

[Note: I will show slides of accompanying images during my presentation. An updated version of this paper, which will include illustrations, will be made available, upon request, following the conference.]

The Anointing of Christ: A Commission in Image and Deed

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Art and life are not one, but they must become united in me—in the unity of my answerability.

Mikhail Bakhtin, “Art and Answerability”

Considered from a broad perspective, the products of artistic creativity may be considered as religious or moral acts precisely because of their consequences in the world. From this point of view, the creative process is also intrinsically religious and moral insofar as it involves actions for which we are responsible and accountable within a given community.

Deborah Haynes, “Toward a Theology of Art”

Introduction

I have a ten-by-fifteen-foot arts and crafts studio, in Oakland, California, that I affectionately refer to as “my glorified closet”. However small, my studio is to me a sanctuary, a refuge, a sacred space set aside for contemplation and art. Although I open my door to the public on a seasonal basis, the tranquility of my studio feels far removed from the commotion of the street. The artwork I make is also “sacred”: for the past seventeen years, I have been producing, almost exclusively, art that is explicitly religious in both content and function — altars, icons, and rosaries.

I came to making devotional and liturgical art by way of the fine arts. In fact, “secular” art, my own as well as others’, led me first to the Catholic faith and later to the study of theology. One of my main quests, spiritually and academically, has been to find a language for articulating religious experience with non-religious art, particularly in a post-church, postmodern context. In my studies, I have sought to illumine the religious dimensions of secular art in popular culture through a secular means, specifically by utilizing technical terms, such as “authoring” and “answering,” from Mikhail Bakhtin’s larger discourse on art, for engaging the potentialities, or “gaps,” in secular cultural products.¹ Characteristic of much of Bakhtin’s thought, “authoring” and “answering” are elusive terms – fluid, layered, and oftentimes overlapping. Alluding to these concepts throughout this paper, I offer this brief introduction to begin.

The meaning of answerability, which evolves with the development of Bakhtin’s thought, refers to both responsibility and addressivity. Particularly in his early work, Bakhtin uses this term to describe moral action—our unique, embodied, and axiological acts or deeds that belong to the ongoing and ethical “event-of-being.” In his later work, Bakhtin’s notion of answering refers more to addressive response than to moral responsibility, or, rather, the addressive response is the ethical act. It is only through addressivity, or dialogue, Bakhtin contends, that we author not only texts but lives: “*To be*” Bakhtin writes, “means *to communicate*.”² For a work to be “answerable,” then, it must be in dialogue, with others, culture, and life.

Although I have been using such concepts as authoring and answering to engage the religious dimensions of secular art, I have not yet brought them to bear on religious images, including my own. Contrary to Bakhtin’s understanding of answerability —

through which, he contends, we mend the split between such disparate worlds as culture and life, theory and practice, ethics and aesthetics — I have, until recently, separated the work that I make inside my studio from the work that I do outside. In this paper, however, I consider a recent commission that I received — to paint an icon of the anointing of Christ, for a local inner-city sanctuary (the exact location to be determined), dedicated to Mary Magdalene — as well as the notion of “religious art” in general, in light of Bakhtin’s thought.

Although this paper deals with imaging the anointing of Christ, it is neither an art historical nor cultural analysis of depictions associated with this act. Rather, in this paper, I propose an image of the anointing, that, similar to the anointing itself, is collaborative, contextual, performative, full of potential, unfinalizable, and, above all, answerable. I begin by discussing the dialogic aspects of art in general, particularly in regard to commissions, and conclude with some final remarks regarding religion, art, and religious art.

The Anointing of Christ

A Commission

To be commissioned to make an artwork is to enter into dialogic relationship. In fact, the dialogue has begun long before the artist accepts or declines the patron’s offer. Even before responding, the artist has begun shaping not only the invitation but the artwork itself, insofar as it exists in the patron’s mind, a process which began earlier, in the patron’s dialogue with other internal or external utterances, including the artist’s anticipated response. That is, according to Bakhtin, all utterances (verbal and non-verbal

units of communication) are authored in response to other utterances, past, present, future. Whether real or imagined, conscious or unconscious, our memory of past utterances as well as our anticipation of future responses give shape to what we perceive and communicate in the present.

