FRANCIS SANZARO III
Syracuse University

ALTAR TO AN UNKNOWN GOD—DANIEL SIEDELL'S *GOD IN THE GALLERY*

A review of Daniel Siedell, *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008. 185 pages. $25.00. ISBN: 0801031842

Daniel Siedell begins *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art* with an analogy from St. Paul's speech at the Areopagus on Mars Hill, where rather than dismiss the unknown altar to the "unknown god," St. Paul affirms the pagan creation and "baptizes" it in the name of Christ. Just as St. Paul "bent" such objects towards the Gospel of Christ, Siedell will allow modern and contemporary art to swerve towards a Christian-inspired, Nicene-Constantinopolitan doctrine of analogical participation (11). Siedell's overall argument is as follows: if all of creation was termed "Good" and participates in the mystery of Creation, and if a liturgical aesthetics can *once again* underwrite artistic practice, then art can make "Christ known to contemporary culture" (164).

Siedell is right to admit that he ultimately fails to provide a theory as to how one can "bend" art towards Christianity, but this is precisely the point—remove art from the realm of secular theory (too myopic says Siedell) and return it to its original, liturgical framework, where it can, like St. Paul atop the alpine altar, envisage a broader plain of application. Siedell, however, will do what St. Paul didn't dare. Whereupon atop the hill Paul proclaims, "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands," Siedell will claim just the opposite, miring himself in Wolfgang Laib's piles of pollen and Janine Antoni's gnawed chocolate sculptures. Siedell artfully delves into that most erratic of contemporary discourses—a religious embrace of contemporary art.

As one might expect, Radical Orthodoxy is never distant from Siedell's pages, though direct discussions of their own preoccupations with liturgy and analogical participation are scarce. Occupying as it does sections of the concluding essay, Radical Orthodoxy provides the central framework not only for his main point but also the conceptual armature behind his analytical categories—the politics behind valorizing the premodern and postmodern over the modern; the need to expand Christianity's vision; the confidence that it has the authority to do so. Siedell could have been more upfront regarding how much he is borrowing from Radical Orthodoxy, especially given the fact that in the index both John Milbank and Graham Ward have one page reference, which is inaccurate.

I. Embodied Transcendence

God in the Gallery is a self-proclaimed "idiosyncratic" engagement with modern and contemporary art, compiled in seven essays. Intended for art students interested in exploring the relation of their faith to artistic practice as well as for "theologians who want a more nuanced treatment of modern and contemporary art,"(9) the primary task of the book is twofold: first, to envision a comprehensive Christian doctrine capable of accommodating contemporary art practice, and second, prove that art and art criticism has much to gain from theological and incarnational concepts. Siedell accomplishes these tasks.

Siedell carries the most authority when he speaks of art—he is a professor of art, curator, critic and art historian—and he addresses himself specifically to the cultural dominance of the Protestant aesthetic (or lack thereof). According to Siedell, it is our Protestant legacy to understand art within a semiotics of communication, where the image must be accompanied by text. In this case, art is redeemed and can enter popular (un)imagination, for the meaning is regulated by graphic commentary. If there is no immediate message or if meaning cannot be reconstructed, then art is considered elitist (in this case art is bad and disconnected from popular culture). For Siedell, art loses in either scenario. In the first instance, perceptual and existential fertility are drowned by the obsessive need to textualize the visuality of art, while in the second art is exiled to the desert of cultural irrelevance. It is also important to note that Christianity loses in both scenarios as well: the true content of art cannot enter the body of the church, a fact that serves to undermine Christianity's claims to universalism because it is too busy quarantining what it cannot process.

In this text, Siedell constructs problems to which his ideas are the solution, and does so convincingly. Rather than summarize each chapter, which Siedell does in the "Introduction," it is wise to locate Siedell's contribution within the problems he understands to beset the placement of religion within modern and contemporary art.

The first problem that he assesses is that of classical philosophical parlance—the dialectic between immanence and transcendence. Siedell will navigate this ground with the help of what he terms the "economy of the icon" (30). Drawing on Jean-Luc Marion's work on the icon's transparent gaze, Siedell argues that the icon "is a material means of grace, a pointer through which devotion, contemplation, and communion with God are enacted" (3). According to Siedell, the icon's status after the Second Council of Nicaea reintroduces transcendence into the material immanence of the world. To argue this point, Siedell unreflectively contrasts "Greek philosophy" with Christianity, positing that the former thought the world a burden that "must be transcended" to reach god, while the latter knew that divine transcendence could only be achieved through "material immanence" (32). The icon is a case where transcendence emerges within material immanence. The key point is that the icon is always-already contextualized—one could say *rendered transcendent in this contextualization*—through its role in a liturgical and analogical reality. Siedell is clear in his placement of religion—the *religious* traffics in embodied transcendence. Embodied transcendence enacts an incarnational logic—equal part aesthetic and philosophical; which is to say, the image-world of the church is summoned in the icon through its participation in a liturgical reality.

