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2013, WIP, Hamilton Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
2013, The Drawing Show, Philadelphia, PA
2013, The Story of the Creative, Angel Orensanz Foundation, New York, NY
2013, Binary, Manifesto-ish Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
2012, WIP, Gallery 813, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA
2012, Painting Ain't Dead, Gallery 224, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA
2012, Rough House, Gallery 224, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA
2012, Wet Paint, Gallery 224, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA
2012, New Artists in the Summer, Freeman Motors Gallery, Portland, OR
2012, Faith and Art IV, Gimpl Hall, Salem, OR
2011, WIP, Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA
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2009, Faith and Art I, Gimpl Hall, Salem, OR
2009, Strong Forces, Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland, OR
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2012, *The Return of Hermes: Demonstration against Student Loans*, Philadelphia, PA

Todd Molinari

Artist Statement

Art exists in the flow of history, but has history become an endless succession of moments in time without any point of reference? My studio practice attempts to grapple with this question, recognizing that the lack of an apparent answer signals tension rather than a predetermined outcome. My practice and research challenge the notion of the historical inevitability of anything.

One area of contemporary life that is marked by mutual incomprehension and separation is the relation between the realms of secularity and religion. As a priest and an artist, I stand in the breach of these two spheres of knowledge and action. This duality is also within me. My artistic practice and priestly existence examine the tension between the two. In my art I draw on the energy of each in order to engage in a process of transformation and exploration of myself and of the viewer. This contested space is a site for new artistic discoveries.

EVERYTHING IS AN EPITAPH

A thesis submitted to the
Division of Graduate Studies and Research
Of the University of the Arts
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MASTER OF FINE ARTS, STUDIO ART

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Synopsis

This thesis will focus on the following ideas: **Hybridity**: I am a priest and an artist, and my studio practice is inextricably bound up with this state of affairs and manifests it through creative flows of energy. I reflect on how Wendy White, Marisa Merz, Georges Perec, the role of the *flâneur*, studies in perception and “Provisional Painting” have impacted my practice. **Experimentation**: The alchemical transformation of matter and spirit is an aspect of my practice that has led into many different directions. I look to Sigmar Polke and Francesca Woodman as beacons. The challenge in my practice is to translate research and studio-as-laboratory into finished work that expresses my ideas. As will be seen in the unfolding of the thesis, experimentation has become a type of artistic practice all its own. **Portraiture**: This aspect of my art takes portraiture as the starting point for explorations into perception and the nature of how people, places and things are self-presented, perceived and related, from which my current and future practice is flowing.

Taking the portraiture of Gerhard Richter as a starting point, this concept understands portraiture in the broadest possible sense, defining the term as a form of perception. This interests me because so much of my dualistic life is bound up with people, spaces and presentations that appear one way but actually are something entirely different. Portraiture is a critical enterprise for me that inquires into the nature of what is being presented and asks if that is all there is, or is there something else to it?

These three identifiers: Hybridity, Experimentation and Portraiture form the basis of my practice and of this thesis. These three are unified as aspects of my art as Epitaph: Hybridity is inscribed into my identity and forms it, yet it continues to undergo a process of transformation. It is the starting point for my art-making as “epitaphical”. Experimentation is an umbrella term for the recognition of the epitaphical nature of experience is processed. Portraiture is one current manifestation of this process, defined in the broadest possible way. All the aforementioned is proposed within an institutional critique of what I observe in the Church and the world, and it offers a unique perspective as artist-priest.

EVERYTHING IS AN EPITAPH

Introduction

Walking every morning at 5:30 am down the via Giulia, past the Campo de' Fiori and the Palazzo Farnese, in the dark, empty streets except for the wondering dogs and cats, I began my day in silence and open air. The sun would begin to arise once I came up to the Circus Maximus. It would be first a purple-gray streak behind the trees on top of the Coelian hill, my destination. More dogs running through the Circus while joggers passed by. The first buses, with their belching smog and honking and wheezing, rushing by on their first run. The Eternal City was still asleep, barely waking, where all a pedestrian can run into are the ghosts of ages past. This element of awareness, of a critical appraisal of my perception and how to sort distortions in my subjective experiences proved to be foundational to my self-understanding as a priest and as an artist. Making distinctions, separating my sensual experience from the world-as-it-is had always fascinated me, and I found the urban environment of Rome as a fertile proving ground for my hybrid identity. To be a priest is to have an indelible mark placed on your soul which can never be erased. The inscription of time, history and memory on the edifices and the faces spoke of what endured and yet also what faded. This dynamic, when memory etches itself onto a person, a space, a relationship, marked my identity and understanding of the world and of myself. This inscribing also degrades over time and becomes something else - an epitaph. I become an epitaph, you become an epitaph and all things become an epitaph, and this is what I respond to my in art.

I had an experience earlier that year that defined my awareness of space and my place in space: Our seminary in Rome held a bar-b-que, to which all the seminarians and faculty were

invited. Also invited were visiting priests from the States who stayed at the seminary on sabbatical. Most of these priests were kind, thoughtful and engaged, but some seemed to be a bit *off*. As I was standing in line waiting to load up my plate with burgers and ribs, I felt a hand from behind pinch me on my buttocks. Aghast, I turned around and looked him in the eye and said, “What are you doing?” His response was a creepy smile that reminded me of the McDonald’s character Grimace. He had a fixed grin of unrealized desire that I would later place in my paintings. I said, “Don’t ever do that again. Not interested.” Suffice it to say, this put a damper on the dinner, but it gave me a direct experience of having my space invaded and opened my eyes to perception of what was going on in the Church. It also began a process of questioning perceptions, both interior and exterior, in order to really look and see. My eyes were opened to corruption and evil, yet this paradoxically convinced me to seek creativity through observation of the external world: sketching historical sites, journaling my daily life. All of this was held together by the notion of knowing space and my place in space, specifically of my perception of self in space and questioning perception itself. These two ideas formed the core of my many approaches to making art. Likewise, an emerging critical approach to the real human weaknesses and injustices in the life of the Church, as well as a culture of looking the other way, formed an important pillar to my approach to priesthood and art-making.

I believe it was at this point in my life that what Duchamp calls “‘a l’e’tat brut,’”¹ the process by which art in its “raw state”² emerges from the artist’s personal “‘art coefficient,’”³ began to arise within me – although I did not fully realize it until later. As I have become more

¹ Marcel Duchamp, *The Creative Act*, Lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 19, 1961, (New York: Art and Artists, 1, 4, July 1966).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

and more aware of this emergence of the primal streams of my art from the “relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed”⁴ it has become apparent to me that an important part of my artistic practice is a response to my situation in space; it is a manifestation on my place in space, of what I am in relation to space. But the Duchampian process of transfiguration of one thing that becomes something else also marks my life as a priest and as an artist: I engage in an experience or an inter-personal encounter and am transformed.

Likewise my art is a process of transfiguration of experience into a moment that begins to touch silence. The moment of silence and beholding oneself in the presence of the transformed thing, as fleeting as it may be, gets close to the heart of what my art is all about. Rilke puts it this way: “Most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered, and more unsayable than all other things are works of art, those mysterious existences, whose life endures beside our own small, transitory life.”⁵ Solitude, openness to experience and the patience to allow it all to be processed: Rilke’s reflections point in the same direction as my personal artistic journey: “Works of art are of an infinite solitude”⁶ . . . “We must accept our reality as vastly as we possibly can; everything, even the unprecedented, must be possible within it. This is in the end the only kind of courage that is required of us: the courage to face the strangest, most unusual, most inexplicable experiences that can meet us.”⁷ My awareness of space and my place in space is one of the ways in which I mediate my experience in the form of the art works that I craft.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rilke, 4.

⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁷ Ibid., 88-89.

For me making art is part of life, in fact it is my life as it is engaged in the world. This engagement-in-the-world modality takes on different aspects: observation, reflection, contemplation, reaction, synthesis and experimentation. I am a duality of priest-artist, artist-priest. It is a hybrid and unresolved tension that both fosters my creativity, and which proposes its own problems and obstacles. This thesis seeks to explicate clearly how my identity is manifested through my studio practice and how my studio practice undergirds my identity. For me being an artist was never a one-time decision but is the fruit of a process that unfolded over many years.

This thesis will focus on the following ideas: Hybridity: I am a priest and an artist, and my studio practice is inextricably bound up with this state of affairs and manifests it through creative flows of energy. Experimentation: The transfiguration of matter and spirit is an aspect of my practice of studio-as-laboratory that has led into many different directions. Portraiture: This aspect of my art defines portraiture in the broadest possible way as the starting point for explorations into perception from which my current and future practice is flowing. This interests me because so much of my hybrid life is composed of the impact of encounters with people, spaces and places upon the already marked character of my priesthood. These three identifiers - hybridity, experimentation and portraiture form the basis of my practice and of this thesis. These three are unified as aspects of Epitaph: Hybridity is inscribed into my identity and forms it, yet it continues to undergo a process of transformation. It is the starting point for my art-making as “epitaphical”. Experimentation is an umbrella term for the epitaphical nature of experience as it is processed. Portraiture is one current manifestation of this process. All the aforementioned are proposed within an institutional critique of what I observe in the Church and the world, and it offers a unique perspective as artist-priest.