Should the artist accept the commission, the patron's vision for the artwork, and the artist's, will commingle and collide, not only with each other but with other visions and voices, past, present, and future; and, for as long as viewers engage the artwork, activating its potentialities, the work itself will be a visible and living record of this multiplicity of visions. Although the artist may scrawl a single signature across a corner of the canvas, no one will be the sole creator. Although the patron may ultimately possess the work of art, no one will have exclusive ownership of it. The artwork, rather, will be "interindividual." According to Bakhtin:

Everything that is said, expressed, is located outside the "soul" of the speaker and does not belong to him. The work cannot be assigned to a single speaker. The author (speaker) has his own inalienable right to the word, but the listener has his rights, and those whose voices are heard before the author comes upon it have their rights (after all, there are no words that belong to no one). The word ... is performed outside the author, and it cannot be introjected into the author.³

All artwork is collaborative; and proprietorship, joint – between artist and patron (should there be one), and other real and imagined, conscious and unconscious, implicit and explicit, past, present, and future interlocutors.

In my attempt to produce an answerable image of the anointing, I seek to exploit the collaborative quality of the work, as it is in dialogue with other sources, including, in this case, Biblical texts and intertexts (and commentary on these Biblical texts), newspaper cuttings, fragments of the Gospel of Mary and other "Gnostic" texts, as well as the architecture of Julia Morgan. Even images I reject, especially images I reject,

however seemingly directly or indirectly related to the anointing of Christ — those depictions of the groveling prostitute, so often identified, by title or attribute, as Mary Magdalene; the aerial-view photograph of Greenland’s crumbling ice cap⁴; an obit to Greg Ballard, Jr., who was shot Saturday night on his way to a high-school spirit-night with his senior class, and died within a half-hour, marking the 107th homicide in Oakland this year; the ominous realities of greenhouse gases, famine, disease, genocide, and war—these images, too, I seek to expose and respond to, intersect, negotiate, invert, subvert, or reclaim.⁵

The particular image I have selected to discuss in this paper — one of several that I am in the process of making, many of which integrate found objects, recycled newspaper, beeswax, and egg tempera — is still in its conceptual phase, as its actual location is yet to be determined. That this piece is still in progress makes it an especially appropriate subject for a paper that integrates ideas by a thinker who emphasizes process over product and who values the unfinished over the complete. Insofar as the piece is site-specific, the setting will determine some details. However, I offer a sketch of this image, based on what information I do have: that the image is to depict the anointing of Christ, in a sanctuary, dedicated to Mary Magdalene, in Oakland, California.

The Anointing in Image

The image is of an ointment jar, surrounding the doorway of a sanctuary: a composite of many images, open to interpretation, and collaborative. However, to my mind, this image is particularly suggestive of the anointing of Jesus, as described in Mark 14:3-9—of the woman who breaks the jar; of the subsequent anointing; and of the

ointment itself: “While he was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head” (Mk. 14:3).

The jar, rendered in human proportions, is, first of all, evocative of a female form. The height, approximately four times the scale of an average adult, challenges, in my mind, metaphors used to describe women as vessels — passive receptacles for human or divine (male) seed, fetuses, or consumer products—to one of creative activity: prophecy, leadership, birthing, and healing. More than referring to she who anoints, however, the doorway recreates her act of anointing as well as the pouring forth of ointment itself, two aspects upon which the remainder of this paper focuses.

The Image as Deed

This image of the anointing is active, and interactive; it works only insofar as an assembly activates it, collectively and individually. That is, the assembly becomes simultaneously anointed and ointment, as they pass through and “pour out” the doorway. The size of the doorway’s opening helps to create this dual perception: it is large enough as to avoid creating a bottleneck that would restrict the movement; but, narrow enough to regulate the flow of motion, so that the assembly, exiting the sanctuary, will resemble the consistency of oil pouring out. An inscriptions surrounding the door — “the Spirit of the Lord is upon You” (Is. 61:1; Lk. 4:18) and “Thy name is perfume poured out” (Song 1:3) — also reinforces the creative activity of anointing, while exploiting additional associations, texts, and intertexts, that open the image to further potentialities.⁶