When a work of art displays an embodied transcendence, a shift in the semiotics of the artwork occurs. By placing so much emphasis on an incarnational logic, Siedell can construct a second "problem" within art and art criticism: Does an art work communicate to us or ask us to contemplate? Signification or expression, one might add. Siedell is interested in artwork that asks us to contemplate, given its non-dogmatic appeal. Exactly what we are to contemplate Siedell leaves unanswered—this is the apophatic flavor of the text. Herein lays the impetus for his discussion of a Protestant aesthetic verse a Nicene theology, as hinted at earlier. In the case of Luther, Siedell writes, "religious images needed to be accompanied by words; they needed explanation; they needed to be disenchanted for *communication*" (135). Thereafter, not only is the scope and content of art equated with a tool of disseminating information, "the Christian faith is made a function of a series of simple questions and simple answers, defined by beliefs rather than practices, thus explaining, demystifying, and disenchanting the faith" (135). The issue is not only semiotic, but can be reframed within a discourse of cultural isolation. Because Protestant (he also uses evangelical) Christianity has, according to Siedell, become more about beliefs than practice—a fact Siedell takes for granted—and because art has no overarching theoretical structure to accommodate its varied practices, Christianity cannot effectively engage culture and art cannot be contextualized within Christianity. Engaging contemporary culture is perhaps Siedell's main objective. Siedell writes:

> But the Nicene Christian faith can offer a firm foundation on which to build bridges toward culture—toward the secular world—in a more nuanced, discerning, and even expansive way. It was St. Paul's foundation in the life of the church that enabled him to engage culture, to look closely at the altars, to name the altar to the unknown gods, and to quote from pagan literature because these things can be bent, shaped, and molded in order to fulfill the knowledge implicit in them…the missional movement goes from the church outward toward culture, not from culture to a passive, inert, irrelevant church (150).

It is the precise nature of these images of bending/swerving, of expansive perceptual terrain, of an "altar to an unknown god" (a trope for a work of modern art) authorizing Siedell's formal, aesthetic analyses. Without his third chapter, this book would contain a surprisingly little amount of formal analyses of paintings, installations, etc. However, with such an "expansive" concept of what artistic practice does and which objects it can interrogate, one wonders if Siedell has opened his umbrella so wide as to, inevitably, pacify the productive yet violent energies fueling much contemporary art? (By the way, where is Tillich?) He is clear that the solution of a Christian artist is a bad idea, and he is clear that purposely inserting Christian content in works of art is just as atrocious, but where can the line be drawn, if a line is needed at all? Siedell often speaks around a gaping hole, almost in the post-structuralist sense we know so well, and it is his confidence in the certitude of the *swerve* (of the artwork towards a liturgical reality) that saves him from providing answers that will eventually undermine his conclusions. Rather, we should recall Aquinas' faith in the ultimate destination of the analogy, which in one configuration always lacks a fourth term. In other words, this mystery of creation (Christ) is a constructive element, and expressing it, via art or religion, is authorized by the very thing one has yet to find.

In an excellent discussion of German artist Wolfgang Laib and Janine Antoni, the latter a N.Y. artist, Siedell reopens another topic long familiar to philosophy and aesthetics—the object. It was Duchamp's work that inaugurated the discourse of the object when his readymades became famous just as Pop Art got under way (some decades after Duchamp's urinal). At first, the readymade would challenge the seriousness of artistic creation and the myth of the original work of art. It was Warhol, not Duchamp, who turned the readymade—an image in this case—into a critique of pomo simulacra, though the idea was always there as Picasso and Braque took bits of paper, media and cloth and pasted them into their compositions, thereby inventing modern collage in the early 1910's. For Siedell, however, the orphaned readymade, now "lonely" in a museum, retroactively proves the point that objects have meaning within cultural fabrics. And yet, as Peter Burger famously observed in his *Theory of the Avant Garde*, reinserting the readymade back into an aesthetic environment, which is what an artist did, expressed the psychology of the melancholic. In that text, Burger is using Walter Benjamin's views on history and allegory to argue the demise of history, with the readymade taking on the perceptual analogue of modern consciousness—the need to reconstruct from fragments. Siedell's reading of the "homeless," Christian intellectual wandering amongst the ruins of a culture unable to see its divine roots is, however, quite unlike Benjamin's melancholic allegorist who desires to capture objects for himself, ala Baudelaire. It must be admitted, however, that Siedell's understanding of modernity's "transcendence" as distilled essence feels fateful, alienated and heavy, desirous to a lapsarian tune.

