

## Recuperating Religion in Art History: Contemporary Art History, Performance, and Christian Jankowski's *The Holy Artwork*

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In my research, I mobilize the methods of art history to analyze performance artworks that engage with American religious practices, communities, and traditions. As an art historian, my work is situated within academic discourses that take religion seriously, from Giorgio Vasari's biographical approach to religious representations to Edwin Panofsky's attention to religious iconography. Despite these roots, art historical discourses around contemporary art generally have insisted on secular interpretations; religion has become a taboo subject in contemporary art history, especially in regard to avant-garde practices like performance art. While many scholars in other disciplines such as religious studies and sociology have rejected the secularization thesis, most historians of contemporary art remain deeply committed to secular modernity. Guided by Enlightenment-based formulations of religion that identify religions with institutions rather than lived experiences, and influenced by post-9/11 rhetoric that has conflated religious devotion with extremism and violence, late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century art historical scholarship remains mistrustful of religious content in artworks and resistant to interpretations that explore artists' and artworks' religious contexts. For many contemporary art historians, the presence of religion in contemporary art challenges assumptions about progressive historical narratives, questions the critical distance espoused by many academics, unsettles disciplinary boundaries, and may even seem embarrassing or naïve from critical theory perspectives based on Marxist ideology or Freudian psychoanalysis. And yet, contemporary artists continue to combine religious forms, content, and contexts with avant-garde performance practices. In particular, in endurance art and other high-stakes performance actions, artists draw their prophetic power and transformative possibilities from their religious commitments, embodied worship practices, and visual traditions of religious dissent. Without attention to the role of religions, these art actions can be misinterpreted and their power overlooked.

In this article, I consider one particular performance—Christian Jankowski's *The Holy Artwork* (2001)—to explore the benefits, challenges, and implications of mobilizing traditional art historical methodologies in the interpretation of religiously inflicted performance art. *The Holy Artwork*—the title itself directly evoking the taboo of religion in contemporary art—staged a seemingly unorthodox encounter between an American evangelical preacher and a German contemporary artist. Subverting expectations, drawing attention to cultural and social stereotypes, and modelling unsettling and potentially meaningful encounter, Jankowski prostrated himself at the feet of a televangelist preacher for the duration of a televised worship service. In collaboration with Reverend Peter Spencer, Jankowski performed *The Holy Artwork* during a crowded, televised Sunday service at Harvest Fellowship Church, Spencer's evangelical mega-church in San Antonio, Texas. At the beginning of the service, Spencer invited Jankowski to the front of the church. The artist walked toward the pastor and suddenly fell at his feet. He collapsed on the floor and remained in this position as Spencer preached a sermon about creativity and Christianity. Spencer's discussion of "God is the ultimate artist," hymn-singing by the Harvest Fellowship Church Praise Team, calls to prayer, and other activities took place around his prone body. At the end of the service, after a final

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prayer, Spencer offered his hand to Jankowski, who took it and got to his feet. The artist thanked God and the congregation and left the stage, ending the performance.<sup>1</sup> Rather than detail a thorough analysis of this piece, my discussion here explores what Jankowski's action suggests about how art history can provide generative perspectives on performances that engage religion, and in turn, how performance can contribute to productive ways of doing contemporary art history.

Dominant art historical approaches to avant-garde performance art tend to de-contextualize it in favour of a timeless cosmopolitanism, underscored in the increasing importance of international festivals in disseminating performance art. However, *The Holy Artwork* visualized the intensely local, historically specific character of religion in performance. Just as when faced with a painting or sculpture, the long art historical tradition of attending to context, from national histories to individual biographies, is crucial to making sense of Jankowski's act of falling down and his sustained immobility. In his multi-layered intervention, the artist's collapsed body made visible a complex set of pre-9/11 regional identities, social relations, and political ideologies. For example, the explicitly religious setting of a Texan, evangelical, mostly white Christian mega-church—sited in the ethnically diverse, international city of San Antonio—highlighted Jankowski's role as an outsider, an invited guest, a wealthy, cosmopolitan, German artist. His submissive stance in the home territory of then newly elected President George W. Bush pointed to Bush-era, pre-9/11 American imperialism, and to the influence of American conservative and evangelical churches on international diplomacy in the turn-of-the-century political moment. Further, in juxtaposing submissive and dominating white male bodies in the figures of a German citizen and a Texan preacher, the piece highlighted regional and national stereotypes of masculinities in the context of the American West. The background and collaboration between these two men also deserves further elaboration, from Jankowski's own religious upbringing, about which he has not been forthcoming, to Spencer's role as the only televangelist in the area willing to work with Jankowski; dozens of others rejected the artist's request (Silva 2002, n.p.). Perhaps Spencer's experience as a graphic design major in college and his former career as a dinner theatre actor influenced his decision; and perhaps his openness to encountering contemporary art in the form of Jankowski contributed to his troubled relationship with his congregation, which ousted him a few years later (Parker 2003, 3B). When scholars take into account the confluence of religious representations, congregational practices, embodied local mythologies, and national histories, art historical methodologies can meaningfully facilitate these and other insights into the embodied politics of performance actions engaging with religion, including Jankowski's gesture.

