



Art and Christianity 105

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The Garden as a parenthesis



Ref. William Morris's 'Long walks and trellis-enclosed plots'

its profiles and ripples would be like Venus landing ashore without clothes, without visibility. It would only be doing half the job: standing but not appearing. The external, transcendent wind of Zephyr and Venus' internal, coordinating limbs are not two distinct movements, but different stages of one movement that turns and spills over into the visible and loops back into her body.' In the world Spuybroek reveals by thinking in this way, 'beauty and grace are structured by the same phenotechnical cycle.' (p. 85)

From heart-wrenching violence to shimmering radiance, and the incidental detail of a summer day to a foundational principle for understanding movement, Spuybroek's kaleidoscopic engagement with ideas and examples can overwhelm. As he ranges from Minoan bull-leaping imagery to Beatles lyrics and back again, via Thomas Aquinas, Martin Heidegger, and St Paul, there is a relentless breathlessness to the text. This is part of its joy, however. This is a book in which there is much (as Spuybroek's own responses to Italian architecture would have it) 'blossom, flourishing, efflorescence, flowering' (p. 322).

Ayla Lepine is Chaplain of King's College Cambridge and a trustee of A+C

The Figure of Christ in Contemporary Photography by Nathalie Dietschy

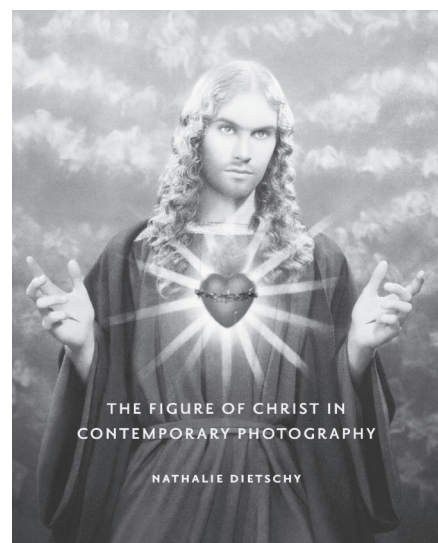
London: Reaktion, 2020

ISBN 978 1789142082, 338pp, h/b, £40

This book is a translated and updated edition of *Le Christ au miroir de la photographie contemporaine* (Alphil, 2016). Nathalie Dietschy is an art historian at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland; she has written on a variety of subjects relating to photography, including essays on Andres Serrano, Fred Holland Day, and Renee Cox. The volume is beautifully produced, its large format including over 140 colour reproductions. Around 50 contemporary artists are featured, the majority of whom are represented by more than one image of their work. For photography this is important, as the medium tends to emphasise serial production and the arrangement of images in sequential and conversational ways.

The book's stated aim is to provide 'a solidly documented framework' for discussions of the figure of Christ in photography since 1980. In this it offers a comparable approach to *Revelation: Representations of Christ in Photography*, by Nissan N Perez (Merrell Publishers, 2003).¹ Dietschy pays homage to Perez's catalogue, considering her volume a similar 'systematic and comprehensive study of the subject' (p. 15), within parameters of more recent works. Her inclusions are certainly as diverse and wide-ranging, with international, multi-ethnic scope, and noticeably featuring almost as many female artists as male, from Vanessa Beecroft and Sam Taylor-Johnson to Faisal Abdu'Allah and Kofi Allen.

The tendency, however, towards broadness is accompanied by a thinness of critical reflection. Images of Christ serve to reflect the 'singularities of each artist's approach' (p.16), and comparison is often a rather banal description of compositional variation. The instances of 'provocation, transgression, and challenge' (p. 283), especially in Part 4's foci on Serrano, Cox, and Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin, are given their simplified, almost caricatured, pedestals. It is a well-worn path, to delineate artistic concerns as shaping a modernist avant-garde in this antithetical way, especially in regard to religion. The dividing line between an inherited Christian symbol, full of possibility for religious meaning



and an appropriated cultural icon now a tool for self-expression, is presumed absolute. The main section of the book, Part 3's 'Identity Claims and Political Statements' presents an array of Christ figures so delineated: female, black, or homosexual Christs; Christs across cultures and religions; Christs of the socially excluded or capitalist corporations.

These will be of interest to the reader unaware of the cultural currency that the figure of Christ has in photography. They undoubtedly also reveal knowing and serious engagement with artistic traditions insofar as that tradition is understood to embody a politics of representation, a figural politics indeed, often of exclusion, moral control, and societal permissibility. But the presentation of these is lamentably abstracted from Christ as religious, indeed from the viability of artistic interpretation as expressing religious concerns. In a consideration of photographed Christs, all the freight of Christendom is jettisoned since 'faith now belongs to culture' (quoting Michel de Certeau, p.13); further, secularism is not just an observable context for artistic practice (manifestly evident as it is), but also confers an ideological shrinking from religious discourse within commentary itself. Where, for example, liberation theology receives a somewhat token mention by Dietschy, it is as a pointer to the greater validity of subjective expression in art, not for what it does on an axis of religious/biblical negotiation. Where the treatment of Serrano's *Piss Christ* defers the artist's own un-ironic stance as a kind of conceptual ambivalence, it misses out on the particular Catholic characteristic of this ambivalence.

A greater nuance is perhaps felt in the earlier chapters of the book where, along with a brief consideration of his-

Letters

torical precedents, Dietschy introduces more allegorical and more abstract contemporary approaches, as with Yasumasa Morimura's montaged crucifixion scenes and Stephen Althouse's shroud compositions respectively. These and other examples are shown to open onto deeper symbolic and associative meanings, precisely through attention to photography's habit of invoking the full force of the real. A similar emphasis on metaphorisation is held up in a chapter on the Bible, 'From Text to Image', where stylised cultural narration is a feature of the work of David LaChapelle, Duane Michals, and Bettina Rheims.