Although I see this image as an allusion to the anointing in Mark 14:3-9, inscribing above the doorway text from this particular passage would close down the meaning of the image – rendering it too explicit, reducing it to illustration rather than interpretation – rather than open it up. Inscribing the text from Luke would, however, at least to my mind, open the image to additional references, the text in Isaiah, for example, among numerous other, less explicit allusions — emphasizing the prophetic, priestly, and messianic aspects of anointing, a commissioning or “sending forth”: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, / because he has anointed me / to bring good news to the poor. / He has sent me to proclaim release / to the captives / and recovery of the sight to the blind / to let the oppressed go free, / to proclaim the year of the Lord’s / favor” (Lk. 4: 18-19).

Inscribing the text from the Song of Songs, “Thy Name is Perfume Poured Out” (Songs 1:3) would, for me, emphasize the sensuous, richness, bodily-ness, and intimacy of anointing, as well as its enfleshing of Spirit. In uniting the anointing to past interpretations that associate it with the Song of Songs, without binding it to them, my hope is that this image would intersect and subvert conversations that might seem otherwise closed, thereby liberating associations between the beloved in the Song of Songs and the woman anointing Christ from such heavy-handed allegories and analogies that can be traced back as far as Hippolytus’ third-century commentary on the Songs of Songs.⁷

Not only is this image collaborative, it is also contextual.⁸ The context – in this case a doorway, in a sanctuary, in Oakland – also becomes a collaborator. Its “chronotope,” to use Bakhtin’s term for describing the relationship between context and the creation of meaning, is “the threshold”: “one of ‘crisis and break in life’; ... where

decisions are made or indecisiveness becomes crucial, where boldness or the fear of ‘stepping over the threshold’ take on profound meanings.”⁹ Accordingly, this threshold, between sanctuary and inner-city, is critical. People who cross it are sent forth and poured out, to be both anointed and ointment in an urban environment, which, among all its virtues, is riddled with violence.

While this anointing image is bound to a particular time and place, it is also porous, interacting not only with the present but with the past and future. The jar, for me, is located in Bethany as well as Oakland — where women, in all the canonical gospels but Luke’s, anoint Jesus with oil days before his entrance into Jerusalem.¹⁰ This image also anticipates future potential anointings, of women, for example, whose leadership in the church and world has largely been suppressed.¹¹

The sanctuary is also somewhat flexible, insofar as it does not have to be ecclesial, in a formal sense. It can be any space set aside, permanently or temporarily, as sacred, a place of retreat or refuge—for some, perhaps, a home; for me, my studio. In fact, a non-traditional sanctuary would carry with it connotations as subversive and surprising as the anointing in Mark 14 itself, where a woman anoints Jesus’ head in the home of a leper. All of these contextual considerations, considered in light of Bakhtin’s understanding of the “chronotope of the threshold,” are key to my imaging of the anointing. It is a commission to cross the threshold between Bethany and Jerusalem, culture and life, urban sanctuary and city street, as both ointment and anointed, sent forth and poured out.

In addition to being collaborative and contextual, this piece is action-oriented, unfinished, and unfinalizable. It is full of what Bakhtin calls “event potential” – “a live

event, played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses.”¹² Literally, this piece is a “live event”: liturgical rather than architectural, performative rather than informative. The “live event,” for the most part, happens in the images openings. This jar remains ajar¹³ not only by virtue of it being an act rather than object, in conversation with other voices and other visions, as well as with the context, but through the activity that takes place in its silences and spaces, gaps and ambiguities.