Art historical methods of formal analysis and comparison can also draw attention to the particulars of the artist's posture in *The Holy Artwork* and its multiple meanings. Jankowski's fall left him in a very specific pose: on his side, one arm extended, legs one on top of the other, back to the audience. The artist placed himself on the margins, on the floor; in the video of the action, he is visible only in the gutter of the shot, at the very bottom of the screen. Spencer verbally called attention to Jankowski's physical and visual act: the artist, Spencer said, is “emptying himself[,] falling down[,] ...] no longer becoming the center of attention” (Jankowski 2002: 19). Yet Jankowski did position himself at the centre of the composition, the centre of the action; Spencer's sermon and the action of the church service revolve over and around the still, central point of his own body. Jankowski has said that he based this pose on a stance from religious paintings by Spanish Baroque artist Juan Bautista Maíno, who regularly placed collapsed figures in the foreground of his religious narrative paintings (Corrin 2001, 3).<sup>2</sup> Counter-Reformation Catholic artists often worked to make religious experience accessible to viewers by including a mediating figure to connect to everyday life. Jankowski's choice to inhabit this somewhat obscure, intercessory Baroque stance over more

traditional supplicating postures—for example, face-down, with arms out to the sides, as would be typical in medieval practices—suggests that his body can be read as a mediating figure, a stand-in for the viewer, a character functioning to make the scene, as my students like to say, “relatable.” This analysis highlights the transgressive, boundary-crossing nature of *The Holy Artwork*, an interpretation underscored by references to a constellation of other performance actions. In collaborating with a non-artist, siting the piece outside of the art world, and challenging social norms, Jankowski’s piece recalled the performances of Gunter Brus, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Yoko Ono, William Pope.L, and others, aligning this work with the intersectional critical dialogue generated by these artists. In addition, the piece refigures, and perhaps re-performs or re-envisions, an important performance work by another German artist, Joseph Beuys, who shared a New York gallery space with a coyote for several days in *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974). In both actions, the German stranger staged an ambiguous welcome in the context of post-World War II American imperialism; the tongue-in-cheek title of Beuys’s work could serve as a descriptor for Jankowski’s. These comparisons clarify the political and ethical commitments interrogated in *The Holy Artwork*.

Given its transgressive nature, it is perhaps not surprising that *The Holy Artwork* was met with consternation and discomfiture. Jankowski’s performance took place outside of a traditional museum or art world setting, confronting unsuspecting audiences with an unexpected, seemingly inexplicable action. The artist physically entered into the community of Harvest Fellowship Church, and when he fell to the floor, he not only surprised viewers but violated social and bodily norms. In the video documentation of Jankowski’s performance, Spencer remained undisturbed by the artist’s motionless body, continuing his sermon and leading the congregation in Sunday activities, but other participants in the service—members of the choir and the band as well as church-goers in the audience—oscillated between studiously ignoring Jankowski and openly staring at him. Their occasional sidelong glances, stifled giggles, and surreptitious gestures revealed their discomfort with Jankowski’s position. Observers seemed to be wondering whether this action was a joke, and if so, a joke on whom? Was the artist’s attitude reverent or disrespectful? Was he serious about engaging with the community or was this a media stunt? Jankowski put this audience on the spot, demanding that viewers make a decision about how to respond and how to behave. Critics and art historians have responded similarly, with confusion about the artist’s motives and uncertainty about their roles as viewers (Smolik 2000, 127; Princenthal 2002, 51; Pollack 2004, 118). The artist has suggested that this unsettlement is central to performance practice: he said, “If you lose control, if you don’t know exactly what the artwork wants to tell you, or the meaning of it—that’s the moment you have to start thinking yourself and you don’t come down to common sense” (Silva 2002, n.p.).

This destabilization extended beyond the action itself to the distribution of the piece. The performance video has appeared in museums and galleries, and it broadcast on Spencer’s local cable television show, addressing and conflating multiple, diverse publics: global, cosmopolitan, art-world observers and local, San Antonio television audiences. It is here—amid the discomfort, confusion, and humour that can result from encounter; the difficulty of locating meaning across communities; and the uncertainty at the heart of communicating across difference—that Jankowski’s performance models how contemporary art historians might encounter religion in performance. *The Holy Artwork* reminds us that encounter is foundational to religious performance. In order to productively analyze these performances, contemporary art historians must engage with these encounters—encounters with self, with others, with divinity—in all of their messy ambiguity, unsettlement, unresolved multiplicity, and potential for misunderstanding and conflict. With attention to current theorizations of religion and performance in religious studies, partnering with art historians studying other eras and other areas, for whom religion has remained a central concern, and drawing on the discipline’s

deep historiography of fruitful dialogue about religion and the visual, contemporary art historians must develop a nuanced language for thinking, writing, and talking about the role of religion in twenty-first-century performance.

## Notes

1. For the transcript of this performance, see Jankowski 2002.
2. See, for example, Maino's *The Resurrection* (1612–14) in the collection of the Prado Museum. <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-resurrection/528d18b5-73c4-4775-87fd-d9680f95f2bb>.

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