These and some concluding suggestive possibilities for the distinction between American and European 'culture wars' are hopeful avenues for future enquiry. Yet the limitations of the volume overall must be acknowledged. Appropriation of religious imagery in photography, whether ironic or sensationalist, might once have served a progressive narrative for modern fine art, but is no longer so exclusively or so intellectually adopted. The continuing attraction of Christian imagery in contemporary culture must surely reckon with more than the fine art photograph: inclusions from advertising or journalism, for example, would necessitate a devolved conversation about the figure of Christ within the concerns of economic contexts of circulation, the reception history of the Bible, mediated or material religion, and the enduring affective and emotional power of the icon. A more engaged survey here would connect with the situatedness and embeddedness of photography (and Christianity) in our 'post-secular' era, remembering that photography and faith are both hybrid belief systems, variously invested.

Sheona Beaumont is an artist and co-founder of Visual Theology

1. The latter is the only publication surveying photography with biblical themes across the medium's history, with over 100 artists represented, and produced on the occasion of an exhibition held at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem in 2003.

From Joseph Masheck, New York

Aware that A&C does not frequently publish letters to the editor, I must now write just such a one, as a responsible art historian and a friend of this journal, in response to extended remarks made about Andy Warhol in Mark Dean's review of 'Bruce Nauman' (see A&C no104) at Tate Modern. First an historical fact; then a knowing interpretation.

The matter of fact is that Warhol died of AIDS, though that is not the scandal: the first scandal is that everyone in the New York artworld at the time (I was editor-in-chief of *Artforum* in the late 1970s) knew that he paid off the private hospital (most of our hospitals are private) to say that, instead, he died from complications of a simple gall-bladder surgery. At the time it was obvious that this must have been a considerable sum because the excellent hospital thus had publicly to admit to malpractice.

The real scandal concerns the general social morality of someone who, notwithstanding his pit-stops at the classy Dominican Church of St Vincent Ferrer, near his house, was at the center of a wall-to-wall life of sex and drugs (plus at least one famous extramural suicide) at 'The Factory', his downtown studio, without even considering the all-night sex at Studio 54. This was all so well known that there was a funny cartoon – if not in *The New Yorker*, it was in the *Village Voice* – called 'Cardinal Cooke Hearing Andy Warhol's Confession.' It showed Warhol in the righthand compartment of an old-style confessional: Cooke was in the middle, with a biretta about a foot higher than his head!

Why should anyone do this? As a Catholic, I have to say that the worst reason is intellectual: that the church authority, though never at home with modernity, has loved to take advantage of the same postmodern relativism that it otherwise condemns: it realizes that if it stands in the shadow of postmodernism, no one can accuse it of anything. Well, what about duplicity! Believe it or not, some of these people actually hope to see Warhol canonized a saint: the patron saint of transparent hypocrisy? More could be said about this wretched PR-snowball; but for now I only seek to straighten out the historical record.

From Mark Dean, London

My recent Bruce Nauman review made passing reference to Andy Warhol's Christianity, which is indeed well-documented, in that Warhol was raised Catholic, never renounced his faith, and attended Mass regularly throughout his life (although I understand he did not usually take communion, and more to the point, did not publicly claim to be a Catholic, good or otherwise). I also stated that Warhol's Christianity was 'implicit in much of his activity'; however, I was not here referring to sexual activity, but rather to artistic activity. It is my belief that Warhol's approach to portraiture – which is the key to all his work, including his films – cannot be understood without reference to his Christianity, in particular an acceptance of and a commitment to persons as they present themselves. Nonetheless, Joseph Masheck's letter appears to suggest that Warhol's 'general social morality', with reference to sex, drugs and discotheques, somehow disqualifies his Christianity. There seems to be some confusion here between religiosity and sanctity; this is a common misapprehension, which often leads to accusations of hypocrisy against religious people, and while the charge may be justified when levelled against those who preach a morality they only pretend to practice, this can hardly be applied to Warhol, who if anything pretended to be amoral.

With regard to Warhol's purported cause of death, however, I struggle to see the relevance to the question at hand. Even if one accepted that 'general social morality' is a determinant of Christian status, what does this have to do with HIV/AIDS? We know that when the condition was first identified in the 1980's, some preached it as divine retribution for queer sexuality; such theology has arguably contributed to many unnecessary deaths through fear and ignorance, and has certainly acted as a justification for the violent legal persecution of LGBTQ people around the world to this day. While I trust that this kind of homophobia is not what is being rehearsed here in this journal, I am left with a question as to whether, a third of a century on from Warhol's death in the first decade of the continuing AIDS epidemic, it is still being suggested that a positive HIV status is an indicator of a negative moral state.

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basel.ch/en/exhibitions](http://kunstmuseum-basel.ch/en/exhibitions)

Epic Iran

vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/epic-iran

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royalacademy.org.uk

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Rebecca Louise Law: Seasons

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The Living Planet [fact.co.uk/sea-
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Pete Codling: Little Bits of God [god-
whospeaks.uk/the-god-
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whospeaks/art-and-culture/)

Viewing Room at Hauser & Wirth
vip-hauserwirth.com

Tracing the East newgeographies.uk

Bruce Nauman at Tate Modern

tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/

**Chila Kumari Singh Burman at Tate
Britain, installation for Diwali**

[tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-
britain/exhibition/chila-kumari-
singh-burman](http://tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-
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Mark Fairington: Relics

ushaw.org/current-exhibitions

Spirit and Endeavour [salisbury-cathe-
dral.org.uk/news/celebrating-800-
years-spirit-and-endeavour](http://salisbury-cathe-
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