred Stieglitz's photograph of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* and the Secondo Pia's photograph of the *Shroud of Turin*, to the close-up photographs of the *Mystic Lamb* and Walter Benjamin's essay on the effects of photography and moving images on the traditional visual arts. Moreover, many of the photographs included in this project were taken by me, personal encounters with particular artifacts, which further speaks to the transient circumstances and experiential impact that the images *could not capture*.

In addition, *Exhibiting God* also utilized the concepts of the *vitrine* and the *veil*, transforming them into verbs, as ways to compare and contrast theological practices that respond to the cracks that appear in the symbolic order, through which the real—the *tehomic* void—seeps through. The vitrine offers a way to spackle over these cracks while the veil is a means to work with them, covering and revealing in ways that seduce and increase the desire for the creative potential of the too muchness of this nothingness. This project concludes with a brief tour of three sites in Sweden. The first is in a seminar room

on the campus of the Stockholm School of Theology in a Stockholm suburb called Bromma.

## THE WHITE CUBE IN BROMMA[5]



Final Seminar (*Slutseminariet*) for this project at the Stockholm School of Theology in Bromma, Sweden,19 May 2026.

The museal nature of art and religion—that, following Preziosi, art is dead religion and religion is dead art—produces a situation in which the theological dimension of museal discourse can be more difficult to discern, more difficult to point to or isolate as *theological claims*. In this context, Deleuze's suggestion that theology now exists as a structure and that "anything can be theological" is an iteration of this museal situation.[6] And as Martinson has argued, a theology that is post-Christian and post-secular, "is by definition vague." He continues,

> It becomes theologically vague when measured against the discursive concreteness that underpins Christian faith…But this vagueness does not necessarily mean a lack of content; rather, there is a strong and established theological content in

[5]For an analysis of the development of the higher research seminar as the crucial site (sacred site) for the construction of the modern European research university in Germany, see Chad Wellmon, *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2015), 234-261.

[6]Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 281.

> our current cultural and philosophical debate....[7]

This vagueness is an unavoidable characteristic of museal theology, a theology that cannot be restricted or limited to theological concepts, theological texts, or even theological claims. Yet this museal theology is not merely "outside the cathedral," but is itself institutionally situated, that is, it is located *in the academy*, within the faculties of humanities, and—in the Swedish model that has shaped and influenced this project—concentrated symbolically in the liturgy of the theological higher seminar (*högre seminariet*). This post-Christian seminar room, Martinson argues, offers an opportunity to display "a broader concept of theology," one that "has the potential to make room for a reflection that initially does not even want to define itself as theological..."[8] The higher seminar offers a liturgy that thus embodies and represents the institutional network, preserving the tradition of academic theology while managing what becomes seen and unseen, makes artifacts legible and meaningful *as theology*. This seminar room functions in a similar manner to the "white cube" of the modern art gallery, that conceptual "neutral" and seemingly "empty" space within which artifacts and concepts are displayed and visibilities managed—and believable images produced. The seminar room, just as the gallery space in an art museum, *is a theological apparatus*. It is also a *museal space*. And this means that the seminar room, like the museum, the cathedral, the parish church sanctuary, or even the auditorium, functions as an exhibition space, a space to display artifacts that "[were] once—but no longer—felt as true and decisive." In the case of the

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[7]Mattias Martinson, "Nästan religiös Katedraler och sekulära teologier," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 92 (2016), 36.

[8]Mattias Martinson, "Nästan religiös Katedraler och sekulära teologier," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 92 (2016), 26.

academy, such artifacts or concepts as *truth*, *knowledge*, *objectivity*, *scientific* become as theological as *belief*, *faith*, *redemption*, *grace*, and *salvation*—images that elicit belief and motivate thought and action. As Bruno Latour has claimed, the knowledge produced through academic research "is not a direct grasp of the plain and the visible…but an extraordinarily daring, complex, and intricate confidence in chains of nested transformations…."[9] And as such, the higher seminar, as a post-Christian and post-secular museal space, *needs to be curated.* And this curatorial practice is a fundamentally different method of research from the conventional approach of the modern (Swedish) research higher seminar, in which the collective effort to build a monument of knowledge is liturgically performed as a "community of researchers who were contributing to the production of human knowledge brick by brick, technical insight after technical insight."[10]

