

## TRANSCENDENCE AND THE VISUAL: SEEING BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

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In teaching courses on Jesus' parable to university students in Toronto, James Breech was troubled as each student persisted in seeing himself or herself in every parable. Finally, Breech said to them, "Some of these parables are not about you, they are about *other* people. There are other people in the world".<sup>1</sup> Breech's students exemplified the modernist problem characterised in Yeat's words, "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold".<sup>2</sup> In modernism, the centre was everywhere, the circumference nowhere: i.e. each person had become his or her own centre. In that condition, the student loses capacity to see the other as other; and in poet Hart Crane's words, "each sees only his dim past reversed".<sup>3</sup>

How are we to move beyond such an impasse? In that same poem entitled "Hatteras", Hart Crane gives a clue:

... time clears  
our lenses, lifts a focus, resurrects  
a periscope to glimpse what joys or pain  
our eyes can share or answer ...<sup>4</sup>

Time (history) gives perspective and distance on ourselves and allows us to sense others as other; but as Mark Taylor details the modernist predicament, "we are in a time between times and 'a place where there is no place'".<sup>5</sup> Or as Charles Schulz Says through Charlie Brown in the Peanuts cartoon strip, "I am studying church history; my pastor was born in 1935". With no awareness of history, a student's vision is under the tyranny of the most recent past. With little background, everything is foreground.

In contrast, we will see that many contemporary visual art works (like parables) would help us and our students to transcend ourselves, to see others as other, to sense our finitude, and even to sense a centre beyond ourselves. Much post-modernism in visual arts leads us to

engage the art work within its full historical and social setting and so moves us in the opposite direction from post-modernism in literary theory. Such post-modern literary theory focuses on deconstructing the knowing self which had already been severed from the known subject matter by modernism's thinking premised on objective/subjective and mind/body dichotomies. Such reading of the literature instead focuses on reader criticism. Such post-modern literary theory not only leads away from literary criticism but also leads away from reading of the literature and instead focuses on reader criticism. Such literary theory has more commonality with much modern visual art than with post-modern visual art.

The field of visual art increasingly needs the expertise of scholars in biblical studies, church history, and theology for the following reasons. Many significant contemporary artists' works feature subject matter from the Bible and from Historical theology. While some of these uses are tongue-in-cheek, many are profoundly related to the traditions. So, art history and art criticism need to become more historical and biblical to treat the art adequately. As modernism in art and scholarship had tended to eliminate biblical subject matter along with much other historical subject matter and to emphasise perceptual psychological analysis, many art critics became oblivious to biblical and theological dimensions of art. While this obliviousness poses a special problem for adequate analysis of contemporary art with its renewed interest in religious subject matter, the problem obtains also with modern criticism of previous periods of art as both the modern denial of transcendence and the modern obliviousness to theology flaw criticism.

There are happy exceptions; for instance, Leo Steinburg's insightful book *The Sexuality of Christ In Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* reveals both how the nakedness of the Christ child - a nakedness revealing his genitals - emphasises his humanity and incarnational theology and how most art historians and critics have been oblivious to that arts' theological purposes.<sup>6</sup> Similarly while many modernist critics view French Impressionism as eliminating transcendence, Nicholas Zernov suggested the sacramental nature of such works and their affinity with emphases of the liturgical renewal of that period, as both stressed everyday elements and made space for the participation of the viewer or worshipper.<sup>7</sup> These examples make us aware that obliviousness is another example of what Wittgenstein called "not a stupid prejudice" but a learned one.<sup>8</sup>

In many ways, religious studies and theological studies need visual

arts. For example, an increasing majority of students remember primarily by what they see and not by what they hear; and so for education to be memorable, we may include the visual arts which are abundantly available in most periods and places. Also of significance, visual arts usually increase ambiguity of interpretation - ambiguity which is the threshold of transcendence; so, visual arts are a welcome ally of hermeneutics in biblical and theological studies where we would teach students the polyvalency in both parable and doctrine - a polyvalency to which discursive teaching may make us oblivious. New testament scholar Robert W. Funk notes that the only way to interpret a parable is to tell another parable.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, we turn to art works.