Hybridity: The Priest-Artist as *Flâneur*

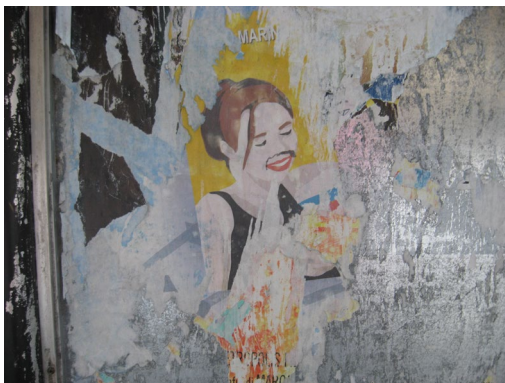
After much thought and reflection, my life as a priest-artist/artist-priest has undergone some important clarifications. Living this hybridity is unique and something that is ever-new for me and a sure source of creativity. A return to Rome always has the effect of clearing the mind and giving me a fresh perception of things. In many ways it was and remains a touchstone for my life as a priest and artist, a source of fascination, living history and convoluted contradictions. In my time of honing my artistic practice within my priestly life I came to identify with the *flâneur* as a *locus personae* for the point of convergence between being a priest and an artist. From Rome I have learned many things: there is the question of pace of life and the use of time. The pace of Rome is that of the mid-18th Century academy - morning cappuccino, meditation, followed by a studio session; a long lunch, walk and nap; afternoon studio, supper, walk, read and sleep. This “horizontal” approach to art-making extends to life and my life back into art and recalls me to the sources of my creativity.

The priest and the artist as *flâneur* also share a number of affinities: They are both part of the neo-liberal economy and political order but are like appendices or footnotes. They are not economic “producers” but nevertheless have tremendous influence on the culture. Each is also the other identity in different ways: The priest is an artist and the artist is a priest. They both deal with the realms of freedom and possibility, but come at them from different points of entry and from different point of view. *Flânerie* – making a slow sauntering journey from one place to another place – is the unifying element. This exploratory and experimental restlessness is at the heart of both identities. Both have infinite possibilities and are wide open to the horizon of freedom.

My nomadic journey to and from and within Rome gave me the opportunity to map my mental and creative processes as I made my way through different neighborhoods in the Eternal City. I once went on a walk from the Piazza del Popolo and the Flaminian Gates northward to MAXXI, the national contemporary art museum. I had the opportunity of taking the tram up the via Flaminia northward to the museum but opted to walk. I stopped by a small “Pizza a Taglio” joint to buy some water and visited with some locals munching on slices of fresh gooey pizza. Already the atmosphere cleared, and it became less touristy and I felt I was in a real neighborhood where people lived and worked. Taking leave of the friendly neighbors, I proceeded down the via. Sidewalks are common in the parts of Rome that were built after the 1920’s, and this part of the city was a mixture of post-World War II government buildings, a children’s park (probably from the 60’s) and more recent apartment complexes. To the right was the Etruscan Museum and the hilly, forested back-side of the Villa Borghese. This way was familiar to me. Back in the early 90’s when I was a student in Rome, I would take the tram to the north end of the city every Wednesday afternoon to teach a freshman class at Loyola Marymount High School. It was part of my seminary formation, and I would spend Wednesday afternoons teaching precocious and wild sons and daughters of oil executives and diplomats who worked in Italy and the Mediterranean basin. It was at first a harrowing experience, but I soon adjusted to the challenge and ended up having a good rapport with the students. Those memories of struggling through difficulty and spending inordinate amounts of time getting to and from the school across the city’s public transportation infrastructure were living epitaphs in my mind – I wonder where all those kids are now? At the same time, I felt glad that was in the past and that I was doing other things now.

Hybridity: The Cityscape, Wendy White and Marisa Merz

As I continued walking my imagination and thinking began to open up. I began to think about the similarities and differences with being a priest and an artist, but in an unforced way. I thought about the idea of progress of civilization – whether there was anything to it, the separation of powers between the Pope and the State, and finally what the fine arts are all about. It is hard not to think about “big ideas” in a city like Rome, even in a pedestrian neighborhood. Yet in Rome it is never a forced thing. It all comes naturally. These thoughts were in contrast to a critical stance against the delusions and illusions of the state and the economy, especially the destructive agendas of the neo-liberal economic policies of the ruling class. As I further penetrated into the Flaminian residential neighborhoods the monumental Rome of the crowds slipped away, and I entered into a zone of graffiti-laden walls and street detritus. I took a number of photographs of these scenes both for documentation and also for source material for studio work:





These and other images called to mind the work of Wendy White, who I had been researching and about whom I read in a number of reviews. Her use of graffiti, observations of urban life, perceiving life within the place of the cityscape all validated in me my love for the cityscape as a central component to my studio practice. Barry Schwabsky wrote of her work:

Much abstract painting seems inhibited - call it scrupulous if you prefer - the product of an earnest effort to get things right. Not Wendy White's. In a 2008 review she is quoted as saying 'successful paintings...maintain an awkward, muscular energy that threatens to fall apart at any time'. There's a great deal of bravado in her art, and sometimes a kind of frantic energy, but also fragility, self-consciousness and doubt - sometimes a sense of half-exhausted, half-ecstatic dizziness. The paintings' repleteness seems all the greater for their ability to encompass emptiness.⁸

Her paintings captured a street energy in New York that I was picking up in Rome, even though I was moving at a slower pace and at a different rhythm than her observations. But it also seemed to me that her paintings echo the multi-layered nature of the city. The city that I was walking through and am a part of is not just the facade that presents itself to me. Rather what I am seeing is an epitaph in all its multiple layers, multiple histories, inscriptions and erasures all piled on top of each other. The fracture of the cityscape in its unvarnished, working class, recessionary state echoed the provisionality of White's paintings. My perception is composed of these layers as I see them in the space that I find myself. This aspect of her art caused me to rethink my art-

⁸ Barry Schwabsky, Vitamin P2 New Perspectives in Painting, (London: Phaidon, 2011).

making, not only because I see it in my own work, but also in that my art-making is a way for me to process and digest the many layers of my own personal history and hybrid identity. My art is a manifestation of the layers of my life that I peel back and reveal, or which I cover over, or which I juxtapose. In all this layering my art finds a crucial key. Her painting series *Fotobild* offers some important glances at the layered cityscape which produces interesting juxtapositions. According to Hauser, “Wendy White’s paintings are theatrical panoramas in which movement, transition, text, color, photography, design and construction mix together, expressing her intense interest in...‘being in the world.’”⁹ I could certainly relate to these themes of movement, transition, use of multiple media, all of which situated me as “being in the world.” I found that portrayed accurately my approach to life and to making art, and I was thankful for the clarification and the point of reference that Wendy White’s work offered me.

I finally arrived at the destination of my day trip, MAXXI, the Italian national contemporary art museum. The architecture, designed by Zaha Hadid, was in marked contrast to the post-war surrounding neighborhood, yet it blended in without much fuss. At the museum itself, many of the galleries were closed that day in preparation for an upcoming exhibition, but the gallery that was open focused on Arte Povera and related contemporary Italian artists. In particular I was struck by the work of Marisa Merz (b. 1926), an artist from Turin who works with copper, clay, fibers, paper, other metals, wax/paraffin, and fabric. Her works are ephemeral, and mysterious, and they evoke maternity and materiality. Standing in front of her works on paper and walking around her sculptures in a relatively empty gallery created a real sense of stillness and a visceral reaction to the work. The museum focused the exhibition on several large works on paper. I really liked her mixture of freedom, sensitivity and earthiness

⁹ Ibid.

that I remember from other modern artists from Italy and France. I find the paradoxical juxtaposition of roughness and mystery intriguing. In addition, her work proposes the idea of leading the viewer “back to her studio.” Likewise there is an iconic aspect of her work that enables it to transcend that of her contemporaries as well as the younger generation of artists. Her large work on paper, *Senza titolo* (Untitled), 2010, was stationed in the gallery as a focal point, and her use of charcoal, pastel, gouache and silver leaf on heavy watercolor paper was mesmerizing, and I stood in front of it in contemplation for a period of time. What I like about her work and that of the other Arte Povera artists (such as her deceased husband Mario Merz) is their different take on things. They have a point of entry into creating that is different than mine, and I appreciate and feel I can learn from that difference. The roughness of their work has a deep humanity that reflects more the “real Italy” that I know and that has been an important formative part of my life. This is the Italy of soccer fields in small towns, muddy back roads, and the alleys of post-war inner-city filled with graffiti, out of work youth smoking on street corners and the persistence of things-never-quite-working-out, yet where life goes on with a certain equanimity and grace. The gestures of the Arte Povera and I meet in some backwater trattoria, yet each goes his or her own way. This is the Italy that I know and which has affected my world-view and art making.