Duchamp returns to help force the analogy with the visual arts. His experiments with the readymade caused experiential and interpretive friction for viewers by displaying a non-art object, like a urinal, in an art space. This gesture made visible the mechanisms that manage what is seen and unseen, and thus what becomes legible and meaningful as a work of art. This gesture revealed that the operation that makes this or that artifact a work of art was, among other things, a *theological* one, in other words, driven by faith in what cannot be seen, pointed to, or proven, but which nevertheless

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[9]Quoted in Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Anthropotheology: Latour Speaking Religiously," *New Literary History* 47 (2016): 339.

[10]Chad Wellmon, *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2015), 244. See also Steve Fuller, *Back to the University's Future: The Second Coming of Humboldt* (New York: Springer, 2023); Chris Haufe, *Do the Humanities Create Knowledge?* (Cambridge University Press, 2026).

served as the source and catalyst for thought and action, for the production of meaning and the generation of interpretations. Duchamp's practices revealed that the white cube, the exhibition space, was neither neutral nor empty, but was cluttered with apparatuses and contraptions that managed what could be seen and believed. Duchamp's curatorial experiments with non-art objects showed that it is possible that anything can be art, provided it is displayed and interpreted in certain circumstances and under particular conditions. *Exhibiting God* offers a similar curatorial experiment. It is a project that does not appear on the surface to be easily recognizable as theology, but rather art history, museum studies, heritage studies.[11] But, displayed under certain circumstances and under particular conditions, such as in the theology higher seminar room, *Exhibiting God* might be experienced and interpreted as theology. Its presentation in the theological higher seminar therefore generated friction and this friction makes visible the invisible mechanisms that confer the status of "academic theology" on this or that artifact, even if its theological identity is, as Martinson calls it, "vague." A project which consists of close readings of canonical texts—critique and commentary—causes less friction than this project. *Exhibiting God* curates situations that start not with theology and theological concepts but with works of art and other cultural artifacts and the disciplines that address them. This project, then, while developing a museal theology—a *museified* theology—and the curatorial as a method for practicing it, also reveals that the higher seminar is, like the museum space, *theological* in that manages what is visible and invisible as legible and legitimate academic discourse, while working from believable images about

[11]I presented iterations of this project in several higher or research seminars in Sweden and the question, "what makes this theology?" was usually the fundamental question that often transcended any discussion of any specific content.

what constitutes *truth* or *knowledge* and how this or that particular artifact (dissertation, research paper, chapter, grant proposal) participates in discovering truth and producing knowledge. The museal seminar room, however, like the room at the Stockholm School of Theology in the suburb of Bromma, where I participated in countless seminars, is also one in which participants show up late to truth, to science, to knowledge. It is a room that enacts and displays its distance from those research seminars in philology that shaped the German universities in Berlin and Humboldt in the nineteenth century while attempting to follow its example, through critique and commentary. The participants in the higher research seminar, whether theology or art history, cultural heritage or history of ideas, do so at a distance, perhaps even what could be described as a photographic distance—perhaps not unlike the visitor to the cathedral—a tourist or museum viewer—who has seen the photographic images of the interior of this or that cathedral, the images of the lamb's face. Is the higher seminar thus a relic of the past, a remnant, like other cultural monuments that outlive their makers and their original circumstances and purposes and the beliefs that realized them? Are the participants of the higher seminar *performing* science, performing research, *performing* the search for truth, perhaps in a similar way to Proust's hypothetical artists and archaeologists *performing* the lost church liturgies?[12] Is participation in the museal research seminar—at least in the humanities—an act of cultural heritage, or historic conservation and preservation? Perhaps it is similar to Szeemann's *Gesamtkunstwerk* exhibition, which built models only from the debris left behind. Cultural geographer Caitlin Desilvey argues for a "post-preservation" approach to

[12]Marcel Proust, "Death comes to Cathedrals," 97-106.

historical artifacts, an approach that acknowledges the important creative and imaginative role that decay can play in heritage and preservation work. She observes,