Many major contemporary artists' works have theological or biblical import which most critics have missed. My recent book *Transcendence With the Human Body in Art: George Segal, Stephen De Staebler, Jasper Johns, and Christo* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) explores extensively the works by four such artists as the sub-title indicates. My forthcoming book *Eyes To See Wholeness* explores works by over forty artists. In my interviews with many of these artists, they often express puzzlement that other critics have missed so much. Christo's wife, Jeanne-Claude said, "How can critics miss the religious significance of Christo who dropped his last name Javacheff so as to emphasis his first name: Christo".<sup>10</sup> *Wrapped Coastline. Little Bay, Australia* (1969) and *Wrapped Kunsthalle, Bern, Switzerland* (1968) are like prayers of thanksgiving helping people see earth as a gift. A wrapped object implies a gift and a giver who wrapped it: i.e. God as creator of the earth for us. Such wrapped works emphasise the mystery of creation and the finitude of the viewer who cannot see exactly what is inside the wrapping. As masks sometimes reveal as well as conceal, the wrappings call our explicit attention to shapes which before we had noticed only tacitly. The wrapping also may remind us of the shroud and resurrection of Christ as Dominique Laporte pointed out.<sup>11</sup> While the size of the projects and the number of persons wanting to view them no longer make it practical to have the works up for just three days, more recent works have been planned for as long as three weeks.

Christo creates his works in locations which often require the viewer to go on a pilgrimage to view them. That was true of *Valley Curtain, Grand Hogback, Rifle, Colorado* (1971-71), *The Running Fence, Sonoma and Marin Counties, California* (1972-76), and more recently *The Umbrellas, Japan - U.S.A.* (1984-1991). Such works are sometimes called process art because they reveal the processes and

structures of the communities as people worked to support or oppose the projects - and in the process often met their neighbours and found out for the first time the townships or other governmental units to which they belonged. Similarly there was much interaction among persons who went to view the works.

The process is often a long one as the dates for the art works reveal. For instance, both *The Running Fence* and *Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin* (1972-1994) were conceived in 1972; but while the former was completed in 1976, the later took nearly two decades longer. The political as well as religious dimensions are often overlooked in Christo's art; for instance the orange (rust-like) coloration and title of *Valley Curtain* was a parody of the Iron Curtain as *The Running Fence* which was twenty-four and a half miles long was a parody of the Berlin Wall which was twenty four kilometres long. *Valley Curtain* was placed in a valley where Christo knew the winds would rip it to pieces in a brief time. Far earlier than many other persons, the Bulgarian born Christo was certain that Communism would collapse. His *Wrapped Reichstag* project could not be completed until Germany was reunited and that parliament building by the Berlin Wall could be wrapped.

The political and religious significances of *The Umbrellas* were lost on most commentators. In the history of both Japan and the western world, umbrellas were lifted over the heads of the most significant religious and political leaders. By raising a total of 3100 umbrellas (thirteen hundred and forty blue umbrellas in a valley seventy-five miles north of Tokyo, Japan and seventeen hundred and sixty yellow umbrellas in a valley sixty miles north of Los Angeles, California), Christo was providing room for hundreds of thousands of visiting persons to be under umbrellas. With a diameter of twenty-eight feet and five inches, each umbrellas allowed many persons to picnic together under it in the cool of its shade. In political terms, *The Umbrellas* project expressed a democratic direction. In religious terms, *The Umbrellas* project expressed the priesthood of all believers. Christo commented to art students at a meeting in Bakersfield (just north of the umbrellas in California) that the plan to have the work up for three weeks stressed our morality: i.e. we and our creations do not last forever. In fact the work was taken down before the end of the third week in respect for a woman who was killed by a freakish tornado-like occurrence with a velocity not known before in that valley.<sup>12</sup>

