Media Reviews
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Book Review
Christopher Partridge / Marcus Moberg (eds.), The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music


Elvis Presley, with nimbus and royal crown, a winged and flamed heart on his chest, his hand raised in a gesture of blessing and his initials to the left and right of his head – this depiction by illustrator Jim Starr appears on the cover of the Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music, edited by Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg. The aim of the handbook is to provide a broad overview of the research field of religion and popular music. The task is not easy. The field of popular music and religion is multi-layered and touches not only on definitions of popular music but also on demarcations between religious and secular – or on the blurring of this boundary. A secular song can arouse religious feelings, just as a song created in a religious context can become a viral hit; a star can become a kind of saint, as Jim Starr demonstrated with his Elvis image.

The book opens with an introduction by the editors, who first emphasise that the field of religion and popular music has gained less attention than the empirically observable (or listen-able) interrelations of religion and popular culture more broadly. How true! All the more important, then, is a publication such as the Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music. As always for such broad topics, the editors were faced with identifying a useful approach to a complex field. They decided to divide the book into an introduction and three parts.

In the introduction, the editors situate the contributions to the handbook, especially those in Parts II and III, according to a typology proposed by B.D.
Forbes distinguished four possible perspectives on relationships between popular culture and religion: religion in popular culture, popular culture in religion, popular culture as religion, religion and popular culture in dialogue. In addition, the editors rightly emphasise the contextuality of methodologies, concepts and categories as well as the cross-disciplinary questions that the handbook poses. For example, they raise the important issue of an appropriate definition of “religion” for this field of research and ask to what extent the term “sacred” is more open than “religious”: “the sacred […] concerns those ideas which exert a profound moral claim over people’s lives” (7).

Part I, “The Study of Religion and Popular Music: Theoretical Perspectives, Methodologies and Issues”, brings together five contributions that address central theoretical, methodological or conceptual issues in religion and popular music: ethnography (Andy Bennett), emotion and meaning (Christopher Partridge), protest (Ian Peddie), censorship (Michael Drewett) and feminism and gender (Alison Stone). This part of the book develops central processes in the interrelation between religion and popular music across genres and religious traditions. These articles emphasise the diverse social meaning-making processes of popular music and reflect an academic view. It is particularly positive that the contributions in this part highlight the transgressiveness of popular music and religion: both popular music and religion are subject to processes of negotiation, for example regarding censorship (chapter 4). Popular music (as well as religion) can reflect and legitimise dominant ideas – as discussed by Stone (chapter 5) – but also challenge them. And sometimes both processes happen at the same time. The contributions in Part I help frame the following articles and provide reference points across the other parts of the book.

Part II, “Religious Perspectives”, focuses on the interrelation between popular music and religious traditions, specifically Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Japanese religion, Chinese religion, Paganism, Occultism and Caribbean religions (in this order). The individual contributions and their insights are fascinating. A close look at individual religious traditions shows concisely how popular music can emerge in religious traditions, how it can be used by religions to convey worldviews and to evoke emotions, how it is shaped by religious ideas and how certain religious symbols, motifs and narratives are popularised through music and, in part, received again and again.

A point to ponder in relation to this part of the book, however: what we usually subsume under “popular music” originated in the “Western” cultural
context, and it is noticeable in this part that Christianity is treated particularly prominently. Not only does Part II begin with Christianity, but four articles are dedicated to this particular tradition (while one of them discusses bibli-cal references in popular music, the New Testament receives more attention than the Hebrew Bible), while the other religious traditions – certainly no less complex – are discussed in one contribution each. One might experiment by reading the contributions in Part II from back to front in order to gain a more unusual view of the interplay between popular music and religious traditions.

Part III, “Genres”, is dedicated to different genres and their interrelations with religion: Heavy Metal, Pop and Rock, Punk and Hardcore, Reggae, Folk Music, Country Music, Electronic Dance Music, Blues and Jazz, Psychedelic Music, Rap and Hip Hop, Goth Music, Ambient Music and Film Music (in this order). These very enjoyable articles convey focused and telling information and great examples that allow the reader to connect the thoughts raised in Part I with different genres and to discover similarities as well as differences in the relationships between religion and specific genres.