> the feature's ongoing decay, rather than threatening to hollow out the memory and the meaning of the structure, instead has its own productive relation to the past…It is possible to see a fullness in the current state of the structure as it sheds one arrangement of matter to adopt another.[13]

Decay and decomposition, then, become potentially creative practices to work through meaning and memory by other and different formal means. "Shed[ding] one arrangement of matter to adopt another," is an apt description of museal theology and a description of the museified higher seminar which has or can take on new forms, forms that might resemble the artist's studio or the child's sandbox more closely than the scientist's laboratory. Rather than mourn such a loss as Adorno's Valéry would, museal theological discourse could embrace it as Adorno's Proust and accept—or even delight in—the possibility that a post-Christian theology, as Martinson argues, would not even be immediately recognizable as theology when presented in theological contexts, like higher seminar rooms or conference panels but become so over time.

The higher seminar room, as a museal space, is thus a potential site for improvising with, curating, cultivating, and even conjuring afterlives of knowledge, truth, and science by causing friction between preserving tradition and encouraging the new forms it could take in the future. In the case of this project, it is where Anselm Kiefer's studio in Barjac, France, Yves Klein's exhibition, *Le Vide*, Ted Joans's *Long Distance*, the conservation of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* are given afterlives as

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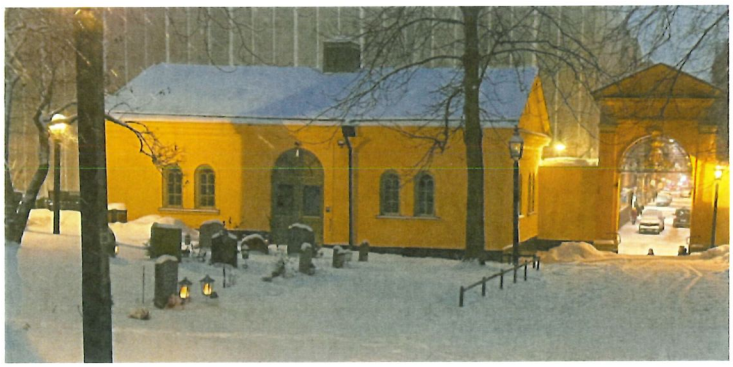
[13]Caitlin Desilvey *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 2.

*theological* artifacts and such concepts as the curatorial and Benjamin's *exhibition value*, *distraction*, and *aura* as well as vitrines and veils function as *theological* concepts.[14]

To continue on our three-site tour that concludes our curatorial experiment in museal theology we need to leave the seminar room. Instead of returning to the cathedral or museum, artist studio or gallery space, we will meet at a building enjoying its own unique afterlife with a completely new use. It is a former storage shed located on the grounds of a church cemetery in an upscale area in a neighborhood in Stockholm called Södermalm, originally built in the seventeenth-century in order to help facilitate the most impactful of material transformations, physical death.

## PALLIATIVE THEOLOGY IN SÖDERMALM



Benhuset has presented an active program of art exhibitions since 2014 and because such venues for artists to exhibit their work are difficult to find in Stockholm, the program has become quite competitive, with often hundreds of applications for the ten slots available for its annual public program. The name of this exhibition space is called

[14]The Duchampian curatorial gesture has been run in reverse, that is, presenting this project not in theology or religious studies higher seminars but in art history or cultural heritage or museum studies higher seminars, in which what is smuggled into art history or museums studies are *theological* concepts and structures.