As I concluded my day at MAXXI I decided to take the tram back to Piazza del Popolo. I spent several hours at the contemporary art library and media lab studying Merz and related topics of Arte Povera. Retracing my steps through a neighborhood familiar from the past, along with an imaginary retracing my pace of life to centuries past, allowed me to see the value of the cognitive on one side of my practice and the metaphoric and physical on the other. White and

Merz are able to combine and overlay the cognitive with the physicality of the material in such ways that a type of alchemy takes place, not only in the work but in the viewer's perception.

Hybridity: Space Explorations with Georges Perec and John Cage

An important aspect of my studio practice that has influenced me is my interest in space and perception. One strategy that I utilized was to paint a series of still lifes as a formal structure upon which I could study these issues. In one series I ended up painting six different still life paintings, all but one oil on paper, and in that process I felt that not only did I gain a deeper insight into perception, space, color and light within painting, but that I slowly and imperceptibly saw that one aspect of my art is the act of “looking” in the sense that Perec discusses it in his explorations on poetic space.¹⁰ I came to see that in and through my painting I communicated more than I realize or consciously intend – that my sense of space and place in space is conveyed in my painting as well, regardless of the formal approach or subject matter. I saw that my art was about my subjective “looking” at the world and the poetic mediation of that into matter. One of the paradoxes of this process is that the “looking” is in reference to something in the world (including myself) or at least something that is space or is in space yet the final outcome, the art-work, occupies space, has a place in space of its own, independent of what was looked at. The experience becomes the space – it becomes plastic material that has a place in space in relation to me and to the world. In a strange way this calls to mind Hegel's notion of rational idealism but in reverse: In my art the ideal becomes the real and spirit becomes matter. Hegel's formalism, which posits that the world can be rationally apprehended, and that the progress of history is the story of this action, is inverted in Perec's notion of the poetics of space.¹¹ With

¹⁰ Georges Perec, Species of Spaces and Other Pieces, trans. John Sturrock, (New York: Penguin Classics, 2008), 121.

¹¹ George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, (New York, Penguin Books, 1993), 13, 93-97.

Perec, the more one “looks” and the more one engages in poetic interaction with space that more unknowable it becomes. Where Hegel posited that art has historically exhausted its possibilities and will hereafter gradually decline into irony and dilution,¹² Perec shows that there are new possibilities and vistas for art to enter into in the present and the future. This is so because, far from having exhausted its potentialities, art is in fact always poised toward fresh insights and new possibilities based on the artist’s ability to “look,” not with the determinism of rational control of nature but rather with the eyes of a poet: freedom and wonder. I was able to integrate Perec’s notion of “looking” at ordinary objects. It was here that I saw photography in a new light. The camera lenses’ way of seeing something without affirmation or denial allowed me to make paintings based on the thing itself instead of being about my interpretation of it. This quality of randomness, which shares an affinity with John Cage’s compositions based on random chance, provided my art with freedom from my own subjectivity, yet it also maintained an engagement with the world as it is, with all of its poetic qualities intact.¹³ I would later return to photography with portraiture as a theme in my practice.

Hybridity: The Flâneur, Studies in Perception and “Provisional Painting”

In a *Sunday New York Times* article Evgeny Morozov laments the end of the “*cyberflâneur*”, the fact that the days in which the Internet was the habitat for countless amblers who spent their days and nights strolling through websites in search of experiences and encounters is now over due to the process of commodification and rational control of the web-surfer. Google, Facebook and their ilk may have made it convenient to find anyone or anything on the web with a search request, but their corporatized approach to all things has virtually eliminated all playfulness, spontaneity, randomness and serendipitous carelessness from the

¹² Ibid., 69-75.

¹³ John Cage, *A Year from Monday*, (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 107.

Internet.¹⁴ Yet although what was a promise of the early digital age has gone the way of the dial-up connection, *flânerie* as such has not died out; it has only migrated back into the arts. The need for a reclamation of the personal, of the observed, of resistance to the processed and pre-packaged image is an emerging characteristic of contemporary art. In order to gauge its importance it will be necessary to analyze how observation has developed as a concept and a practice in modern times and how that has led to current interrogations within the arts.

Vision, observation and the observer at first seem to be fairly constant realities, yet recent studies have shown that there has been a radical development of these over the last three centuries.¹⁵

The observer and the observed are not separate entities, but rather are two dimensions of a single process: “Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product and the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification.”¹⁶

A decisive turn took place in the 19th Century in which the theory and technology of optics, color theory, the disassociation of the senses from vision and the emergence of techniques of rationalized and standardized control of the individual combined in such a way to reconstitute the observer as “a new kind of subject or individual in the nineteenth century.”¹⁷ In effect what happened was nothing short of the reinvention of the individual subject: As observer s/he was now inseparable from the observed. The process of observation was the internalization of a broader technology of rational organization and control that was used to transform the person into a new consumer of the image (among other things). This elision of the observed allowed for

¹⁴ Evgeny Morozov, “The Death of the Cyberflâneur”, in The Sunday New York Times, (New York, February 5, 2012), SR6.

¹⁵ Jonathan Crary, Techniques of the Observer, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), 5.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

“a new valuation of visual experience: it is given an unprecedented mobility and exchangeability, abstracted from any founding site or referent.”¹⁸ The consequences of this development have been manifold and laden with tensions: The destabilizing of the image from the referent enabled the arts to develop in a multitude of directions with the possibilities that flow from any and all visual experiences and forms of knowledge as potential objects and subjects. The artist is liberated to express him/herself in whatever medium is necessary to advance an idea. Yet this has led to a series of crises, one of which Nietzsche refers to as “a crisis of assimilation.”¹⁹ This is a crisis of a superabundance of sensations and experiences, where the observer can no longer behold and contemplate an object but instead “a weakening in the power to digest results from this. A kind of adaptation to the the flood of impressions takes place: men unlearn spontaneous action, they merely react to stimuli from the outside.”²⁰

This crisis is also accompanied by the issue of the destabilization of the viewer and the image. No longer is the image a stable, universal entity that is modeled after the projection of the Camera Obscura: “There is never a pure access to a single object; vision is always multiple, adjacent to and overlapping with other objects, desires and vectors.”²¹ This disjunction has been an important part in reshaping perception in modern times, but brings with it ambivalent elements as well: No longer is there a single object but rather an unending multiplicity of perceptions that are reproducible and exchangeable. The question arises as to how to value one image over another, or how to relate any image to another. The freedom of image-making would then demand ever-greater critical thought and reflection that would be co-extensive instead of

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 20.

prior to the image production. These ambivalences characterize modernity, and the viewer is inextricably embedded in this process. In previous eras the artist saw her responsibility as one of rendering, explaining and shaping reality, based on a unitary perspective and a theoretical framework of stable projection of the image based in the Camera Obscura model.²² The faculty of vision was compared analogously to the Camera Obscura in such a way that it provided a model of knowledge that in turn influenced the arts and the artist's view of herself. With the separation of the senses that followed as a consequence to Goethe's color theory and other studies of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, this former model collapsed and was gradually replaced by a new framework in which visual knowledge based on universal norms and its ordering by a coherent program of training was now superseded by transitory and reproducible fragments that are severed from time and space, and which are no longer grounded on an internally coherent set of practices.²³ Seen from this point of view, the history of art from the late 18th Century up to the present follows a trajectory of related inquiries into the nature of perception re-conceived. Thus one could argue that there is a thread that connects everything from the Romantic movement, to Academic art, to Impressionism and to Modernism. Additionally, Goethe's color theory typified this view, where "the human body, in all its contingency and specificity, generates 'the spectrum of another colour,' and thus becomes the active producer of optical experience."²⁴

Along with later developments in visual technology, such as the invention of the *zootrope*, the *diorama*, the *kaleidoscope*, the *stereoscope*, the *phenakistiscope*, and the *thaumatrope*, various studies offered a fuller explanation and measurement of the phenomenon

²² Ibid., 38-39.

²³ Ibid., 70-71.

²⁴ Ibid., 69.

of the afterimage, which in turn enabled the image and the viewer to be both observed as provisional things that could be manipulated, controlled, measured and produced in expanding ways.²⁵ Provisionality, chance, subjectivity, fallibility, and the adaptability of the body to new forms of motion that were both forms of knowledge and visual experience characterize the present age and the approaches to art-making and visual production.²⁶ The artist as *flâneur* realizes she is embedded in such a condition and yet asks whether it is possible to find the unmediated image while engaged in practices that involve the mediation of the image through the aforementioned strategies in creating art. She seeks freedom to roam wherever she can. Yet she is skeptical: That she is part of the process of observation suggests critical questioning of her art at every step.