The book ends with notes to every chapter, a collective bibliography (which makes it more challenging to select only one contribution to read with students), a discography, a filmography and a very helpful index.

The Handbook of Religion and Popular Music is a rich resource that explains the complex subject area in a multifaceted way and with the help of gripping examples. As one reads the book from beginning to end, the topic’s complexity becomes very clear, but individual articles can also be picked out easily because they are self-contained. Despite their brevity, the individual contributions provide an excellent first insight into a specific field of research and offer good starting points for further research. For me, however, the stimulating Part I could have been expanded a little more. The body does appear in some contributions within the first part (especially the one on gender), but a separate chapter on the body as the basis of religion and music would have been exciting. I would also have liked to delve more deeply into a trans-disciplinary view of (religious?) values and norms conveyed through music, a topic on which chapter 4 touches, but with a focus on censorship. I recognize, however, that this handbook does not aim to cover every possible topic or angle, but instead provides initial impulses for further research. And it succeeds very well in doing so.

The Handbook of Religion and Popular Music is useful reading material for all those interested in music and religion, for example scholars in Religious Studies and Cultural Studies, musicologists, journalists, artists and students.
across a range of fields. It can surely be called a standard work for introduction to this subject area. It is very suitable for teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The only (small) disadvantage is that as a handbook in the classic style, it approaches its subject by means of texts and some pictures. Music examples are not integrated. I recommend readers ensure they have internet access within reach as they digest this book, in order that they can listen to the songs mentioned.

Bibliography

Material Christianity: Western Religion and the Agency of Things is a collection of essays that focuses on the role of things in shaping religious practices, identities and thinking. The chapters analyse different dimensions of materiality from various disciplinary perspectives – e.g. history, history of art, theology and religious studies, South Asian studies – bringing together approaches and methodologies from a broad range of epochs and cultures. In this sense, the title is misleading, since the spectrum of case studies is broader than Christianity or Western religion, which remains a diffuse category. Highlighting the crucial role and effect of things on practices and beliefs, the book shows in an exemplary way how detailed analysis of individual or shared religious ritual and thinking in past and present resists academic generalisations and conceptualisations.

The volume is organised into two distinct parts. The essays in the first part are categorised under the title “Bodies”. In her contribution on “Cimabue’s True Crosses in Arezzo & Florence”, Henrike Lange analyses crucifixes at the heart of various material practices. Lange considers selected works, following their long histories through phases of material degeneration and restoration. The case of the crucifix is particularly significant since this object performs visually and materially the incarnation of Christ, the material practice at the core of Christianity. Christopher Ocker, who is also a co-editor of the volume, analyses in “Resacralising the Media of Grace” the role of materiality within
various streams of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Focussing on the tension between objects and symbols, between imagination and the physical world, between memory and real presence, he highlights the role of bread and wine in articulating new and controversial approaches to the body of Christ. Within the structure of the book, these first two contributions are complementary, since they deal with different material agencies that shape the relationship between believers and Christ as well as the practices of forming, regulating and controlling the effects of things in the relationship between communities and the divine. Mark A. Peterson’s contribution, “Puritanism and Refinement in Early New England: Reflections on Communion and Silver”, analyses silver objects used in a religious tradition that is not usually associated with refinement and splendour. In comparing the recurrence and function of precious objects in both religious rituals and domestic practices, he questions scholarly assumptions about the radical condemnation of luxury. The article shows how a culture of refinement was compatible with Puritanism because the objects could express a communitarian and personal link to revelation. Samuel F. Robinson’s “The Problem of the Flesh: Vegetarianism and Edible Matters” focusses on controversial interpretations of food practices in the 17th and 18th centuries. Discussing vegetarian diets promoted by Roger Crab and later by Thomas Tryon, the chapter shows how readings of the agency of food relate to various theologies of the body in the early modern era.