In other words, dialogue is not enough to make a work dialogic. Even anointing images that tend toward the monologic – the whore ducking under the table to fondle Jesus’ feet – contain entire choruses of consciousnesses: the bride in the Song of Songs; the woman taken in adultery; Mary Magdalene with her seven demons; “the sinner” in Luke who anoints Jesus’ feet with her tears and hair; power, control; fear; sexual fantasy. Although I will not be addressing such issues in this paper, I raise them to underscore the point that such dialogues are not dialogic – they are exclusive conversations, heavy-handed confluences, resulting from domination and control.¹⁴ Even though they are made up of many voices, they are, nonetheless, monologic. A dialogic work liberates visions and voices. This work will not only be dialogic, but what Bakhtin will later come to describe, through discoveries he made in the novels of Dostoevsky, as “polyphonic”: “*a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices.*”¹⁵

While heavy-handed authoring will close down genuine dialogue, so will rendering a subject too explicit, too complete. For example, even the images that portray the woman anointing Jesus’ head, scant though they are in comparison to those depicting

the anointing of his feet, are, to the extent that they are overly-determined and complete, monologic as well. Based upon Christianity's long legacy of erasing the names, muffling the voices, and expunging the contributions of women from its records, I do not suspect benign motives behind the obliteration of the identity of the woman who anoints Jesus' head. I do find, however, the ambiguity of her identity to be more of a gain than a loss, a positive than a negative, as the gaps open up the anointing event to possibilities that a complete and finished image does not. The gaps provide openings in the text's potential for meaning as well as for our participation in it.

In addition, the gaps also provide what Bakhtin refers to as "loopholes" — "a retention for oneself of the possibility for altering the ultimate, final meaning of one's words."¹⁶ Loopholes provide an escape, for those, such as the women who anoint Jesus, from others' attempts to entrap and objectify them. Further, insofar as this account remains incomplete, it is and always will be unresolved: the openings, the gaps, not only point us back, "in remembrance of her," but forward as well, "whenever the message is told." A corresponding image of the anointing, then, must likewise be unfinished.¹⁷

Related, yet distinct from the image's dialogic openness, is the work's "unfinalizability." Even when this work finds a home, permanent or temporary, it will remain as unfinished as the sketch itself, as will be the anointing of Christ. As Bakhtin notes, "*nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate work of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.*"¹⁸ In his later work, Bakhtin speaks of the unfinalizability of meaning in terms of "great time." He writes:

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even *past*

meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) — they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue’s subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival. The problem of *great time*.

Finally, and most importantly, an image of the anointing must answer to life, must respond to concrete people and places in particular conditions, as well as to issues, local and global. Insofar as non-human nature is also an interlocutor, to a world warming its way to extinction, the image must also answer, whether that be in content or function. The materials, as well, can answer.¹⁹

I came to this realization during my first attempt at painting an image of the anointing. Allergic to turpentine, I switched, several years ago, from oil to acrylic paint. It struck me, however, while painting this an image of the anointing, that a plastic-based medium was at odds with the woman’s act. Beeswax, recycled newspaper, alabaster, egg, clay – and other sustainable materials that I associate with the anointing are much more in keeping with it. To the extent that the materials are not sustainable, they stand, to my mind, in opposition to the woman and her act—as well as to religion, art, and religious art.

Conclusion:

This paper, and this image, is not only a response to a commission to paint the anointing of Jesus, it is an exploration of how art that is religious, in content and function, can also be religious according to what Bakhtin calls “faith” or “a feeling for faith”: “an integral attitude (by means of the whole person) toward a higher and ultimate value”.²⁰ I

suggest, therefore, that, for an image to be “religious” it must be “answerable”; and, for a work to be answerable it must also be “dialogical”: collaborative, contextual, performative, indeterminate, and unfinalizable.

I began this paper by alluding to commissioning – generally speaking, insofar as the concept relates to creating and consecrating life through act, word, and image – and specifically, to this particular commission: that I paint an icon of the anointing of Christ, for a local urban sanctuary, dedicated to Mary Magdalene. Although, in this paper, the patron’s identity remains, by her choice, concealed, her voice and her vision are embedded and revealed in the image itself, as well as in this reflection on the image. In addition, the accompanying sketch of the anointing, as well, was drawn by a hand not my own, but by Mary Fran Michaels, a sketch artist, and a friend to me as well as to the person who commissioned me. This work is, literally, a joint creation, a co-commission.