A recent example of provisionality in art-making and critical reflection on it can be found in an article by Raphael Rubinstein.²⁷ In this first of two articles, he outlines how the practice of painting in the work of several contemporary artists are marked by “works that look casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-canceling. In different ways, they all deliberately turn away from ‘strong’ painting for something that seems to constantly risk inconsequence or collapse.”²⁸ Artistic *flâneurs* in their own ways, they press the question, “What makes painting impossible? What makes great painting impossible? Perhaps it is a sense of belatedness, a conviction that an earlier generation or artist has left only a few scraps to be cleaned up...Impossibility can also be the result of the artist making excessive demands on the work, demands to which current practice has no reply.”²⁹ Yet the artist, each in his/her own way, finds

²⁵ Ibid., 100-122.

²⁶ Ibid., 112-113.

²⁷ Raphael Rubenstein, “Provisional Painting,” in Art in America, (May 4, 2009).

²⁸ Ibid., 1.

²⁹ Ibid., 5.

that “painting must be done, must go on.”³⁰ The rejection of “a sense of finish in their work or to rely on acts of negation”³¹ can be found in the work of contemporary Austrian artist Stefan Sandner.³² His work attempts “to bridge the gap between the everyday and the ideal”³³ by appropriating “found texts and documents - scrawled notes, agenda pages and enigmatic sketches - which he paints in greatly enlarged formats onto his large monochromatic canvases.”³⁴ His 2006 work *ohne Titel (Untitled)* is one example of this approach. Here the artist appropriates an anonymous word list that is rendered with the greatest care and exacting craftsmanship. At first glance he might appear to be a “textual appropriator”³⁵ or passing on an inside joke on abstract painting, but with a closer appraisal he offers both a “disconnect”³⁶ and “a new synthesis”³⁷ for painting: The combination of left-overs with expert technique yields a synthesis of provisionality, chance, impossibility and the unattainable. Sandner finds a way to express the two aspects of modern observation as distinct from its pre-modern forms: The contemporary artist is faced with a plethora of neutral images from which to select and respond, while his/her subjectivity becomes the locus of visual knowledge. Thus the observer faces both the potential for infinite artistic expression within a realm of countless images yet faces the threat of ever-greater standardization and control under various realms of power that have the same visual knowledge.³⁸

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Crary, 150.

In a subsequent article, Rubinstein writes an update on the trajectory of impossibility and lack of finish within contemporary painting.³⁹ He cites Philip Guston's insight as key to this discussion. Referring to the revolution of Abstract Expressionism as not merely "a stylistic innovation"⁴⁰ but as an instance of asking the question "whether it's possible to create in our society at all"⁴¹ and what stake the artist still has in this matter. His foresaw that the democratization of art-making would not be the same as creating, for in a world full of images the artist had found him/herself "driven into a corner against a wall with no place to stand"⁴² and where the act of painting became the way of pushing back out against such constraints - to determine whether such is possible. The strategies suggested by Guston for push-back against the confinements of our society and the commodification of image-making involve the unfinished, lack of resolution, the appearance of no work having been done, and chance at the service of diligence and experimentation.⁴³ That the transitory, provisional and random have *caché* is not only a reflection of our times but is also a working-out of the re-foundation of vision that occurred in the 19th Century. This process will continue unabated with "some painters...rediscovering doubt as an aspect of their medium, reclaiming Cézanne as an ancestor and nominating as their tutelary spirit Samuel Beckett, a writer who favored paintings where he found 'no trace of one-upmanship, either in excess or deficiency. But the acceptance, as little

³⁹ Raphael Rubenstein, "Provisional Painting Part 2: To Rest Lightly on Earth," in Art in America, (February 1, 2012).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 3.

⁴³ Ibid., 3-4.

satisfied as bitter, of all that is immaterial and paltry, as among shadows, in the shock from which a work emerges.’’⁴⁴

In the preceding sections I discussed those experiences and artists who were formative to giving meaning to my hybrid self. In each case, either the formal or intuitional aspect of their creative processes and output have caused me to think through my presuppositions and have propelled me in new directions. The development of my studio practice has not been simply characterized by refinement of technique or particular choices of this or that theme. It has involved and continues to involve a line of inquiry into who I am as a priest-artist and what that means. It is a process is not a conclusion to a premise or a product of a formula. These influences have shown me that artistic practice is a process of defining one’s space, not just in the literal sense, but in the widest possible sense. Having looked at Hybridity as one quality of my studio practice and artistic identity, the next section will turn to Experimentation as a second central aspect of my art-making. This will be seen as a means of concretizing my duality and giving visual evidence of the processes of wrestling with my hybridity in particular visual forms.

Studio Practice as Experimentation: The Material Processes used in My Studio Practice

In my studio practice I take the approach of bringing the raw material of my life experiences, perspectives, people, places and things, the space that I and others occupy, and engage in a process of distillation and synthesis to arrive at *thusness* or *quiddity*. The *thusness* or *whatness* of what makes for my art calls for its own inner logic and reason that often can only be discerned *post facto*. Thus my art usually has two points of departure: Either it begins with a perception of someone or something as it is in space, and then continues on a pathway based on a

⁴⁴ Ibid., 6.

pursuit for discerning its essence, or it begins with an idea based on a conviction of some sort or an intuition, which develops according to a process of discovery. Even though I use a wide variety of materials and often approach my work as a manifestation of my hybridity, I consider my work to be painting, albeit in a manner that admits to a broad and generous definition. In his personal reflections on painting, Gerhard Richter remarks,

What shall I paint? How shall I paint? ‘What’ is the hardest thing, because it is the essence. ‘How’ is frivolous, but legitimate. Apply the ‘How’, and thus use the requirements of technique, the material and physical possibilities, in order to realize the intention. The intention: to invent nothing - no idea, no composition, no object, no form - and to receive everything: composition, object, form, idea, picture.⁴⁵

Richter’s almost Zen-like approach to painting, characterized by openness, receptivity of Nature, freedom from prejudice or assumption, impacted my studio practice. Although I do not share his materialist philosophical outlook, I nonetheless appreciate his clear-eyed objectivity and critical distance from art that is overrun by theory and “themes.” I find this approach a refreshing counterpoint to much of my background and helpful in clarifying my own approach to art-making. Regarding compositional choices, I allow that which has been received or which has been already a part of my life through experience to dictate the parameters of the elements of a given work: order, color, size, arrangement, proportion, logic and selection of all particular contributing factors. Naturally this does not exclude chance or other aleatory aspects of the composition, since the composition of my paintings are not so much reconstructions of Nature but are Nature-as-received in its particular essence.

The material choices for my work relate to my experimental approach to studio practice. This approach is basically open-ended and assumes an attitude of trial-and-error and of making one’s way through the dark woods. Yet it takes a Leibnitzian attitude of optimism and of trust of

⁴⁵ Gerhard Richter, The Daily Practice of Painting, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 128.

the material elements that are available for a given work. Here the studio is subdivided into three main conceptual areas: Research-and-development, contemplation and production. Taking a multi-media approach to materials, I will use oils, acrylics, photochemical solutions and emulsions, lacquer, house paint, ink, printing techniques, collage, oil stick, gesso, glues, chalk, dust, dirt, and anything else I can get my hands on. The application of materials ranges from Old Master-ish indirect applications of paint, to watercolor washes, to digital prints overlaid with swaths of impastos, and everything in between. I will often integrate materials within the same painting, highlighting hybridity. For example, in a painting completed this past summer, I lifted a classical female figure from a poster I observed in Rome and painted her according to the techniques of Titian, as an homage to his working methods. I juxtaposed that image with washes of photochemical emulsions as part of the underpainting. Since these elements are photo-sensitive, they will gradually develop and darken. This feature relates to my interest in being in a place in space through the passage of time. I added a cartoon-like Care Bear figure rendered in a flat manner of illustration. This allows the painting to transform into a conversation between the different elements and diverse materials. The material incarnates the formal and spiritual. The impulse to create is given plastic form according to the composition of the given elements. The manner of proceeding thus takes a certain shape as a work of art develops and passes through many and various permutations. There is a type of adequacy that is maintained between the disparate parts that compose the final rendition of the work of art.

More recently my choice of composition and materials has focused on a minimalist and essentialist approach: I used small-sized 12" x 12" panels to paint "portraits" based on various responses to personal experiences, mostly using a combination of photo-sensitized areas along with oil paint made from hand-mixing earth pigments. This combination of ancient, almost

primitive mixing techniques juxtaposed with an outdated photogram method from the 19th Century bespeaks of my interest in the development of art through history and the freedom to use any and every method developed through history to give voice to my concerns. Likewise, I have utilized digital print technology to print canvases with photographic imagery and to which I apply paint in a random way. This marriage of contemporary technology that transforms an image into information and then back to an image with aleatory practices that invokes the alchemical possibilities of creating something new from what is preexisting appeals to my hybrid identity and exploratory impulses.