The second part of the volume is dedicated to “Spaces”. In “San Diego the Pamatácuaro: A Mountain Shrine in Colonial Mexico”, Martin Austin Nesvig discusses the role of materiality in a devotional practice in a remote location. By erecting a shrine, a late 16th-century community unfamiliar with the political, religious and linguistic culture of the colonial power shaped the cult of the Catholic saint associated with their town. The result is a peculiar form of devotion based on the needs of and beliefs rooted in this place; material agency led in this case to the autonomous agency of the inhabitants. The following chapter takes the readers to a different place and time: leaving early modern Mexico they arrive in contemporary California. In “Labyrinths as an Embodied Pilgrimage Experience: An Ignatian Case Study”, Kathryn Barush reflects on the relationship between the spatial materiality of a labyrinth – an obligatory, delimited path with strong metaphorical significance that has been used in Christianity since the 4th century – and the bodily experience of walking as a form of religious reflection. The last two chapters are dedicated to the intriguing question of pantheism from the perspective of philosophy of religion. Raphael Lataster and Purushottana Bilimoria, in “Pantheism and
Its Place in the History of Religion”, and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, in “Pantheism Monstrosities: On Race, Gender, Divinity and Dirt”, explore concepts of pantheism and ask whether resisting the clear separation between an external divine entity and the world could change how we look at materiality. Following such pantheistic worldviews, material agency and its efficacy cannot be considered mere products of humans but stand rather as independent entities in religious meaning-making processes.

These short summaries of the essays collected in this volume emphasise the challenges linked to fundamental questions about how we describe, reconstruct and conceptualise religion. First, the volume shows the crucial significance of historical and contemporary case studies for understanding the agencies of things, individuals, collectives and religious experts in constituting religious practices and beliefs. In doing so, it highlights the challenge of defining appropriate categories for comparing particular and unique constellations in order to achieve a general reflection on material agency. If material agency is to be taken as independent of human activity, concepts like “religion” or “tradition” will need to be discussed anew. Along this line, the volume notes the problematic role of anthropocentric scholarly approaches throughout the history of research into religion and religious history. Thus the editors argue: “The issue moves from a question of how religion reflects social order, human imagination, and culture, to a question of how religious things and performances belong to an ecology that produces human nature, society, and culture. For culture is no longer the mere product of human action and phantasy. Like self and society, it is generated simultaneously by willful people acting in space and time and by physical things” (9).

The case studies gathered in this volume are not linked by a common theoretical approach or methodology and from this point of view, the book is no more than a collection. Nevertheless, it offers an intriguing contribution to a new approach to the study of religion where concepts that are often taken for granted, such as “agency”, “subject” and “object”, are opened up for new consideration. “Religion” becomes a less and less clear concept to delimit anthropocentric constructions of transcendence and the divine. Rather, it is transformed into a conceptual map with which one can order and connect questions about practices that characterise cultures and societies. The book as a whole can be used as an introduction to the field of material studies in religion; the individual contributions may also be of interest to scholars familiar with the specific contexts.
With the series “New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies” Routledge is publishing new approaches in well-established academic disciplines. Amongst the volumes published in this series so far is Frank Bosman’s *Gaming and the Divine*, and not only does it fit perfectly with the purpose of the series, it is in itself (spoiler alert!) absolutely worth reading.

In his introduction, Bosman establishes the connection between computer games and theology using an episode of *Assassins Creed Rouge*, which thematizes the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. He then notes popular misconceptions about the personality of gamers (3) and alerts readers to a blind spot about (serious) theological topics in computer games. Bosman’s discussion of the state of research shows not only great competence but also a high level of experience with the products he is analysing. Yet for me, as a fundamental theologian, his next step is even more important. He discusses the value of computer games as a *locus theologicus*, referring to Cano’s definition from 1563 and arguing for its applicability to the topic of this book (6). In the following chapter, he even describes video gaming as a religious act: “The act of playing particular games can, in some specific cases, be interpreted as a religious act in itself” (8).