Terrence Dempsey's recent establishment of The Museum of

Contemporary Religious Art at St. Louis University in Missouri witnesses to the immense number of contemporary artists with biblical and theological concerns expressed in their works. While dozens of those artists are relatively young and have recently been recognised as of major significance, there are famous well established artists among them such as Michael Tracy, Frederick Brown, and Stephen De Staebler. Major exhibitions focusing on contemporary artists dealing with religious subject matter are being mounted at various places around the world: Thomas Torpezer received over a thousand submissions when he announced plans to curate *All Living Tradition: Biblical Themes in Contemporary Art* which will originate at Oklahoma University's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art and tour the United States. In the Netherlands, Regnerus Steensma is organising the forthcoming *Image of Christ in Contemporary Art*. In Germany, Horst Schwebel has organised many exhibitions of international importance involving major artists of our day as have Jane Dillenger and John Dillenger in the United States and Rosemary Crumlin in Australia. My own work has concentrated on the biblical and theological concerns in the works of many well known contemporary artists such as Christo. Sometimes it is difficult to understand how critics could miss those concerns as in the case of Christo's works. In other instances, the artists concealed those concerns; for example, Andy Warhol knew that many curators and critics had negative attitudes toward religion and so he said little about his deeply religious art as revealed by Jane Dillenger's forthcoming book, *"Heaven and Hell are Just One Breath Away" - the Religious Art of Andy Warhol*.

A retrospective of his earliest art works showed recently how many of Robert Rauschenberg's paintings have a depth of religious understanding and exploration such as *Crucifixion and Reflection* (1950-51: Menil Museum, Houston).<sup>13</sup> While irony continues to be employed by some artists to elude the negative response of critics who could not be sympathetic to religious dimensions in art, critics usually miss both the serious and ironic religious forms and subject matter. While Robert Bellah developed American civil religion analysis (with American presidents such as Kennedy as a god) from his background in Japanese sociology where the emperor is the God of Shinto, Rauschenberg placed Kennedy in the position of Christ at the centre of a scenario similar to Last judgement frescos. In one such work, *Untitled* (1964: Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford), Rauschenberg places to Kennedy's right the blessings of technology such as references to plentiful harvests and space exploration; but to Kennedy's left are

ominous signs of destruction such as a mushroom cloud and other despoiling. In red to Kennedy's lower left are the figures of Adam and Eve being expelled from the garden of Eden. Not expecting such religious forms in Rauschenburg's art or not knowing the last judgement form, critics have usually missed such religious references.

Earlier critics similarly missed how Diego Rivera utilised (for a 1932 mural at the Detroit Institute of Fine Arts) the form of Last Judgement frescos he had studied in Italy. Not wanting Rivera to make a political statement affirming his communist sympathies (such as he had done in placing Lenin prominently in his Rockefeller Centre *Man at the Crossroads* which was later removed to the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City), the Institute specified that in the Detroit mural all persons featured must have lived in Detroit. On one wall, Rivera followed the form of a Last Judgement with an open doorway taking the place of a central Christ. Even iconographically that was appropriate as Christ in art was often placed in the doorway associated with him in John's Gospel. Rivera placed peaceful uses of technology and a portrait of himself to the side traditionally associated with the blessed (for he argued that he lived in Detroit while working on the mural); and he placed warplanes and a portrait of Henry Ford to the side traditionally associated with the damned.

I have thoroughly discussed elsewhere how Jasper John's art works are in deep conversation with Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophical investigations and religious imagery drawn from panels of Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1515: Musee d'Unterlinden, Colmar).<sup>14</sup> Even in a dozen abstract works, Johns incorporated the outline of shapes from the resurrection panel and the St. Anthony panel. Also, I have shown how the stigmata evident in his recent series of works on the *Seasons* (1985-86: Private Collection) were evident in his works for twenty years but missed by critics: for example, *Land's End* (1963: Museum of modern Art, San Francisco) and *Periscope (Hart Crane)* (1963: Artist's Collection).

As Johns deals perceptively with how expectations affect what critics see, he helps us understand why critics have failed to grasp the religious dimensions of both historic and contemporary art. His *Sketch for the Critic Sees* (1962: Leo Castelli Collection) substitutes mouths for eyes behind the glasses; for often critics see only what they have said or written earlier and what they therefore expect to see. The teeth in those mouths could be interpreted as menacing and destructive to the art which critics consume. Before we become too smugly judgemental on the critics, we need to look at his *Sketch for the Critic*