My use of materials in the studio follows a phenomenological approach, that is, an intense focus on of the phenomena that are either created by, associated with or related to a given material. In my attempts to get to the thing itself, the *whatness* or *quiddity* of the material used in a given work influences the nature of the work itself. Yet, moving in an opposite trajectory, my studio practice involves processes of reproducibility, that is, endless remaking of an image according to different methods, materials and contexts, giving them different meanings. For example, I once drew a copy of a lithograph of a female bust, then reproduced it using Van Dyke photosensitive chemicals on paper using a Mylar template, then photographed the image, followed by producing another image using photochemical emulsions on paper. This process of making a copy of a copy of a copy, etc, interrogates the essence of an object while being unable to attain the “real” image. This process, either through random interventions and due to the nature of the materials used, creates permutations in the object that can lead to a degraded image or subtle changes from the “original.” This too is an epitaph. Although this process can be used for many different types of artistic practices, I have used it mainly in the realm of painting, even

though I define painting rather broadly. This engagement in both materials as well as compositional issues led to this discovery of the paradox of essence and change in a given image.

Experimentation: Sigmar Polke's Alchemy

I have found through my research that the work of Sigmar Polke has greatly influenced my studio work, especially in the form of experimentation with new and different techniques and materials. His oeuvre also points to a marriage between conceptual clarity in thinking out philosophically what he wants to say and appropriating the proper techniques for expression.

The framework of my studio practice in this regard consists of the following points: One of the issues that came into focus was that my work was, on some level, a critique of the idea of inevitability and any form of determinism. This obviously put me in tension with some of Hegel's ideas concerning art and culture, yet I felt I was in harmony with deeper tendencies within Hegel's thought which affirms that human endeavor is subject to dilution and finitude over time. The issue of resisting seeming historical inevitability relates to my interest in not only bridging the gap between the spiritual and the artistic in my personal life, but also with investigating the relationship between religion/spirituality and contemporary art, in particular focusing on the reasons for the misunderstandings and schism that often characterizes the stance each has toward the other.

It is the seeming impossibility of making a substantial connection between religion and contemporary art that runs through much of my work. It forms an underlying current of a sense of loss. Absence, deletion, erasure, impermanence, and superscription all bleed through my work on some level or another. I attribute some of this to my pastoral work and life in general:

My life and my art are inseparable, and the one and the other are constantly in dialogue where the need to process experience is filtered through both enterprises and leaves its mark and its erasures on each. Yet I also regularly experience the tension and indeed the chasm between religion and contemporary art. Instead of fleeing this situation I see that my art is the way to grapple with the question of this gap. In this regard I find affinity with Francis Picabia's work, especially his *Transparencies*. The motivations of this phase of Picabia's work has been the subject of much discussion, but there is a general consensus that they are a reaction to and critique of the moralizing religion and rationalizing judgments that led to World War I.⁴⁶ The art critic and friend of Picabia, Alain Jouffroy, notes that the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche influenced Picabia in developing a visual language that would embody this critique in the wake of the devastation of the Great War:

Nietzsche wrote: "Contradictory man, if such a concept is allowed, would be the man who most powerfully represented the contradictory character of existence, as the glory and justification thereof." Here, surely, he can be seen as the elder brother of Picabia who, in the late 1920s, invented his "*Transparencies*," paintings in which he juxtaposed the religious and mythological figures used by Western painters in every period (flowers, fruits and women's faces). Each "*Transparency*" was more contradictory than the last, as if he set out to attack the kernel of Judeo-Christian civilization, starting with Christianity.⁴⁷

Was it possible Picabia was attempting to express the truth of the final breakdown of a rickety morality and religious practice that was used to justify a horrible war? Was this Picabia's statement of the irreconcilable dilemma of a society that was rent asunder by the hypocrisies of justification for violence using religion and morality as a cover? Whatever his motivations, Picabia was expressing something of the anger and frustration of the time. Jouffroy comments:

The "*Transparencies*" series was begun in 1927, after a trip to Catalonia during which he saw medieval paintings that abounded with seraphim and angels. In the first paintings he worked on after his return, he reprised their themes, superimposing them without any religious logic. The

⁴⁶ George Baker, *The Artwork Caught by the Tail: Francis Picabia and Dada in Paris*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 233-239.

⁴⁷ Alain Jouffroy, *Picabia*, (New York: Assouline, 2002), 15.

subject here is indeed Christianity, the Christianity that Nietzsche fought violently to the bitter end, accusing it of being the true source of nihilism and decadence.⁴⁸

A compelling piece from 1930, entitled *Salome* exhibits this strategy. Picabia found a visual vocabulary in which to express the existential contradictions he witnessed in modern religion and in its decline. Ironically the breakdown of religion and its formative purpose in society, which included its gradual separation from a vital engagement with art, was expressed in the traditional mode of painting. Picabia's biting attack is not lost on the viewer, yet the paradox cannot be denied either: The loss of the capacity to communicate meaning by religion and morality is made evident through its separation from art, yet it is art (specifically painting) that is able to express this truth of religion, even though this contradicts earlier strategies for which religion utilized art. The contradictions of the "Transparencies" now manifest the truth of religion. Being an artist born in the wake of Picabia's "Transparencies" and the situation to which he was responding, I stand in a space in which the contradictions between art and religion are not only still present, but also where there is now a gaping abyss between the two enterprises. Being an artist who is also within the realm of religion fills the creative process with tensions and seemingly irreconcilable differences. Yet the paradox continues: In the midst of separation, art and religion continue to borrow, steal and use elements from the activities of the other. I find myself in the middle of these realities. The legacy of Picabia leaves unanswered questions that I feel that I have already been addressing in my own way.

The pre-investigation into the issues relating to hybridity, transfiguration and place-in-space as found in Picabia led to my study of Sigmar Polke. The notion of transubstantiation permeates my work. The transformation of one element into another has been the subject of study for centuries by philosophers, scientists and artists, yet as this endeavor was eclipsed with

⁴⁸ Ibid., 16.

the rise of modern science its residue as a gestural investigation into the possibilities of recombination of disparate elements that transfigures into a new entity was left to art. My art is located in this lineage along with numerous contemporary artists. The work of Sigmar Polke is much like mine, as he engages in a modern version of the ancient craft of alchemy, albeit with contemporary concerns at heart. One commentator notes this about Polke and his work:

From a contemporary point of view, we understand that everything in Nature is a struggle between a dissipative dynamic, which brings about disorder, and the formalizations that are inevitably generated here and there and increase the degree of organization, although the totality can never improve its overall efficiency. Human activities interlink with the Natural and in fact are nothing more than a conscious prolongation of it, and hence the mental and material formalizations that civilizations build up arise in the same way - as can be seen, for example, in the similarity of the formulas that define entropy in the physical world and in the realm of information. In this context, the artist formalizes on the basis of the unformed or of prior formalizations, whether natural or human, by the mere fact of doing so...The artist's poetics consists in this, and in that poetics are found the transcendent values that make up his or her inner life...artists immerse themselves in the global landscape that is configured by a cosmic aspect, one that is superimposed on those that he or she possesses as a human being, since as a poetic inducer of transformations, the artist becomes materially and spiritually one with the cosmic whole, and this has evident alchemical resonances. In fact, the alchemists' goal was precisely the fullness of knowledge through oneness with the cosmos, and hence the separation between science, art and behavior in their task was thin and diffuse.⁴⁹

Polke's alchemical experiments provided the groundwork for further explorations into the possibilities of painting, with mastery in the use of photography, chemical emulsions, painting, drawing and writing, often in the same piece. His work is able to focus his own personal energy and gesture in such a way that the fruitfulness of his creativity is never exhausted, and he is able to incorporate his knowledge and experience of the cosmos (Nature) in all its disparate parts and invest them with a conceptual direction. He was always experimenting with new techniques, methods, materials and media in order to write a new kind of poetry, a cosmic poetry of experience.

⁴⁹ Gloria Moure, Sigmar Polke: Painting, Photographs and Films, (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa 20_21 Collection, 2005), 63-64.

My art has been influenced by Polke on a number of levels. His use of unusual materials as artistic media compels me toward integration of whatever media is necessary to create a compelling piece. One example of this in Polke's oeuvre is *Hope is: Wanting to Pull Clouds* from 1992. This painting could be viewed as a metaphor for any number of things: hope, transitoriness, the ephemeral. It makes other important statements that overlap with my work: His use of material becomes the meaning of the painting. He works the dynamics of the materials into a "corporeal presence"⁵⁰ in such a way that both the time used to produce the work and to digest the work allow it to take on a life of its own. This notion of an art work being a synthesis of different elements which combine to become a "living thing" that enters the world is a manifestation of incarnation, of the Other, and of Mystery entering into one's experience and abiding there. If openness to plenitude and the struggle to digest it are proper to Polke's work, then I find common cause with his project.