Chapters 1 and 2 contain what Bosman calls “Fundamentals”. He presents a “Theology of Culture” and a “Study of Games”, both urgently needed because of the diverging terminology in scholarly discussion. Here Bosman’s systematic focus becomes obvious. In his discussion of contemporary cul-
tural theology, he shows profound knowledge of historical proposals (e.g. *logoi spermatikoi* or *praeparatio evangelica*, 20–25) and of the contemporary approaches of Moltmann and Tillich. After a reference to Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes*, which pledges the Catholic Church to read the signs of the times, the author describes the two main positions of “God” in the modern world: Nietzsche’s “dead God” and the “hidden God” that Bosman prefers, noting “the Western world is the exception to the world’s rule” that being religious is self-evident (31). This enables Bosman to state that the “veiled God” is still “Creator, Savior and Whole-Maker [and] still revealing himself to his creatures” (32), yet in new and sometimes surprising forms that are, he concedes, to be critically discussed.

In the section that follows, Bosman defines what he understands as video games. He points out the importance of textuality (40–41): in light of their communication potential, video games qualify as texts. These digital, interactive, playable and narrative texts (43) communicate meaning and are objects of interpretation.

The following paragraphs describe the methodology Bosman proposes: a four-step process of “internal reading” (playing the game), “internal research” (collecting all available in-game information), “external reading” (cross-linking intermedial relationships) and “external research” (gathering additional information about the game and its background). This method enables the identification and examination of five forms of religion in any given video game: material religion (the explicit occurrence of religion), referential religion (allusions to religious traditions in the real world), reflexive religion (“the reflection on existential notions that are traditionally associated with religion within the game itself”, 49), ritual religion (the involvement of the player’s avatar in what is usually associated with religious practice) and gaming as religion (the experience of gaming provides the player with feelings usually associated with religious practices).

Chapters 3 to 8 discuss the classical treatises of dogmatic theology through the lens of video games, illustrating the main theses with references to representative games. In chapter 3, on creational theology, Bosman discusses “the three divine attributes”, omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence (60) and points out that these are also the attributes of the “god-gamer”, but only in an imperfect manner, such that the latter is more similar to the gnostic demiurge than to the Christian God, a diagnosis applicable for both the player and the developer of the game. The author then unfolds the Genesis creation myth and points out that while the Genesis narrative holds that the human
being is made in the likeness of God, even most scholars in theology do not share this view anymore. What if one applies this changed perspective to the interpretation of games? Here a core question pops up almost casually: “Does the player and/or the developer share with his or her digital followers the ability to establish and maintain relationships with one another [...] and do the digital followers have this ability among themselves?” (67). The ontological status of the game as an existing relation between the programmer, the player and the “product” is worth considering and has indeed extensive consequences for both theology and philosophy. The humans involved could possibly be considered “created co-creators” (68).

Chapter 4, on Christology, draws on the expected “messianic aspects of the heroes of many video games” (77), but Bosman adds another perspective by pointing to the legend of St. Christopher. This type of reference avoids the problem that arises from Christ-like messianic interpretations of the protagonist of a game (almost all of these figures have substantial attributes and/or tasks that could be interpreted as supporting such a view) by shifting the key role to the player. He or she is enabled to “become Christophoric” (91). Yet how is the necessary prerequisite of something Christomorphic to be integrated into the (at least in most cases) very violent protagonists; although Bosman dedicates the next paragraphs to “The Christophoric Player: Descending” (92), the reviewer is not (yet) completely convinced.

Chapters 5 through 7 are dedicated to theological anthropology, theodicy – the problem of evil – and ethics respectively.

Chapter 8 focuses on what in classical dogmatics is the treatise of eschatology. Unlike in real life, in gaming death is an experience the player usually undergoes repeatedly. It is a feedback mechanism of almost any game (172). Death is the consequence of failure; those who succeed can win the game or at least solve the next puzzle. This progression is in sharp contrast to the concept of death as an absolute end in (real) secular life. Even though there is a slight similarity – in both cases the situation is out of the player's control – the identification of player and avatar ends but can easily be restored either by restarting the level or by loading a saved game status. Bosman supplies a table that shows the variability in integrating the idea of death in a game (174), unfolding the concepts on the next pages (175–192). Then, interestingly, he brings up the topic of death as a result of sin and refers explicitly to Romans 5:12 – a theological reflection of high quality connected to the body-soul problem (197).