Burger, unlike Siedell, understands the avant garde practices of the early 20th century to be representative of Surrealist *ennui*, a person "who can no longer transfigure his social functionlessness,"[1] an individual who kills the life of the object by removing it from its position in materiality, with little to no concern of redeeming the artwork or the viewer: acts reflecting an absurdist subjectivity. Rather, Siedell wants to make Duchamp the harbinger of *contextualism*, minimizing the threat of alienation with a renewed interest in process. Preceded by a discussion of American Abstract painters, Siedell takes Duchamp and the found object into a discussion of Process art, bringing our attention to the fragility of art objects, the ever-changing mood of the gallery, the aleatory in art making, and our participation in the life of the object. The payoff for Siedell is the gauntlet Duchamp put before the art world—the question of what occurs between the space of an object and a work of art. In short, what baptizes a work into the fold of aesthetic importance? Siedell writes: "Duchamp's readymades affirm that art is not merely an object, it is an institutionalized way of making, looking, experiencing and interpreting" (89). Therefore, the art world begins to look a lot like the church.

This is similar to the way objects function in the church, whether the wood panels of icons, the bones of saints and martyrs and other materials that function as sacred relics, or liturgical furniture that participates in and projects the sacramental and liturgical life of the church (92).

The church also begins to look a lot like a giant art installation. Process is a "liturgical practice" according to Siedell, and he will go on to make that point with a discussion of American artist James Byars' fondness for ceremonial performances and Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco's site-specific sculptures. What interests Siedell are the micro cosmologies that such artists create, certain idiosyncratic expressions where "every object and the space between them is connected to another" (101), where an object comes to life in certain conditions, with certain singular coordinates. This internal resonance can be credited to what Siedell terms a "theological substance" (101), and installation art, which provides the hermeneutical lesson for culture writ large, "is the embodiment of an analogical worldview" (101).

II. Analogical Participation

How are we to understand the phrase "analogical participation," when it lacks the precise sense given to it by others, i.e., Radical Orthodoxy? For instance, such sentences occur frequently in his text: "The divine liturgy, in its synesthetic dimension that engages all the aesthetic faculties, within which the veneration of icons occurs, is the analogical ground for all artistic practice" (150). The general sense of the concept is that participation becomes analogical when it ceases to be an itemized unit (isolation) and participates with *others* in (divine) life. A painting participates with the history of its criticism, the museum where it is housed, the particular lighting on the painting, the room where it is hung or the painter's ritual in constructing the piece, among others. A painting has an intellectual as well as a material culture, and our expectations and experiences are shaped by this history. The task for Siedell therefore is to change the discourse from a focus on an object's reception to an object's construction, because it is only in the latter that the church will be able to keep speed with cultural production.

---

[1] Burger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant Garde* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 71.

For Siedell, objects are not Surrealist or Dadaist fragments, torn and isolated from material praxis, but sites of intense history, introspection and idiosyncratic construction; objects are not monads, but rather instantiations of complex webs of spatio-temporal resonance held together by mysterious forms of internal communication. For example, Daniel Libeskind's Jewish museum in Berlin is a testament to recalling history and memory by having the building's angles and design features resonate with "exterior" features of the museum. Libeskind designed the building to literally point outside the building and onto the surrounding neighborhoods. The abstract lines that shoot off the building from its edges and windows point to addresses of historical German and Jewish citizens. Reminiscent of a style of architecture known as *contextualism*, similar to the more general concept of site-specificity that understands the context of the site as the most important aspect to a building, Libeskind's building takes the context not as a something to react to, but as something to construct. In our present case, albeit more philosophical, the work of art necessarily carries "within" it that which has given it life—the analogical ground is a concept of a silent performative, constructive as much as it is descriptive.