One of Polke's other works that greatly influenced me was *Seeing Rays* (2006) which, as a late work, brings to culmination his fascination with cosmic knowledge and use of unorthodox materials in painting:

The imagery in the new paintings constitutes a sort of summa of Polke's work, reprising the casual paint pours and loose, sketchy brushwork; figures blown up from cartoons and photographs; collaged, printed fabrics that burlesque geometric abstraction or portray cartoon ghosts; and engravings from the 17th through 19th centuries. In the aggregate, they explore an uneasy space shaped by optical illusion and multiple viewpoints, and furnished with a supernatural congregation of angels, devils (and devil cats), imps and ectoplasm. A number of paintings, collectively titled "Seeing Rays," draw from a 17th-century engraving by the scholar and cleric Johann Zahn that depicts two gentlemen observing the sky from different vantage points. Lines emanating from their eyes fan out into the heavens—or draw them back into each eye as a vanishing point...At the same time, Polke geekily enjoys the technology of old-fashioned magic, and his paintings celebrate its rickety evocations of the supernatural. But more than a magician, he is what in earlier times might have been called a mage, a figure who presides over magic both as a worldly enterprise and as a doorway to suppressed or otherwise unavailable alternate realities. The mage is familiar with the complex physical operations of the perceived world but is wise enough to acknowledge the extent of what he doesn't know and can't explain...I never get the sense that Polke is cynical about either his source material or the practice of painting. He is a great, loose draftsman, but a greater collagist, less interested in the body than in the machines that reproduce

⁵⁰ Ibid., 265.

its image, and apt to disappear into his materials and processes. If Picabia is Polke's great model, Polke surpasses him as a painter. He is a postmodernist, to be sure, but he is also, with his sustained belief in the regenerative powers of painting, a post-Dadaist. There are many ghosts in the machine of his art, and they can manifest themselves most unexpectedly.⁵¹

Polke-the-mage sounds esoteric and potentially associates him with the lower rungs of intellectual life, but the role of the mage is actually central to human civilization. To be a mediator and a bridge between this universe and all other possible universes, to enable communication to take place between these realms, and to incorporate all consequent knowledge in the process is the role of the mage, and indeed of the artist. A constant searching, a pursuit for the elusive, and of what is known and what is not known drives the artist to create using any medium, and this ends up being an open-ended system.

My experimental research and studio work clarified my hybrid identity as artist and a priest, standing in the breach between two areas of human endeavor, art and religion, whose relationship is oftentimes uneasy, acrimonious and difficult. The two are what I am, and I feel that this tension is not something that I necessarily need to resolve or even takes sides. In fact it is within the unresolved tension that I find the most engaging and fruitful creativity, as challenging as it is. I find the seeming impossibility of being both at the same time to many people and to the culture to be intriguing. There are numerous occasions where people – family, friends, associates – have declared “You can’t possibly be a priest and an artist,” or, “What you are doing is impossible.” I find such statements to be indicative of something that needs to be explored artistically. I find it humorous doing something supposedly impossible. My studio practice therefore is not only a response to a particular pursuit in the Polke-ian sense, but it is an actualized critique of both religious and artistic practice, which places me in line with Picabia’s

⁵¹ Stephen Westfall, “Sigmar Polke,” in *Art in America*, Vol. 97, No. 9, September, 2009.

Transparencies. My continuing research and studio practice are manifestations of my understanding of how each can be enriched in light of these insights.

Experimentation and Francesca Woodman: Intuitions and “Complete Speech”

The Italians have a common phrase to express the incompleteness of life: “*Già ma non ancora*,” the “already but not yet” of life, which means that one has achieved something in life but there is still yet more to be done. It can refer to the graduate or even the retiree, where life has ended, but it still goes on. My own artistic practice and reading Arthur Danto that phrase came to mind.⁵² It expresses the truth about art after the end of art: It has arrived, but its completion is found in its own self-understanding, which never quite ends. The philosopher and art critic Jacques Rancière has a related but different interpretation of Hegel’s theory of art.⁵³ For him Hegel is really talking about the fact that the essential nature of art is always simultaneously in the past and in the future. Attempts to make it present through programs of purity are not only bound to failure, but they also release fugitive elements that escape and can be perceived but never contained. Rancière theorizes that this is what happened to art through the 19th and 20th Centuries: Modernist art tried to realize “pure” art, but in doing so it not only witnessed its own failure it brought about the end of art itself, and in the process released destabilizing forces that have caused both reconfigurations of social relations as well as the beginning of a new stage of formations of discourses of knowledge within art that has now become philosophical discourse. It is as if a nuclear fission took place and all sorts of gamma rays and radioactive chain reactions were released within the processes of art. As Rancière relates:

⁵² Arthur Danto, After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 35.

⁵³ Hegel, 13.

The surface is not wordless, is not without 'interpretations' that pictorialize it. In a way, this was already the lesson of Hegel and the meaning of the 'end of art.' When the surface is no longer split in two, when it is nothing more than a site for the projections of the pigments, Hegel taught, there is no longer any art. Today, this thesis is commonly interpreted in a nihilistic sense. In advance, Hegel supposedly condemned art for art's sake to the fate of 'anything goes' or showed that now, rather than works of art, there are 'only interpretations'. The thesis seems to me to require a different reading. It is indeed true that Hegel personally turned the page on art, put art on his page - that of the book which tells the past the mode of its presence. But that does not mean that he turned the page for us in advance. Instead he alerted us to this: the present of art is always in two places at once. He tells us in sum that art is alive as long as it is outside itself, as long as it does something different from itself, as long as it moves on a stage of visibility which is always a stage of defiguration. What he discourages in advance is not art, but the dream of its purity. It is the modernity that claims to vouchsafe each art its autonomy and painting its peculiar surface. Here indeed is something to fuel resentment against philosophers who 'talk too much.'⁵⁴

Rancière also posits a tripartite division in art: The "ethical regime of art" corresponds to the age of craftsmanship where artistic images are understood and valued according to their utility to society; the "representational regime of art" which corresponds to the creation of hierarchies among the arts and division of labor. Here art rises above craft-making and stands alone. Art has its own sphere of competency and gains a mode of independence. This corresponds to the Vasarian narrative and the beginning of the bourgeoisie age of the artist who would be rated as cultural hero. Finally there is the "esthetic regime of art" which corresponds to Rancière's theory of modernism. Here hierarchies begin to break down within art and the divisions of labor begin to dissolve. A utopian oscillation of the role of the artist begins to take off, bouncing between being an anonymous creator and worker on the one hand, and no longer being restricted to any particular content or method of working. As art moves into its esthetic phase, not only do artistic hierarchies begin to break down, but through the work of the artist real political hierarchies begin to break down and new forms of socialization begin to take form. Egalitarianism in art creates conditions for egalitarian politics and societies to take root. Yet this

⁵⁴ Jacques Rancière, The Future of the Image, (London: Verso, 2007), 89.

can only be realized through the artist who achieves a modicum of self-knowledge or whose art-making partakes in the post-historical moment of art having arrived at its point of culmination.⁵⁵

As I reflected on both Danto and Rancière I recalled my visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York during my studies. There was a small exhibition of contemporary artists who focused on video and photography, and I came upon a large photographic collage by Francesca Woodman entitled *Blueprint for a Temple* (also known as *Temple Project*) (1980). Here, I thought, is an artist I really connect with and who was pursuing the questions I am pursuing in my own art. I decided to read about her and research into her life and art-making. Francesca Woodman (1958-1981) was a young artist and photographer who often used herself as the subject of her compositions, posing in the nude in decrepit buildings or outdoor settings. The blurring of the image of the body, use of Symbolist imagery and the fleeting perceptions surrounding her body were common themes in her work.⁵⁶ Her work immediately intrigued me: “Her art is inward looking, experimental and incomplete.”⁵⁷ Yet when I discovered that she had committed suicide on January 19, 1981, it not so much made me see her work in a new light, or as a tragic and young Jim Morrison-type heroine perpetually embalmed in nostalgia. Instead it made me think about the ends of lives and of things, and of the end of art. There is an end but art goes on, often just beyond one’s grasp, where it is outside of itself, but this makes it the art that it is. Keller remarks: “History is by necessity written backward; its narrative takes shape with an ending already firmly in place. In the tragic recasting of Woodman’s life the fruits of youthful play have been at times transformed unhelpfully, into something far more belabored and

⁵⁵ Ben Davis, “Rancière for Dummies,” in *Artnet Magazine*, (<http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/books/davis/davis8-17-06.asp>, 2006), 1-6.