Chapter 9 is somewhat different. Not only is it the longest chapter in the book, but whereas the preceding chapters mirror the core treatises of dog-
matics, this one is – at least in the European tradition – genuine fundamental theology. Here, Bosman engages with the critique of religion found especially in the aggressive (and often not well-founded) diction of the “new atheists” (205) and identifies five categories, again based on extensive references to games, of religion as fraud, as blind obedience, as the source of violence, as madness and as an instrument of oppression (206–240). He concludes the chapter with thoughts on how to deal with this challenge and pleads for a digital iconoclasm as a befitting strategy. His interpretation of iconoclasm offers new elements and refers to the shattering of religious idols (including false images of God). Bosman suggests that players integrate the inherent critique of religion in the games and use them to “critically examine their own collective and individual behaviour and history” (243).

In his conclusion, Bosman comes back to his two hypotheses from the introduction (video games as genuine loci theologici and video gaming as a potentially religious act). He finds them validated and adds that the player does not have to be aware of the implications he has carved out in this book. He draws parallels between the Donatist dispute and the orthodox characteristics of a sacrament (in both Catholic and Protestant traditions), finally stating that video games have sacramental potential (256): “They are new vehicles of God’s self-revelation and grace [...] God did not die; He has been hiding himself, waiting to be found by the gamer.”

I am impressed by this book. Bosman demonstrates not only praiseworthy scholarship and a talent for systematic thinking, but also an instinct for burning questions. Above all, he draws on plentiful resources from his own experience, being a gamer himself.

Yet there are some issues that dampen my enthusiasm somewhat, most of them minor, such as the dating of the rise of liberation theology (15) or a less than convincing definition of the terms “ethics” and “moral” (esp. 155–158). In terms of ethics, an additional challenge would be to explore the behaviour of players not only in-game, but also in their game-related practices in real life. Do they use a legal copy of the game, a walkthrough or a savegame editor? Even though these aspects are not strictly in-game, it would be very interesting to have at least some paragraphs on them in the next edition of this book. And how about illustrations? The print version of the book does not include a single screenshot. This absence is a pity, because video games offer plenty of opportunities to illustrate the theses Bosman develops.

My major concern is Bosman’s conclusion about the potential sacramentality of games (255–256). I am not convinced by his arguments. Even if one
were to concede that playing a game might have sacramental quality, a major problem remains: at least according to Catholic theology, the sacraments and sacramentals require a conscious decision from the persons involved, i.e. of the priest and the receiver (or their godparent). To administer a sacrament without this conscious engagement is not only forbidden but also threatens its validity; consequently, unknowing participation in a sacrament or even a sacramental by playing a video game seems impossible to the reviewer. Furthermore, both sacraments and sacramentals usually have to be celebrated in highly ritualized forms. Even though the author offers a suggestive argument, I cannot follow him in this last step, and at present I do not see any way of overcoming that hesitation.

Frank Bosman’s *Gaming and the Divine* is a book worth reading and what is more, a book worth buying. I have learned much from it and will definitely include it in the recommended reading for my course on media and religion.
All we hear are bagpipes as a blurry image gradually comes into focus. We begin to make out the dark torso of a man who appears to be suspended upside down. His arms are folded beneath his head. A faint drumbeat starts to play and his right arm begins to trace the ground several inches below. For the next four and a half minutes, Jamar Roberts will wriggle and pulse through a rectangular performance space not that much bigger than his body. The camera angle will change, as will the volume of the music accompanying him and the speed at which he moves through his confinement. Watching the piece is an exercise in disorientation. Which way is up? Is Roberts lying down or dangling by his feet? We struggle to find our bearings as we watch him navigate his own. The odd pairing of bagpipes and drums adds to our slight discomfort, to say nothing of the fact that the image calls to mind the haunting lyrics of “Strange Fruit”. The last few moments see the dancer, now drenched in a blinding white light, softly snap his chin to the right before going limp.