To say that no one makes or owns an artwork is not to claim that a painting has neither an individual or collective painter nor patron. Rather, as Morson and Emerson contend, in reference to Bakhtin’s metalinguistic theory, meaning does not, cannot, exist in the abstract; it must be embodied: “utterances must have ‘authors’ just as they must have listeners.” Even if a work results from a collective body (Mark’s gospel, for instance), we must “endow it with a voice” in order that we may “respond to it.” Further, that an author answer, or take responsibility, for a work is of central concern to Bakhtin’s ethical aesthetics. My purpose, therefore, is not to deconstruct authorship in art but to underscore the collaborative nature of meaning-making, whether it occur in the writing of texts, the painting of images, or the living of lives. A commission, when done well, can

embody in a unique way the collaborative nature of such a dialogic exchange, whether that dialogue be in consensus or contention.

Although I'm not claiming that this image of the anointing will end crime in Oakland or freeze a melting icecap in Greenland, it enters into dialogue with them, and answers to life.

¹ Elsewhere, I have defined "secular" as neither explicitly nor necessarily theological or scripturally-based, and "religious" according to Bakhtin's notion of "faith," or that which he refers to as "a feeling for faith": "an integral attitude (by means of the whole person) toward a higher and ultimate value." Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson, introduced by Wayne C. Booth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 294. Carrie Rehak, "Journey by Stagecoach: An Adventure in Art, Life, and Religion with Mikhail Bakhtin." Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2006, 2.

² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson, introduced by Wayne C. Booth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 287.

³ Quotes from Mikhail Bakhtin's "The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis" 121-22, quoted in Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 129.

⁴ For more information on Greenland's melting icecap visit:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/3607335.stm>

⁵ As Deborah Haynes points out, "To be truly dialogic and polyphonic, dialogue must take place through paradoxes, differing points of view, and unique consciousnesses. Communication and social interaction must be characterized by contestation rather than automatic consensus." Deborah J. Haynes, *Art Lessons: Meditations on the Creative Life* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003), 55.

⁶ For an in-depth description of "Meanings and Potentials," refer to section with that subheading in Morson and Emerson, *Prosaics*, 284-290.

⁷ This allusion would be a living example of how "dialogue must take place through paradoxes, differing points of view, and unique consciousnesses." Haynes, *Art Lessons*, 55.

⁸ As I discuss in my dissertation, "Bakhtin considers the author a real, historical, flesh-and-blood person. Especially in his later considerations of authoring, Bakhtin would consider significant such external forces as the sociocultural context of the text's production as well as its reception." *Stagecoach*, 62.

⁹ Morson and Emerson, *Prosaics*, 375.

¹⁰ In Luke, the anointing takes place in Capernaum, and the woman, "a sinner," does not anoint Jesus with oil, but with her tears, which she dries with her hair (Lk. 7:36-50)

¹¹ To this end, as Carolyn M. Shields remarks, “conscious, introspective present and unfinalized futures challenge epic and authoritative past discourses.” Carolyn M. Shields, *Bakhtin Primer* (NY: Peter Lang, 2007), 22-25

¹² Bakhtin, *Problems*, 88.

¹³ A word-play, suggested, in relation others (“The environment of Oakland is ‘jarring’; A door can be ‘ajar’; Meaning can be ‘closed’ or ‘open’; The ‘pouring forth of the liquid’ is itself an subversion of the male conceit of ‘activating with seed’; Mary’s act was itself a dialogue, that keeps opening and opening the more one listens to it; A flow of meaning — meaning itself is an anointing of mere matter,” etc.) by Will Amato, in commenting on the subject of this paper. Private communication, October 31, 2007.

¹⁴ Similar issues regarding “uneven voices” have been raised by feminist readers of Bakhtin. For an overview on this discussion see Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), especially 58-60.

¹⁵ Bakhtin, *Problems*, 82.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 233

¹⁷ To quote Deborah Haynes, “In Bakhtin’s formulation, this sense of freedom and openness applies not only to works of literature and art, but it is also an intrinsic condition of our everyday lives. Such creativity is ubiquitous and unavoidable, and for Bakhtin it should not and could not be separated from one’s responsibility toward others and toward the world.” Haynes, *Art Lessons*, 57

¹⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems*, 166.

¹⁹ For an excellent resource on sustainable materials, including materials for “product design,” visit: <http://www.biothinking.com/materials.htm>

²⁰ Bakhtin, *Problems*, 294.