⁵⁶ Corey Keller, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman,” in *Francesca Woodman*, ed. Corey Keller, (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2011), 169-171.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

weighty.”⁵⁸ The life-size caryatids caught my attention while reflecting on this: The caryatid is a sculpted female figure used as an architectural support in place of columns in ancient Greek temples, but they also have appeared as architectural supports throughout history up to the present. The caryatid supports the weight of the temple while also displaying femininity in a type of suspended dance. The *Blueprint for a Temple* presents a paradox: The diazotype image is fragile and the collage of 30 or so images appear to be a transitional study of the most solid of architectural symbols, the Temple. A conservation nightmare for the Museum conservators,⁵⁹ the *Blueprint for a Temple* caryatids carry weight: the burden that Woodman was feeling in her life and practice? Yet the caryatids are reaching upwards and outwards, as if to break out beyond the confines of the superstructure that is imposed on them, and they cover their faces not to hide their identity but as if to say that they know something you do not yet know. It is as if Woodman reached a point of self-knowledge, where she transitioned from autobiographical and symbolic images to the incorporation of herself into the structure of art itself. From this perspective, this work then highlights an aspect of her suicide that gets to the heart of the matter:

Peggy Phelan, whose 2002 article on Woodman baldly asserts that the suicide must be placed at the center of her practice, not as an afterthought. Phelan provocatively asks, “What might we gain if we considered it [Woodman’s suicide], however tentatively, as a kind of an achievement, even, as I will suggest shortly, as a kind of gift?” She writes that Woodman’s death was perhaps “the central achievement” of her life and work; thus, in staging and controlling the circumstances of her death, “Woodman found in her art a type of theater of the oscillating tension between the desire to live and the desire to die. Perhaps on January 19, 1981, she found a composition that suited her, and she developed it into an act of suicide. I do not know.”⁶⁰

This is indeed a controversial proposal, but I believe that Phelan is onto something. Her suicide very well may have been where she discovered “complete speech.” Woodman was on a pathway

⁵⁸ Ibid., 171.

⁵⁹ Nora Kennedy, “Revealing Francesca Woodman’s *Temple Project*,” in *The Book and Paper Group Annual 21* (2002) 13, (Miami, FL: AIC 30th Annual Meeting, June 6-11, 2001), 1-2.

⁶⁰ Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Blurs: Toward a Provisional Historiography of Francesca Woodman,” in *Francesca Woodman*, ed. Corey Keller, (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2011), 195.

to discovery and knowledge even as she manifested great ability from the beginning of her practice. Faced with the tension of building the roof of the temple of her art first, she had to make herself the living column to bear its weight - a weight to may have been too heavy to bear. Nevertheless she went ahead with the composition, both in *Blueprint for a Temple* and in the tension between her life and death.

Ranci re's reading of Hegel's end of art thesis differs from Danto's in that he sees art as not so much reaching a terminus in its own narrative but rather that what makes art art is always in the past and tending toward dissembling in the future. Attempts to make it "present" through various means, that is "programs of purity," the power of finance capital, resuscitating the past, and suppression of freedom to name a few, are filled with inherent dangers and are bound to failure. These attempts also release fugitive elements which are dangerously powerful and can appear out of nowhere. The artist must take care to notice these when they make their appearance. In my own life and practice I have been more familiar with the use and abuse of Sacred Art in Christianity and the attempts to fossilize artistic tropes, which reduce Sacred Art to kitsch and sentimental derivatives devoid of life. That which once animated the sacred in art has fled and has popped up in other areas, for example in the work of Woodman, where her humanity in all its fragility and possibilities was given over to the movement of self-enfranchisement in art after the end of art: Self-enfranchisement of her feminine nature, of her art and of her self-understanding of it all. Fugitiveness, elusiveness, wonder, incompleteness and mystery all make their appearances in her work. She builds a different kind of edifice than that constructed by Hegel as interpreted by Danto. For Danto the great Temple of art is complete and has been annexed by the Alexandrian Library of Philosophy. The artist's task is now to roam the galleries, the open stacks and the secret archives and create from research and experimentation.

For Rancière and Woodman art is also a Temple, but it is the privileged place of seeking the difference between identity and similarity. It is the locus of seeking survival in a state of process. It is all ruins that are also a construction site. It is monumental and vulnerable. It is a gathering place for forming new forms of sociality where “complete speech” can take place. It is an epitaph.

Yet for them art is never quite “there.” For Woodman, her suicide may have indicated that the price to pay in this effort was high indeed. To truly be an artist as Woodman was has inherent risks and dangers, and indeed can induce both wonder and horror. Woodman’s art forces me on the pathway of negotiating the treacherous territory of art-making, which has a cost but is worth it. I think the reason that I had such a visceral reaction to Woodman’s work was that it spoke to my drive to survive: For me being an artist is about survival. It is about what lasts after everything is exposed to the elements. I saw that I too am both fragile and solid. I have realized more clearly that in my own practice a greater focus and intentionality in locating where the line is between my life and my art is necessary, and that in order to survive and withstand all forces I must constantly push back-and-forth across and through that line. Francesca Woodman shows me that being artist means one must be willing to ask the question of how and where one’s self-understanding leads to one’s participation in the project of the philosophical self-understanding of art. Being an artist after the end of art means doing nothing less than this, which means that the personal stakes have never been higher. My studio practice thus activates this situation in an through research and development, experimental use of materials and maintaining open systems of processing knowledge.

Thus the search for identity and engagement in the discourse of the self-understanding of art through constant experimentation in the post-historical moment of art is a central component

of my practice. An important lineament for my art is experiment, process, failure, acquisition of knowledge and skill. That is to say, I realize that for my art to be art I must enter into self-knowledge, here understood as understanding that I am in the moment after the end of art, and as such my art-making must partake in the on-going philosophical investigation into what art is. My art can involve the excavations of the past and appropriation of the tropes and craft of earlier periods, but only in the form of mentioning them as they refer to the whole. This is a new era, where the philosophical discourse on what art is has just begun. The narrative of art is over and has been surpassed. That art has reached its end does not necessarily mean that every single artist has or will achieve self-knowledge. That is for the artist to discover and find out on his/her own, but the means and ends are now here because the historical moment has finally arrived.

Portraiture: Review of Future Directions of Studio Work

In mid-February, 2012, I found my friend and fellow priest, Fr. Gomes, in his room on the floor, almost dead. He had had a heart attack the night before, and when he didn't show up for the 8:30 am Mass I went to look for him. I knocked on the door of his apartment, heard nothing at first, knocked again, and heard a shuffling sound and muttering. He was crying out my name. I went in and saw him lying prostrate on the floor, barely breathing. He was still alive when the ambulance brought him to the hospital, but he only survived two weeks. On the last day he was conscious, he scribbled a note on a piece of paper and gave it to the nurse to give to me. It was indecipherable, except for the squiggly letters that spelled out "Request" in his arthritic hand. The mystery of his message remains with me to this day. It has become one of many epitaphs - silent and pregnant with meaning.

This incident led to a deeper reflection on how those objects that enter into my life are framed as portraits of the person from whom I receive them. As I have reviewed my past and

present activities in my studio practice, I will now turn to review future directions in my studio work. One of the central organizing principles of the current trajectory of my work as I look into the future is the portrait, broadly conceived. The portrait also includes the self-portrait, to the extent that oftentimes the two are indistinguishable within the same work. The portrait/self-portrait is one way in which my hybrid identity and the experimental-aleatory nature of my work coalesce into a coherent whole. My hybridity as priest-artist/artist-priest gives rise to a form of art that is a type of self-portraiture, but is also somehow different: Self-portraiture becomes self-as-processed-experience. This final section will look at the portraiture work of Gerhard Richter as a starting point for continuing dialogue on this direction in my studio practice, accompanied with reflections on how my current and future work in portraiture/self-portraiture express my identity.

In the case of Gerhard Richter I see an artist who reached a point of crisis in his practice and found his way forward: “In his view, the interior life of the sitter – their thoughts, feelings, personality and experiences – are hidden, inaccessible and beyond representation, even if the sitter is known to the artist. For this reason a photograph, as a document of an individual’s external appearance, is sufficient for the purpose of making a portrait.”⁶¹ For Richter, painting portraits from photographs was a discovery that allowed him to pass through a crisis in painting that he had experienced: The problem for him was that painting a representation from nature or the observed object ended up being more about art and the requirements of art to approximate nature rather than the thing itself.⁶² His discovery of the possibilities of photography as a point of departure paradoxically permitted him to invest himself in art from that point onwards:

⁶¹ Paul Moorehouse, Gerhard Richter Portraits Painting Appearances, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 19.

⁶² Ibid.

“Paradoxically, its (photography’s) very banality as an image is persuasive about its veracity: frequently, reality is unremarkable.”⁶³ In my current practice I have found photographs to be an important key to my description of experience. Their objectivity, *thusness* and frequent randomness propose a formidable counterpoint to my subjective experiences and paradoxically assist in processing these lived experiences through creative expression.

In my current practice of painting I have reduced the elements of painting from the photograph to their essentials. I work on a small scale for this body of work, opting for intimacy and inviting the viewer to stand close to the work. Likewise, I include only one object in the painting: an epitaph that references an experience or a story. The palette remains minimal: The use of hand-ground Black Roman Earth pigment with linseed oil and a dash of dammar is all that is needed for application with layers of glazes that are successively wiped down, allowed to dry and glazed over. The composition likewise flows from the random nature of the photograph, simultaneously revealing and concealing, yet the palette is based on the thing in itself. This body of work also contains several iterations of the the word “Request” without explanation. I allow the word to speak for itself. This series of work alternates the “Request” pieces with the small panels of objects taken from photographs, as if my memories constantly being interrupted by this word, even though this interruption is not intrusive but rather is more like an on-going scribal notation that reiterates an impression.