According to the Artist Note by Roberts, the performance piece, called “Cooped” (2020), “was inspired by the release of recent statistics showing the disproportionate amount of black and brown bodies being affected by the Covid-19 crisis.”

ghettoized. Roberts was one of dozens of artists benefiting from the Guggenheim’s performing arts series *Works & Process Virtual Commissions*, which was launched in April to help artists create shorts works while abiding by social distancing guidelines. More than $150,000 was allocated by the commissioning organization, which is now in its 35th year.² A few performers were selected to participate in special Bubble Residencies, held through summer and fall 2020 across the Hudson Valley. Some of these culminated in live shows at the Kaatsbaan Festival in Tivoli, NY, and some were filmed at Lincoln Center in New York City. All 37 performances can be watched on the *Works & Process* YouTube channel.

The performers and their pieces feature a wide range of diversity, spanning different genres, subject matter, age, body type, and professional notoriety. Some names, such as the prestigious Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Tony-nominated Joshua Bergasse, are well known to audiences. Others, less familiar. The pieces too display a diversity of aims, and along with those, of achievement. Some artists, like Roberts, use their bodies and various media to explore the psychological and emotional angst of inhabiting a world battered by COVID. Others, like “100 Days” (2020), featuring the quirky yet lyrical movement of Ballet X dancer Chloe Perkes, are much more lighthearted.⁴ The lighthearted pieces seem to be a better fit for their digital medium, as their creators appear aware of the constraints of the project and work within and around those limits.

That’s not to say that all such pieces will be everyone’s cup of tea. “O Circle” (2020), a six-minute piece showing dancer Burr Johnson merely spinning around in a circle as classic nursery rhymes are read in the background, seems overly simple.⁵ “Is this … all?”, I asked myself every few seconds, not sure why such a capable dancer would be content to sign his name to this. But that’s the risk with art: it can and does disappoint some of its audience, at least some of the time. Another risk – or, perhaps better said, an avenue of promise – is that even when it disappoints, art invites its audiences to engage with it, with themselves, with the world. There have been many times since the start of the pandemic that I’ve found myself, like Johnson, spinning idly through

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3 [https://www.youtube.com/user/worksandprocess](https://www.youtube.com/user/worksandprocess) [accessed 5 January 2021].
4 Caili Quan, “100 Days”, 14 June 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxQvb6JLSo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxQvb6JLSo) [accessed 5 January 2021].
5 Burr Johnson, “O Circle”, 16 November 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjt0mZbjRQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjt0mZbjRQ) [accessed 5 January 2021].
my surroundings, staring blankly at the wide horizon of nothing-in-particular-ness around me, and reading children’s books. Perhaps, then, Johnson’s performance is a visual representation of many of our journeys through 2020.

In fact, we share a lot in common with the Works & Process performers. Like them, we are trying to navigate the challenge of finding new ways of being-and-moving-in-the-world. Our normal work- and life-spaces have been overturned, locked down, closed. We are trying to find our footing on new ground, aware at all times that one wrong step could end up costing us dearly. We are all, like Roberts, disoriented. And yet we forge ahead. The curtain is already up; it always is. We are on stage. We are who we perform ourselves to be: what new characterizations have we discovered within ourselves as we’ve moved through our own quarantines? Limitation is the very condition of possibility.

Our quarantine spaces are stages of sorts. Those spaces don’t exist somewhere out there, but are constituted by our very movements within them. If we adhere to the strict recommendations laid down by the Centers for Disease Control, then our performance space spans the roughly six-foot distance between us. Dancer Gabriel Lamb explored this theme explicitly in her piece “5x8”, named after the dimensions of the Persian rug on which she danced around her Hamilton Heights neighborhood. During her five-and-a-half-minute performance, the camera captured Lamb dancing fluidly in several different locations, never straying, however, beyond the boundaries of the rug beneath her feet. “Home and the outdoors have been our refuges during this time of uncertainty”, she wrote in the accompanying Artist Note, “so there was a peculiar logic in the combination.” Home, in other words, is often thought of in opposition to that which is outside of it. Yet what happens when we relocate the most intimate spaces of our home outdoors? Is home something we carry with us, like a rectangular piece of fabric? Or maybe home is the musical setting that continues to play within us as we move between both spaces.