A church is no different, Siedell seems to say, combining smells, sound, lighting, text and gestures to invoke the symbolic. Such factors add to the artwork's liturgical context as well. Moreover, the object is reflective of a certain process of the artist, who views his artistic world as all-encompassing, constituting his subjectivity, taste, manners, habits, ethics, etc. This is what Siedell refers to as the "aesthetic dimension of the liturgy" (142). Within the liturgy, an opening occurs that facilitates a diverse range of artistic and religious practice, especially "veneration, contemplation, communion and participation in Truth, and that Truth is not a proposition but Christ himself" (142). Each artist has rituals, and creates within those rituals. Siedell uses Cuban artist Martinez Celaya to argue this point.

> Art is a religion for Martinez Celaya because it does what religion does: provides the institutional framework within which, and the material means through which, a person's spiritual life is developed as he relates to himself, others, and the divine. As the transcendent and the immanent find their embodiment in religion, so they find their embodiment in art for Martinez Celaya, But it is not so simple that he has abandoned religion for art, for the former informs and sustains the latter (65).

What a concept of liturgy does for Siedell's vision of art is provide an analogy with religious practice, a concept that serves to compare the multisensory, liturgical space with the aesthetic space of artworks and their ritualistic mode of construction. A multivalent, liturgical context helps us avoid the simple ascription of meaning to a single work. Furthermore, Siedell carefully removes contemplation from the spectacles of bourgeois visuality and brings art before us not as objects with "messages" but as a discipline that requires learned resources to appreciate. When a work of art asks us to contemplate, forcing us into a relationship with it, it is worth our effort and time. Contemplation is a diagnostic tool as much as an aesthetic virtue (15).

Art is not an object but a "practice that shapes belief" (68). "Belief," writes Siedell, "is not merely the sum total of cognitive acts, a bias from our disembodied rationalistic and iconoclastic "information society," but consists of the received traditions, customs, habits, and disciplines that sustain and shape belief" (68). Believing in the meaning of a work of contemporary art—so notoriously stubborn they are to revealing themselves—requires the knowledge of the context immanent to its construction. In this way, according to Siedell, "high art is incarnational at its core" (68).

When we find ourselves in a "liturgical" environment, signification becomes "contingent, relational, and transcendent" (91). For all of us prone to equating contingency with a lack of transcendence, and/or that which refuses claims to transcendence, we want more regarding what type of transcendence we are approaching. Levinas' notion of "intersubjective transcendence" thickens Siedell's description, and yet, at the same time Siedell writes: "Transcendence is material as well as spiritual; engaged and not escapist; collaborative and communal, and no individualistic and private' ethical and not merely aesthetic" (82). Often, transcendence is equated with communion or sacredness.

For example, of American abstract painter Jackson Pollock, Siedell notes that "his gestures and actions enact transformation in an almost sacramental manner" (88). He then calls his actions "sacred," and describes Pollock's barn as a "sacred space" that contributed to the uniqueness of his canvases. Who is swerving here? Pollock or Siedell. Shouldn't the painter have the final word as to whether his painting was sacred or not? In fact, no. Siedell is firm in his conviction than Christianity authorizes exploration into areas where it doesn't belong, and this is, perhaps, his most unswerving conviction. Christianity is a *religion of vocation*, a religion needing to see, desirous to see more, and the role of the art critic is to address "art's liturgical and sacramental dimension," long ignored by art criticism, thereby expanding Christianity's cultural relevance and the scope of art criticism (130). Art critics nourished by the Christian faith who "build bridges" to cultural production ought to not concern themselves with "maintaining airtight confessional boundaries," but "in contrast, Nicene Christianity's dogmatic foundation can open up the widest horizons for the experience of and reflection on contemporary art that reveals how artists discover what it means to be human through their artistic practice" (125-6). This opens another context in which

Siedell moves—the material aesthetics of subject constitution—i.e., calling attention to our own material, aesthetic and liturgical embodiment.

As the analogical ground that can underwrite contemporary art practice, liturgy returns from the "premodern" economy of the icon to "postmodern" situatedness. With such sensitivity to the liturgical context of all contemporary art, Siedell claims that "ancient-future Christians" can now witness Christ in contemporary culture (165). Not only does Christianity need to expand its visual horizon and include the productions of culture, contemporary art—understood as insular, fragmented, and hermetic—needs the concept of liturgy to make sense of its own productive capacity. The world is God's installation.

FRANCIS SANZARO is a doctoral candidate at Syracuse University whose areas of interest are aesthetics, theology and materiality. His most recent work appears in *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*.

©Francis Sanzaro.

Sanzaro, Francis. "Altar to an Unknown God—Daniel Siedell's *God in the Gallery*," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 10 no. 3 (Summer 2010): 140-147.