This dualistic tension between the photograph and my subjectivity provide a fruitful exchange for creativity. Yet in my sourcing of photography I define portraiture in the broadest and often non-literal way as possible: A scrap of paper with Fr. Gomes’ crippled handwriting, a random glance in a parking lot, or a small trinket found in the home of a deceased parishioner.

⁶³ Ibid., 43-44.

Photography leaves the impression of memory to become a portrait of a person, a life or a mood. My painted portraits based on photographs point to the epitaph, which exists somewhere between the neurons and the canvas. While Richter is more interested in utilizing random photographs to serve as a foil to the distortions and subjectivity of the representational tradition within painting, I appropriate photographs to put myself and the viewer in unmediated contact with the memory and the mystery of the untold, the forgotten, and the overlooked within a world awash with objects and images.

Conclusion

A week before I returned to Philadelphia last summer, an elderly woman in my parish suddenly died. The day after her death, I received a phone call regarding her. Expecting the caller to be a family member, I was surprised when there was a lawyer speaking to me on the other end of the call: The woman had disinherited her only child, a daughter, and had placed me in her will as the inheritor of her estate. Suffice it to say, I was taken aback and felt unease at the ethical issues that this situation raised. Nevertheless, I decided to go to her home, see what was there and then put everything up for auction and give the proceeds to the poor. The day I went over to her house I was filled with trepidation: What would I find in her home? Would it be a hoarder's cave, or contain a nasty surprise? As I turned the key and opened the door, my worries dissolved as I entered a rather plain, ordinary home with modest furnishings. She had left behind mostly clothing, boxes of quilts and cheap jewelry. There was a noticeable absence: There were no photographs at all: no family, friends or any record of her life. In fact, there was no indication of any relationship to anyone. Except this: a small, faded photograph dated 1966 of a woman dressed as a male clown. On the back were written the words "Grama Barton." Along with that was a small, blue-plated notebook with a tiny golf pencil attached. It was a notebook from a

New Year's Day Sorority Prom from 1928 in Palm Springs, CA. I was intrigued, and the artist in me took over. I knew what I needed to do. These two discrete relics were all that I took home that day, leaving the rest of the estate to the auction. These items form the basis of my current thesis show, in which I transmit their epitaph through painting.

The hybrid nature of being a priest-artist/artist-priest will remain something that cannot and should not be resolved. Looking forward, after I complete this current series of Epitaphs, I will turn my attention to subjects that I want to address: The current hypocrisy in the Church's cover-up of abuse, the breakdown and untethered condition of iconic imagery within the Sacred Arts as symbolic of the repressed psycho-sexual energies within Christianity in the world today. Using both small-format pieces and large-format pieces in alternation, I will attempt to synthesize my experimental processes in such a way as to address these issues in visual language. I believe my voice has a unique perspective in regard to addressing these issues, and I intend to speak to these issues with my creative powers.

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Todd Molinari
Everything is an Epitaph

University of the Arts

MFA Thesis Show
December 2013

Summary of MFA Thesis Paper, “Everything is an Epitaph”

- This thesis will focus on the following ideas: Duality: I am a priest and an artist, and my studio practice is inextricably bound up with this state of affairs and manifests it through creative flows of energy. I reflect on how Wendy White, Marisa Merz, Georges Perec, the role of the *flâneur*, studies in perception and “Provisional Painting” have impacted my practice. Experimentation: The alchemical transformation of matter and spirit is an aspect of my practice that has led into many different directions. I look to Sigmar Polke and Francesca Woodman as beacons. The challenge in my practice is to translate research and studio-as-laboratory into finished work that expresses my ideas. As will be seen in the unfolding of the thesis, experimentation has become a type of artistic practice all its own. Portraiture: This aspect of my art takes portraiture as the starting point for explorations into perception and the nature of how people, places and things are self-presented, perceived and related, from which my current and future practice is flowing. Taking the portraiture of Gerhard Richter as a starting point, this concept understands portraiture in the broadest possible sense, defining the term as a form of perception. This interests me because so much of my dualistic life is bound up with people, spaces and presentations that appear one way but actually are something entirely different. Portraiture is a critical enterprise for me that inquires into the nature of what is being presented and asks if that is all there is, or is there something else to it? These three identifiers - duality, experimentation and portraiture form the basis of my practice and of this thesis. These three are unified as aspects of my art as Epitaph: Duality is inscribed into my identity and forms it, yet it continues to undergo a process of transformation. It is the starting point for my art-making as “epitaphical”. Experimentation is an umbrella for the term of how the recognition of the epitaphical nature of experience is processed. Portraiture is one current manifestation of this process, defined in the broadest possible way. All the aforementioned is proposed within an institutional critique of what I observe in the Church and the world, and it offers a unique perspective as artist-priest.

Summary of my MFA Thesis Show: Everything is an Epitaph

By invoking the overlooked, the remainder, the lost and the found within my day-to-day life as a priest, I have created a body of work that manifests my hybrid identity as priest-artist as well as my restless transmutational experimentations. I desire the viewer to enter into a contemplative posture and experience the poetics of my place in space.

Unlike Richter, I am less interested in referencing the random photograph as a foil to the artifice of the representational tradition within painting as I am in pointing to a personal story that has been forgotten, to a memory that has no home, and to a way of perceiving that is often ignored within a world awash with images. The focus of this body of work is to invite the viewer to see what is inscribed in perception through unmediated experience, motivated by painting based on photographs.

Of the five planned paintings, four are complete and one is in progress. Digital images of these paintings are included in the following slides.



- Todd Molinari, *Grama Barton*, 20" x 20", oil and digital print on canvas, 2013



-

Todd Molinari, *Request III*, 12" x 12", oil and pigment on panel, 2013



- Todd Molinari, *Epitaph (Calix)*, 12" x 12", oil and photochemical emulsions on panel, 2013



- Todd Molinari, *Request IV*, 12" x 12", oil and photochemical emulsions on panel, 2013



- Todd Molinari, *Epitaph (1928)*, 12" x 12", oil and photochemical emulsions on panel, 2013

Layout of the Exhibition:

In the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, when you enter the gallery:

1. I have this wall to the left of viewer as he/she enters the main area:



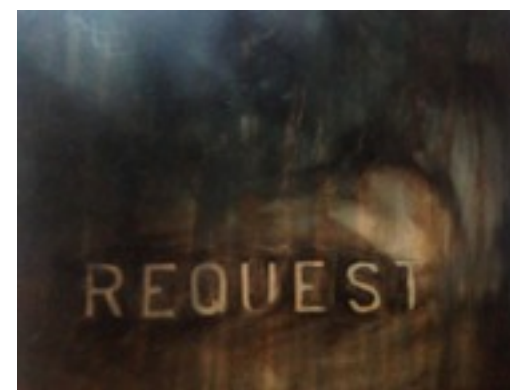
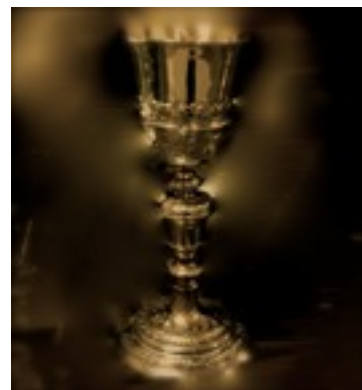
- On this wall (to the left of the corner) would hang:



2. I have this long wall to the right:



- On this wall would hang, with equidistant spacing between each piece from the corner and the end of my designated space:



Materials Needed:

Hammer, nails, tacks, ladder

Installation dates:

I am flying in on Monday, December 2nd, and I will install the paintings that evening and on Tuesday, December 3rd throughout the day. I am planning on shipping out the paintings and materials by mid-November.

Postcard:

I have received approval from Erin for my postcard. The design was emailed to Erin last week in a separate Keynote/PDF file.

Questions:

I have one of the paintings in storage on the 9th floor in the storage room. I will need the key to access that room in order to retrieve that painting. I also have other paintings in storage there that I will remove at the time and plan on shipping home. Will it be possible to retrieve that key on the morning of December 3rd?

Do I need to create my own placards for the show?

Thank you.

Image List
(All works by Todd Molinari)

Gramma Barton

Oil and digital print on canvas

20" x 20"

2013

Request III

Oil and photochemical emulsions on panel

12" x 12"

2013

Epitaph (Calix)

Oil and photochemical emulsions on panel

12" x 12"

2013

Request IV

Oil and photochemical emulsions on panel

12" x 12"

2013

Epitaph (1928)

Oil and photochemical emulsions on panel

12" x 12"

2013

Request V (Request Redivivus)

Oil on panel

12" x 12"

2013

Request VI

Oil on panel

17" x 10"

2013