

WHICH CONVERSATION? WHOSE LANGUAGE?

Jerry Bleem, O.F.M.

“true art has a close affinity with the world of faith...art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience.” [Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*]

From my own experience, I can attest that art and religion exist in relationship with each other. I am a member of the Order of Friars Minor and a presbyter in the Roman Catholic Church. I am also a visual artist and a member of the faculty of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. These aspects of my life are not in conflict; in fact, that which I name religious in my life can at times also be called artistic and visa versa.

In this brief paper, I would like to examine the state of the dialogue between religious structures and the cultural production identified as art. I come to this question recognizing that any institution is composed of people; in the end, a conversation exists because people vis-à-vis organizations are willing to consider other perspectives. Given the nature of this conference, my challenges will be offered to those that describe themselves as “of religion” rather than “of art.”

What kind of conversation is the “world of faith” having with the “world of art?” What’s the tone? Who sets the parameters? I offer you two anecdotes in response.

Around 1990, my province moved a private cemetery we had maintained for decades to a cemetery operated by a large Midwestern archdiocese. The administration of my province asked me to serve on a committee to propose a monument to mark the friars’ new burial plot. When this committee met with the director of the cemetery system, we were instructed to contact a specific monument company. Upon inquiring about other companies, we were told that this would be the only monument company the cemetery would allow to erect our monument.

We met with representatives of the monument company and described our ideas for the monument. When we asked to see images of work that sculptors the monument company employed had produced, we were told, “You don’t need to see their work. It’s our job to choose the right sculptor

for you.” By this point, I was bristling. But the other member of the committee wanted to proceed on the terms we were given. After all, the remains had already been re-interred, they argued; let’s just follow the procedure laid out for us.

We met with the sculptor assigned to us. The original maquettes were refined and in the end we accepted a proposal that I considered bland and dated. Our provincial administration accepted the proposal. However, when we took the maquette to the administrators of the cemetery, we were told we could not erect such a monument, in part, because it did not reflect the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead and because it would offend people who came to the cemetery. Our proposal’s real offense was its abstract nature (hardly an untested artistic sensibility.)

In time the issue was resolved by placing four large crosses on the sculpture’s base. To characterize the nature of our conflict, I offer you two quotes. The cemetery system’s priest director told us, “I’m the pastor of this cemetery.” The clear message: his decision was final. The assistant director took the tack that our committee was uninformed and simply needed a little education. Appropriate cemetery monuments, he said, incorporate “a cross, a lily or a lamb.”

You will pardon me, then, if I shutter a bit when I read the phrase “true art” in the *Letter to Artists*. My mind remembers this incident when two people willingly defined true art for me and thought my training suspect. Our differences wore the clothes of aesthetics—and a narrow understanding of what constitutes art, and the misuse of power.

Anecdote number two. Several years after this cemetery monument experience, a friend of mine enlisted my assistance in mounting an exhibition of liturgical and fraternal order garments at the Arts Club of Chicago, a prominent, well-respected cultural institution. Interested in vestments as historic, artistic and theological artifacts, I was—to put it mildly—excited about the project. Assuming that finding visually engaging vestments would be a simple task, I contacted both the cathedral and the major seminary of a large Midwestern archdiocese.

After describing the exhibition, I was informed that neither institution had any garment meriting display. I assumed that their hesitancy involved loaning liturgical vesture to a secular institution. I assured them that the

Arts Club would use museum standards in handling their garments and would be building display devices specifically for their vestments. I mentioned my ordination and religious community affiliation several times to convince them that this was a serious exhibit that would show their garments respectfully. I reminded them that security personnel would be present throughout the exhibition.

The people with whom I spoke were polite and listened to my pleading patiently. Their response never wavered. Could I come and look at their vestments? No, it would be a waste of time. I knew these institutions had marvelous garments, but I could not convince them to participate in this venture. The exhibit opened with garments from my collection and from a Benedictine abbey. Throughout the press opening, the members opening and the public opening, I was both pleased and sad. As I watched people intently examine the garments on display, as I answered their questions, as the curator gave her lecture, I kept imagining the garments that could have been present if an honest conversation had been possible.

Like any healthy relationship, art and religion can only engage in fruitful dialogue through mutual respect and honesty. These two incidents have taught me that religious structures and the persons behind those institutions have little knowledge of the arts and are suspicious of art's intention. Too often current religiosity seems set upon reducing the arts to something safe, manageable, and insipid. As a consequence, the inherent sacramentality of both religion and the arts remains a potential common ground waiting to be explored.

In the periodic, well-publicized confrontations between various religious groups or individuals speaking from their religious convictions, and makers or exhibitors of specific artworks labeled as "offensive," a certainty of meaning is asserted without a discussion of the visual language proffered. Perhaps we have forgotten that symbols and metaphors are multivalent— ascribing a single meaning is neither the goal nor desirable. Nonetheless, the name-calling persists leaving both sides angry and self-righteous. What has been lost? A chance to consider art's affinity to the world of faith, the opportunity to think and to be challenged in new ways, the occasion to face squarely what it means to be human, and the venue for art and religion to learn each other's language.