Lamb’s project is different from many of the others because its compilation was public, a fact of which she gradually became more aware during the filming process. “During my shoot with cinematographer Melissa Wu, I noticed that outdoor rug dancing provokes a lot of curiosity in passers-by”, she writes in her Artist Note. While New York City has been off and on under


strict quarantine orders since the beginnings of the pandemic, many residents continued to spend time out of doors, exercising, going to grocery stores, walking pets. Imagine the surprise of New Yorkers, whose theater lights have been dimmed since March 2020, finding a sole dancer performing her craft out in the world. What a delight that must have been – for those, that is, who stopped to take in the experience. Not all of them did.

Not all of us do, either, which was one sad takeaway from violinist Joshua Bell’s 2007 incognito subway performance. We are surrounded by a world of animated beauty, but we don’t always make time for it. “It” being our noticing of what is always happening, because, to be sure, the beautiful is always already around us in dazzling abundance. We are, understandably, more primed to experience it in the world’s great performance halls. But where will we find it when they are closed? Because, as COVID-19 has taught us, even the most prestigious ones can be closed. When that happens, what will happen to art? To a world improved by art? To artists?

The Brookings Institute estimates that the fine and performing arts industries in the US suffered a loss of 1.4 million jobs and $42.5 billion in sales.7 And anyone who has purchased a ticket to a live performance in the past few years can certainly understand how quickly those numbers can be arrived at. We live in an age when four-digit Broadway ticket prices are quite common, when succeeding as a dancer requires a childhood of expensive training. The performing arts, for all the good that they offer the world, remain off-limits for many people who can’t afford to participate in them. Which is why funding projects like Works & Process is so crucial to arts development, particularly at a time when a global pandemic has brought down the curtain. Artists need to continue to eat. Beyond that, however, they need to continue to create.

Some of the most interesting virtual commissions showed performing artists navigating their private lives. Married dancers Ashley Laracey and Troy Schumacher offered a glimpse into the daily routine of their lives as parents.8 The film “7:30/7:30” opens with the New York City Ballet dancers waking up and immediately beginning to care for their young twins. As Schumacher’s piano music plays in the background, the couple play with their children, feed them, bathe them, bounce them in front of a mirror. Throughout the piece, Laracey and Schumacher are seen stretching and putting their bodies through

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7 Florida/Seman 2020.
various ballet technique drills. At the end of the video, the couple embrace, no doubt exhausted from having performed these rewarding yet demanding parenting roles. The couple dedicate their performance to "everyone raising children during these unprecedented times". Their Artist Note is worth quoting in full:

"It's special and beautiful to be together as a family, exhausting without a minute to spare, and a struggle to find enough time to maintain our identities as artists. Capturing every moment during a single day gave us the opportunity to zoom out and see what we are really working on right now: the art of raising two humans into this world.

What Laracey and Schumacher have performed is that which enables every performance to be what it is: the behind-the-scenes goings-on that allow the performer to study, to rehearse, to grow, to improve, to take center stage. The performed world that supports the performance - that supports the performance that acknowledges its performed-ness - is absolutely vital for the latter. Without a world to support it, the art cannot be created. Without a world to support her, the artist cannot create. Some of this support will come in terms of funding and budgets, and some will come from reliable childcare and the not-having-to-worry that next month's rent will be paid. All of these things belong to the scaffolding that holds up the stages on which artists perform their crafts. Audiences typically do not see them, however. Laracey and Schumacher's piece brings this scaffolding to the fore, and reminds audiences that erecting and maintaining these structures is as much a part of an artist's work as any other performed aspect of it.