*Benhuset* and it is located in a cemetery on the grounds of a seventeenth century church, St Katarina Church (1655-1697), named after Princess Katarina (1584-1635) and mother of King Carl X Gustav.[15] Its original function was as an ossuary, a "benhuset" in Swedish—literally a "bone house," which stored human skeletal remains. Throughout the twentieth century it was used as a storage shed for equipment needed to care for the church grounds. Although the director of the program is employed by the church and the selection committee made up of church members and cultural representatives, the program functions as a secular art venue like any other in Stockholm. The artists who show their work there treat the space like any other exhibition venue in the city. Although some work with the idiosyncratic aspects of the space, no artist has yet engaged the spiritually charged location and religious history of the space itself as part of their work. But perhaps that is to be expected. Many art venues in Stockholm are converted spaces with rich historical origins; some made initially for artillery storage, military barracks, royal horse stables, factories, bakeries and breweries. Yet their previous uses rarely if ever are addressed by the artists that present their work there. And their afterlife is first and foremost a result of having survived the circumstances and outlived the intended purposes of their creation. Swedish secularism certainly contributes to the invisibility of the building's religious identity, a secularism that renders invisible the Christian identity of many artifacts in the public sphere.[16] Yet this ossuary turned storage shed-turned-cultural space smudges the strict boundaries and smears the sharp lines that Swedish

[15]For more information on Benhuset see: https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/katarina-/benhuset.

[16]As a mechanism that manages visibility and invisibility and produces believable images, secularism, especially as it is expressed in Sweden, is *theological* and *museological*. I would suggest that the "post" in *post-Christian*, *post-secular*, and even *post-theological* is a possible sign of museification.

secularism establishes between art and religion, the art exhibitions and churches, sanctuaries, aesthetics and spirituality, public and private, visible and invisible, seeing and believing.

Benhuset offers an example of a different material artifact from another cultural location with which to think and imagine a museal theology, one that operates in cultural spaces adjacent to museums, cathedrals, and seminar rooms. It also offers another way to think about afterlives and the role that a museal theology might play in conjuring, cultivating, and collaborating with them. Its usefulness is not found in its cultural influence as a significant producer of culture in Stockholm. Rather it is through its marginal status, peripheral to the art world as well as peripheral to the church—that makes it of interest. In other words, Benhuset is not quite ecclesial yet also not entirely visible as a cultural institution. It is both and yet, strangely, neither. For this reason, as a *demi*-visible, *semi*-legible artifact (entity), Benhuset offers an opportunity to explore what it might mean to put theology *into practice* as a cultural discourse that reveals a new path to think the sacred and the secular, the ecclesial and the culture, faith and knowledge, public and private through the conceptual framework of museification.

Unlike the church and the cemetery of which it is a part, Benhuset survived into the present with an entirely different function. From ossuary to storage shed to art space, Benhuset's afterlife is a quite different life, one that renders its *ossuarial* past entirely invisible to both ecclesial and cultural worlds. While *Exhibiting God* has sought to embrace rather than mourn the passing away of *what was once—but no longer*, it has also practiced a form of historical excavation, perhaps a curatorial archaeological approach to the artifact's past. Whether it is the *Ghent Altarpiece*, Notre-Dame Cathedral, Kurt

Schwitters's *Merzbau*, Kiefer's studio, or Cusa's prologue, the artifact's afterlife can never rid itself entirely of its previous lives, what Benjamin called its "fore-history" (in contrast to its "after-history." This project has thus engaged in a practice of curating these works' previous lives, re-connected with their past life historically in ways that can enhance and enrich their new ones, or even opening up the potential for *additional* new lives.

To think theologically with Benhuset is to think with its afterlife as an art space and to think curatorially about the relationship of its Christian past to its present secular life. And this consists of pushing against a Swedish secularism that tends to render invisible its Christian identity or its Christian origins. Mattias Martinson's work has been committed to demonstrating how Swedish secularity, including the atheism accepted as obvious by many public intellectuals, rests on a robust but invisible Lutheran Christian identity. For Martinson, one of the important roles of post-Christian theology is to make visible such invisible structures in order to enable critical discourse to engage more fruitfully with the production of and analysis of culture and to inform politics and social policy. To reveal the deep Christian identity of Swedish secular culture and policy is neither to re-assert the sovereignty of Christianity or condemn secularism as a failure. Rather it is to reveal the complex relationship and interconnections of Christianity and secularism in Sweden. Moreover, a museal theology as developed in this project suggests that *both* ancient Christianity *and* modern secularism are now museal artifacts and thus can be curated in new exhibitions and whose afterlives can be thus assembled in more creative and imaginative ways in the service of a more diverse and robust public culture.

Benhuset reveals that a post-Christian and post-secular cultural landscape is much more complicated than is usually admitted by its Christian or secular advocates.