*Smiles* (1959: Artist's Collection); for when we notice he has substituted teeth for the bristles in the toothbrush, we smile and then know ourselves to be the critic. To demonstrate how expectations affect all of us in our seeing, I tell students they are about to see a slide of his work entitled "Number Eight". When I show them the slide, they all see the number eight. Then I ask them what they see if I tell them it is entitled "Number Three" or "Number Zero" or "Number Five" or "Number Two" etc. In fact, all those numbers are present in that work whose actual title is *Zero Through Nine* (1961: The Gallery, London). A similar work of somewhat different coloration and background is at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum, Washington D.C. As many artists have done, Johns creates a series of works on the same subject; but the careful viewer will notice subtle differences. Johns's philosophical grounding in Wittgenstein is instructive in this regard. Wittgenstein had considered using as the epigram for *Philosophical Investigations* what Kent told Lear, "I'll teach you differences".<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, I have students look at Paul Cezanne's *Madam Cezanne in Red Dress* (late 19th century: Metropolitan Museum, New York) and ask them to judge how old she was at the time of the painting. They respond with answers from twenty years old all the way to sixty years old. Then I have them use their hand or piece of paper in front of their eyes to cut her vertically down the middle. By looking first at her right side and then at her left side, they see that on one side she looks young as a result of a full cheek and full hand and even a billowing drapery above and behind that side, whereas she looks old on the other side as a consequence of a sunken cheek, bony hand, and a starkly linear frame above and behind that side. Cezanne knew her both young and old and painted her with both ages included. Similarly, Leo Steinburg has shown how Michaelangelo's *Last Judgement* (1541: Sistine Chapel, Vatican City) has the hands of Christ in positions which may be read as expressing a harsh judgement or a blessing, benediction, and consecration.<sup>16</sup>

Ambiguity is the hallmark of great art and comes from the Greek term 'amphibolia', which referred to the military situation where one was attacked from two opposite sides at the same time; so, one was required to pay attention to at least two different sides simultaneously.<sup>17</sup> Fundamentalism (whether it is fundamentalism of the right or the left) usually has only one window. While that window may offer a valuable view, it is only a partial view; and with only one window, there is a danger that sometime it may be blocked leaving

one without any vision. Having four gospels has helped Christianity survive changing times. For instance, one wonders whether a church with only the vision of Matthew's Gospel would have survived the separation from Judaism and dispersion from Jerusalem.

Sculptor Stephen De Staebler has created some works with overt religious subject matter such as *Crucifix* (1968: Holy Spirit parish, Berkeley) or *Pieta* (1989: The Roofless Church, New Harmony) which is inspired by Michaelangelo's *Rondanini Pieta* (1564: Castello Sforesca, Milan), although the De Staebler work expresses resurrection and brings the mother and son together more fully side by side rather than front and back as in Michaelangelo.

Many more of De Staebler's works have affinity with religious form rather than with religious subject matter. For instance, his works are frontal which he associates with a long tradition of icons as a method of communicating transcendence. His *Winged Figure* (1993: Graduate Theological Union Library, Berkeley) embodies that frontality. De Staebler likens frontality to our experience at the dinner table where we are frontally oriented to others for a lengthy time commitment while conversation may deepen and deal with difficult subjects. He contrasts such frontality with the oblique angles at which we stand when talking with other at a cocktail party - an angle which allows us to avoid any commitment and to see easily the approach of others with whom we would rather be talking.

De Staebler also employs incompleteness in his sculptures as in *Winged Figure* with its one wing and one leg and only partial torso. Incompleteness he sees as evoking empathy. In contrast, he sees that a perfected form idolises adolescent bodies and does not make for graceful aging. He notes that all persons are incomplete; and I have seen how his sculptures help all viewers feel affirmed no matter what their physical ability. Henri Nouwen's idea of the wounded healer parallels De Staebler's sculptures; and one may see a Christological dynamic at work in both Nouwen's idea and De Staebler's works.<sup>18</sup> De Staebler's use of negative space is a further dimension of this dynamic of incompleteness. The large wing of *Winged Figure* (formed on the belly of a pregnant woman) forms a particularly large negative space and invites the viewer into the work while De Staebler believes that too much convexity parallels too many beliefs which may repel the faithful.<sup>19</sup>