Though a number of years have passed since Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" was originally exhibited, this photograph continues to be cited as an offensive artwork by many who interpret it demeaning Christ. [1987, cibachrome, 152.4 x 101.6 cm] I have no intention to contradict this reading of the work. However, I would like to consider other possibilities.

Perhaps rather than insulting Christ, the artist was making a statement about the way Christians (i.e., those who profess belief in Christ) live. Hypocrisy is not an unfamiliar accusation leveled against believers and it is not unfair to interpret Serrano's visual language in this way. The distaste one experiences in seeing this photograph of a crucifix in urine might correspond to one's emotional reaction to religious infidelity or the misuse of religious power. Such self-titled Christians might be viewed as pissing on Christ (represented in Serrano's photograph as a mass-produced, formulaic crucifix). Such an interpretation finds ready references today.

In a completely different vein, I would also like to suggest that photograph's beautiful amber color (if it indeed comes from urine as we are told) might also suggest intimacy or a sure human presence. Though a fluid we hide from each other, urine is also a daily reminder of our humanness and the marvelous ways the body processes and excretes. As I walk the streets of Chicago, the distinctive smell of urine reminds me of human beings—especially those forced by their bodies or life circumstances to urinate outside. These marked spaces serve as a surrogate for the societal penchant to ignore the disabled, the elderly and the homeless.

Are the languages of art and religion so unrelated? The Johannine injunction to "eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood" (John 6: 53) does not disgust those who understand its symbolic intent. This ritual action promises a bond—an intimate, human, physical bond—with the "Son of Man."

[Andres Serrano, "Blood Cross," 1985, cibachrome, 76.2 x 101.6 cm] Serrano has photographed other bodily fluids including blood in his artmaking. In a post-A.I.D.S. world where physical intimacy can also be dangerous, all bodily fluids are charged. We think about our bodies in a new way and we think about our relationships in a new way: unsafe.

When the exhibition entitled *Sensation* opened at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999, Chris Ofili's painting "The Holy Virgin Mary" [1996, acrylic, oil,

resin, paper collage, glitter, map pins, elephant dung on canvas; 8' x 6'] was described in some media accounts as “smeared” with ‘feces” and “excrement.” Having been raised on a farm, I consider myself qualified to recognize “smeared excrement” and this is not it. Without a violent emotion in sight, this dung (“elephant” we are told) has been carefully chosen. Their globe shapes are intact and have been painted, sealed and carefully placed. There is no rage, no smearing.

Ofili’s oeuvre, like Serrano’s, fills out our knowledge of his signature motifs. Elephant dung is everywhere, both on the surfaces of paintings and as supports since Ofili does not hang his works but leans them against a wall. This dung is part of “She” [1997], “Prince amongst Thieves” [1999] and even “Satan” [1995, acrylic, oil, resin, elephant dung, map pins on canvas; 182.8 x 121.9 cm].

I think the furor raised over this painting was ill conceived, childish and mostly political. What is Ofili trying to say? What could not be heard over the noise of the controversy?

Clearly the Mother of God has been an important, cherished image for centuries. Who should Mary resemble? What race is she? What standard of beauty does she need to depict? Sadly any of my students could have schooled the former mayor of New York in Ofili’s strategy. Ofili, a self-described Catholic, is making Mary in his artistic image, is reaching back to his Nigerian heritage, and has set aside the current (and unrealistic) standards of Western beauty. This is not a passive Mary afraid to look at us from the picture plane (as if my mother was ever afraid of me). This Mary’s non-typical depiction reminds us that there are all kinds of people in God’s reign—and hence, should be in God’s Church.

And that dung? According to Elizabeth Baker [Art in America, November 1999, p. 39] “elephant dung, in African culture, is not a profane substance; it carries implications of fertility and regeneration.” Even if that were not true, its unusual quality should make us look and wonder rather than make us turn away and accuse.

More challenging for me are the images cut out of pornographic magazines that have been collaged on the surface of “The Holy Virgin Mary.” These pictures of female buttocks and genitalia document sexuality as commodity, the implied visuals for any number of sales campaigns. Paired with the

Mother of God, these images found in plain paper wrappers and on computer screens question our compartmentalized thinking that affirms the holiness of the person and is seduced by the objectified body. How faithful is this to the artist's intention? I do not know. This is the language—of both art and religion—this painting elicits from me.

In the Yale Divinity School publication *Reflections*, John J. Collins who teaches Old Testament there wrote: “The Bible has contributed to violence in the world precisely because it has been taken to confer a degree of certitude that transcends human discussion and argumentation. Perhaps the most constructive thing a biblical interpreter can do toward lessening the contribution of the Bible to violence in the world is to show that certitude is an illusion.”

Art can be a “bridge to religious experience” when “the world of faith” listens to art's language in its complex variety.....and remembers that certitude is an illusion.

JERRY BLEEM, O.F.M.
San Damiano Friary
4860 West 29th Street
Cicero, Illinois 60804