Benhuset presents a distinctive example because its previous Christian life, its "deep Christian identity," as Martinson would call it, is peripheral, indirect. Its original function was not related to official public liturgy or theology. The building did not serve a sacramental or liturgical role but was rather a transitional space for the skeletal remains of those previously buried in the cemetery. It served, therefore, a utilitarian purpose in the service of the sacred burial grounds. That the ossuary serves such a utilitarian and thus overlooked and non-ceremonial purpose is relevant for a museal theology that is sensitive to those invisible apparatuses and mechanisms that participate in managing visibilities. Martinson worries that academic theology might be like a cathedral, "beautiful and pretentious on the outside but without any deeper meaning."[17] Benhuset, by contrast, is nothing if not functional, full of deeper meaning, if only because its meaning is neither decorative nor symbolic but is entirely functional, in service to the sacred grounds of the graves, maintaining and transitioning the remains of those whose lives were shaped by the church two centuries earlier.

To think theologically with Benhuset, *after* its utilitarian origins and intended purpose, is to render this past visible again and to think creatively with that past in the present. What might it mean to think theologically with an ossuary, a transitional site where the skeletal remains of parishioners become, if only briefly and for few to see, a reliquary? How might this previous use contribute to, underscore, enrich the texture of the space as an art space? A museal theology that thinks theologically with a modest

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[17]Mattias Martinson, *Katedralen mitt i staden: om ateism och teologi* (Arcus, 2010), 171.

building that stores skeletal remains and maintenance equipment and the cemetery grounds rather than the beautiful Baroque style church proudly sitting on a hill in full visibility suggests that the image of the cathedral might not be able to incapsulate fully the experiential complexity of Christianity and personal faith in a post-Christian society. Moreover, that an art venue is located in a former ossuary in the cemetery on the grounds of a seventeenth-century church suggests that there is more religious and spiritual presence in secular and post-secular culture than is often recognized.

Benhuset occupies a transitional, marginal, tenuous position in relation to the images of the cathedral and the museum used throughout this project. A site that is neither church nor museum but nevertheless *museified*; yet neither quite reliquary nor vitrine. A museal theology would render visible Benhuset's location on a sacred site in ways that relate it—juxtapose it—to its role as a venue that presents art, which, like religion, is one of the means by which the *tehomic* void is collaborated with and veiled creatively, bringing the absence of the past into a more intimate, even dialectical relationship to the present. That this venue and this practice is located in a cemetery and served as a temporary holding location makes the relationship between art and religion, museum and mausoleum, absence and presence, death and after life concrete, actual, tangible.

Perhaps this is also where the so-called death of theology, introduced in the prologue to this project, takes another form. American theologian Shelly Rambo returns here, reiterating her observation, already quoted in the Prologue, "The death of a certain kind of theology has already happened…we're living in the relic or residue of it."[18]

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[18]Quoted in Beatrice Marovich, "Is Theology Dying? Doing Hospice Care for an Academic Discipline," *The Other Journal* 39 (Spring 2025).

Perhaps Rambo's claim, repeated here at the end of this project becomes more resonant with a museal theology that embraces the passing of its own discourse, that, to continue to practice it, is to *curate* its artifacts, its relics, its material and immaterial artifacts into new constellations and exhibitions. Moreover, this museal theology is a curatorial practice of afterlives, a practice that, following Desilvey, curates decay, as an artifact, a concept, a practice, even a discourse that "sheds one arrangement of matter to adopt another." This curatorial theological practice is thus in some way *palliative*. It manages, facilitates, curates transitions from one state to another, from art to theology, from religion to art, from curating to theology, seen and visible to unseen and invisible. In this context, Preziosi's observation that art is "dead religiosity" and that religion is "dead art" offers a dynamic curatorial creativity.[19] And so, to practice palliative theology with Benhuset is to enable it to make visible its previous history as an ossuary and its current location in a church cemetery in order for it to more fully and more creatively embrace its new life as an art venue. "The curatorial sensibility," as the collective Raqs Media Collective suggested and which is particularly appropriate with Benhuset, "could be seen as making a graveyard walkable through inventive gardening."[20] This is also an apt description of the theological approach that has been developed here.