George Segal's sculptures include many biblical subjects which critics have often failed to recognise or only partially understood. The lack of biblical background which higher education provides its



students is evident in the following example. My classes are part of the consortial MDiv, MA, and PhD programs in visual arts and religion at Pacific School of Religion and the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley. Such courses attract some students from the University of California, Berkeley with which the consortium is in cooperation. The university students were puzzled as we looked at Segal's *The Holocaust* (1984: Legion of Honor Museum, San Francisco). They did not know what to make of the partially eaten apple in the hand of a woman who was positioned on the ground perpendicular to the side of a prone male figure. Their best guess was that the woman was Snow White. They know the Disney film but not the book of Genesis. To those with eyes to see, that work offers perceptions not only of Adam and Eve and Abraham and Issac but also of God and Christ at centre.<sup>20</sup>

Lacking biblical background, students similarly miss the biblical dimensions of many popular contemporary films. For instance, in a course including cinema, I compare *Wallstreet* with the parable of the Prodigal Son, *Ghost* with the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ (for in *Ghost* the hero is betrayed by a friend and then can be heard only by a woman whom others do not believe), and *The Dead Poet's Society* with the story of Christ (for the teacher gives others eyes to see and ears to hear, is betrayed by one student and denied by the rest; but as he is leaving at the end, the students are reencouraged and rise up to stand on their desks to proclaim him their captain in a moment akin to Pentecost). I would not argue that these films replicate the biblical stories but rather they are deeply in conversation with them in ways which often transform how we understand biblical stories, our own stories, and the stories of others.

Let us integrate such visual arts into teaching and scholarship so we and our students move beyond our "dim past revered"; so our study "clears our lenses, lifts a focus and resurrects a periscope to glimpse what joys or pain our eyes can share or answer".

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## REFERENCES

1. I heard Breech make that choice comment when I was his guest lecturer at York University on January 7, 1980. Breech is a leading scholar on Jesus' parables with work such as The Silence of Jesus (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).
2. To Yeats' statement of the modern predicament, architectural critic Charles Jencks asserts that post-modernism offers "the dialectical answer 'Things fall together, and there is no centre, but connection'. Or in E.M. Forster's words 'connect, only connect'". Postmodernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), p.350.
3. Alan Solomon, Jasper Johns (London: White Chapel, 1964), p.21.
4. Ibid.
5. Mark Taylor, Erring: a Postmodern A/Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.6.
6. Leo Steinburg, The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion (New York: Pantheon/October Books, Random House, 1983).
7. Lecturer in Eastern Orthodox Christianity at Oxford, Zernov had proposed this view to Jane Dillenberger when he took part in one of her art classes taught at Drew University in the late 1950s and shared them with me when he taught at Duke University in the 1962-63 academic year.
8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations (New York: Macmillan, 1953, p.109, #340).
9. Robert W. Funk, Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p.196.
10. I interviewed Jeanne-Claude Christo by phone on April 12, 1988 and Christo in person on April 16, 1988 when he was at our G.T.U. Library exhibition of his work.
11. Dominique G. Laporte, Christo, trans. Abby Pollak (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), p.67.
12. Doug Adams, "Uplifting Umbrellas and the Importance of All Persons", Eyes To See Wholeness (forthcoming).
13. For those early works, see Walter Hopps, Robert Rauschenburg: The Early Years (Houston: The Menil Collection/Houston Fine Art Press, 1991).
14. Doug Adams, "Jasper John's Paintings: Postcritical Philosophies", Transcendence with the Human Body in Art (New York: Crossroad, 1981).
15. Ibid. p.96.
16. Leo Steinburg, "Michaelangelo's 'Last Judgement' as Merciful Heresy", Art in America (November-December 1975), pp.49-63. Cf. Marcia Hall, "Michaelangelo's 'Last Judgement': Resurrection of the Body and Predestination", Art Bulletin, Vol. 58 (March 1976), pp.85-92.
17. See Leo Steinberg's discussion of ambiguity in "The Seven Functions of the Hands of Christ: Aspects of Leonardo's Last Supper", Art, Creativity, and the Sacred (New York: Crossroad 1984) ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, p.40.
18. Doug Adams, "Stephen De Staedler's Sculptures: Religious Forms of Graceful Aging, Dying, and Rising" in Transcendence with the Human Body in Art Op.Cit.
19. Doug Adams, "Making Space for Faith" and "De Staebler's 'Winged Figure'", Eyes to See Wholeness.
20. Doug Adams, "George Segal's Holocaust: Biblical Subject Matter and God as Centre", in Transcendence Op.Cit.