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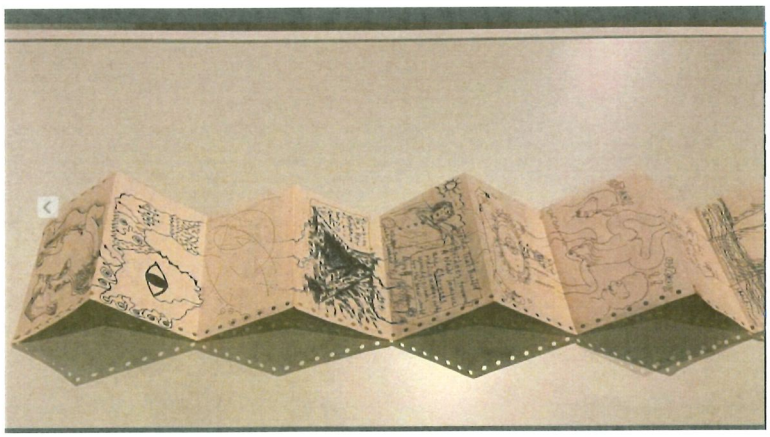
[19]Donald Preziosi, *Art, Religion, Amnesia: The Enchantments of Credulity* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 12.

[20]Raqs Media Collective, "On the Curatorial, From the Trapeze," in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, Jean-Paul Martinon, ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 19.



This project began in the United States, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and now concludes in Sweden at an art space on the grounds of a church cemetery in Stockholm. And so, it is not surprising that Ted Joans's *Long Distance* should return, joining us here in the ossuary. Its afterlife, its new visibility as a work of art, as a part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, as a subject for art historical research and an object for curatorial practice, however, need not necessitate ignoring, marginalizing, or even mourning its past life as Joans's "map of friendship," a travel companion that accompanied the artist on his journeys and many adventures. But this past life and the use to which it was put—*what once was, but is no longer*—remains. But how it remains and in what ways it collaborates with its new life is the responsibility of curatorial practice, which is also, in this museified world of lateness and distance, also a theological practice.

Whether it is walking the grounds of a cemetery, entering a church, visiting an art museum exhibition, or taking a seat in a seminar room, a museal theology reminds us that we are simultaneously pilgrims and tourists, believers and unbelievers, faithful and skeptical, mourners and celebrants, and that, ultimately, what we are looking for is no longer here and now (perhaps never was here and now). And so, we embrace our lateness

and distance as curators, scavenging, collecting, and displaying the artifacts left behind, perhaps even making models of what we imagine might have once existed in order to curate exhibitions we call theology. We also embrace our lateness and distance not only as museum visitors but also as tourists to our own religious traditions.

**BEES IN VISBY**



I spent two weeks in the spring of 2024 in Visby on the island of Gotland, located just east of the Swedish mainland on the Baltic Sea. I was invited as a research fellow under the auspices of the Sustainable Research Forum at Uppsala University Campus Gotland. From the 12th-14th centuries, Visby served as the capital of the Hasiatic League and its well-preserved city wall and dozens of medieval church ruins have contributed to making the old city a UNESCO cultural heritage site. Old Visby is, literally, a museum artifact. I spent my time there walking around the city's stone streets, discovering a different fragment of a church or a different angle of the fragment at every turn. I walked through these ruins in the morning, in the evening, observed tourists having their morning coffee inside them, watching delivery trucks navigate around them and inhabitants parking their cars next to them.

What struck me while walking around them was their porosity, their capacity to become a part of the landscape, even a useful part of it. I think about these medieval fragments, living in the backyards of some home owners, becoming a part of the landscape in the same way that the trees and hills do in relation to two images that this project has used. First, the image of the cathedral, specially, Uppsala Cathedral, which Mattias Martinson uses to articulate a view outside the church, a monument that casts a shadow, that has a continual towering presence of authority, of dignity, or power and sovereignty, and the distant past. And I also think about Marcel Proust's village church in his home town near Paris, a church that took up a comfortable, informal residence among other houses in the neighborhood, even while it came from the same distant past as Martinson's cathedral.

It is the porosity of the Visby church fragments that distinguishes them from Martinson's and Proust's images. Some of these churches were porous because the frames that once held stained glass windows and vaulted ceilings with images of Christ as ruler of the universe, become empty frames for the clear blue sky, or for the tree-laden landscapes or views to the sea. Some of the fragments were simply shards of stone, which looked more like a Minimalist sculpture installation or shoreline rock formation established over centuries.

The afterlife that these fragments were experiencing couldn't be more different than their initial purpose as Christian churches. But is it? Each of these churches represented by the existing fragments created an ecological relationship to its surroundings—it established neighborhoods, pathways, flows of human and non-human entities, facilitated collaborations, became destinations for penitents, congregants,

merchants, shoppers, and pilgrims. Their fragments continue to function in similar ways, now within the context of cultural tourism. But their dramatic physical presence, varying in degrees of course, frame space and the environment differently.

While walking around the city and through the church ruins, their past lives seem remarkably distant, almost mythological—that is, it is absurd even to speculate about "what is was like" or "what the church looked like," even if the informational wall label included a drawing of what it "probably" looked like. Their "afterlife" *is* their life, here, now. And there is a beauty to their presence, not merely as relics from the past. What I learned during my time in Visby and visiting with cultural heritage specialists—historians, engineers, and chemists—is that there is a cost to preservation, a monetary and *environmental* cost that must be weighed with each and every architectural artifact that remains in the city. As part of her argument for what she calls *post-preservation*, Caitlin Desilvey advocates a posture of *counter-preservation*. She asks,

> what happens if we choose not to intervene? Can we uncouple the work of memory from the burden of material stasis? What possibilities emerge when change is embraced rather than resisted?[21]

What if this change consists in disintegration? She writes,

> the disintegration of structural integrity does not necessarily lead to the evacuation of meaning; processes of decay and disintegration can be culturally (as well as economically) productive.[22]

While walking through these Visby fragments I thought about theology, thought about the porosity of a museal theology, a porosity that is at peace with its distance, pastness, lateness—its existence in fragments, bits and pieces scattered across a field. A museal

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[21]Caitlin Desilvey, *Curated Decay*, 4.

[22]Caitlin Desilvey, *Curated Decay*, 5.

theology that might embrace these fragments as resources from which to improvise new theological arrangements that include the neighborhood, the trees, the sky, the flowers that bloom each spring that are "framed" experiences, reflected light, provoked the imagination, producing images of possible pasts and potential futures? I also thought about the costs of preserving theology as an academic discipline—the cost to the imagination for preservation and the potential intellectual resources that could be liberated and allocated for other purposes in the humanities if academic theology might be allowed to give up the fight for its own survival, to fall apart and to take on new forms, new functions, enter into new relationships, enter the museum so that it can be curated in new ways.

One of the more remarkable church ruins in Visby is the church of St. Clemens, built around 1060. It includes benches for tourists inside its walls and a hotel has been built next to it. In the grassy interior it also includes the following sign:




A museal theology might under certain conditions and in certain locations take different forms. Perhaps it might look like theology—confessional theology, secular death of God theology, post-secular and post Christian theology—or it might look like museology and

heritage studies, or curatorial theory or art history, religious studies, climate activism, or creative non-fiction, art criticism or poetry. Or perhaps, even a home to 100,000 honey bees.

Whether it is the magnificent cathedrals and equally magnificent theological monuments of the past or the museal theology that curates what fragments remain, they give voice, either in stone or words, paint or gesture to what Rilke bears witness in his ninth elegy in *The Duino Elegies*, that it is worth being here, if only once:

> But because being here is much, and because all this
> that's here, so fleeting, seems to require us and
> strangely
> concerns us. Us the most fleeting of all. Just once,
> everything, only for once. Once and no more. And we, too,
> once. And never again. But this
> having been once, though only once,
> having been once on earth—can it ever be cancelled?

Perhaps a museal theology that serves to affirm the belief in the "only once" of this life is sufficient, because this life has more than enough afterlives, new lives, and other lives of its own.

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