Another real-life married couple whose work offers a glimpse into their home life is tap dancers and body percussionists Nicholas Van Young and Carson Murphy. In “Hook, The Moon”, Young and Murphy create intricate rhythms to a simple track composed by Young, which are then layered over other rhythms, visually and audibly. The couple have an impressive command of their bodies. Even as they create drum beats with their hands and feet, their bodies move with precision, fluidity, and grace. Several times during the piece, their child Immy appears in the frame and dances around with the joyful abandon of a toddler. Young and Carson receive credits for choreography

and improvisation, which is a welcome reminder that the best performances often feature a combination of both. Performing artists create within the confines of their or their director’s vision – but they create, which is to say, they bring forth something new. Always. Every time an artist performs a piece, she offers the world something that wasn’t already there. The meter for Young and Murphy’s piece was set, as were many of their choreographed time steps. Within those parameters, however, they were able to bring forth something new. There’s a lesson here, perhaps, for those of us struggling to find our creativity in quarantine: the rhythm of our routine may be set in a predictable meter, but we are nevertheless capable of playing within those boundaries.

As a dancer, it’s encouraging to see my colleagues experiment with new ways of being and making in a COVID world. As a human, it’s a welcome reminder that I, too, am being called upon to cultivate a life of beauty and goodness within the confines of the spaces I inhabit. Works & Process is a clear testimony to the virtually unlimited creative potential of the human soul, which often discovers itself within the movement of the sole.

Bibliography


Exhibition Review

**Home Alone Together**, curated by Aaron Rosen and S. Billie Mandle

Accessible at https://imagejournal.org/exhibitions-home-alone-together/

In book twelve of his *Confessions*, Augustine tells God that there is no better name for God's “heaven of heaven” than God's “house” (*domum tuam*). It is in the home, in the *domus*, that the “pure heart enjoys absolute concord and unity in the unshakable peace of holy spirits”. Augustine goes so far as to say that his soul begs to be inside the home. It is the only thing for which his soul yearns. Riffing on a passage of the Psalms, he writes that his soul's “single request” is that it may “dwell in God's house all the days of its life”. In his *Confessions*, Augustine not only compares God's home to heaven, he also claims that the home *is* heaven; home is where “absolute concord and unity” can be enjoyed.¹

Augustine's enthusiasm for the home, his declaration that it is “heaven of heaven” seems uncanny in a time of quarantine. For those of us lucky enough to have permanent shelter, the four walls and roof over our heads can feel more akin to a personal hell than to a place of eternal domestic bliss. A kitchen that has been adapted to fit the experiments of your child's science class, a bathroom that now doubles as a greenhouse to fit your growing collection of plants, and a bedroom that also functions as office space: our houses are stretching to incorporate our confined lives. Thus, the buildings meant to be most intimate to us, the ones that makes us feel as though we can turn inside from out, as though we can delineate between “private” and “public” spheres, have necessarily needed to hold more. Our homes now function as more than space that provides reprieve from the workday, more than space within which to cook and clean and sleep. Our homes are now functioning in ways that exceed what we

¹ Augustine 1991, 252.
thought they once were. We can no longer believe the home to be an interior space constituted by four walls meant to keep the communal out.

In May 2020, professor of religion and visual culture Dr. Aaron Rosen, and Massachusetts-based artist Billie Mandle, whose work focuses on the politics, histories, and paradoxes of place, came together to launch an exhibition titled *Home Alone Together*. The exhibition, supported and featured by *Image*, a journal representing art and literature, ran for twelve consecutive weeks during the summer of 2020, hosted by the journal’s webpage. Collating the work of 25 artists from across the globe, Rosen and Mandle probe the theme of domesticity. Submitting an image each week, either of their living rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, gardens, kitchens or of a mixture of the people and things found within these, the contributing artists allow us into spaces that are intimately their own. Through the content of their homes, they provide us with images of the objects and people that constitute themselves.

As visitors move through the virtual exhibition space, we can choose to view the photographs in categories sorted by either room, week, or artist. Each image is captioned first with the space in which it was taken (bathroom, kitchen, living room, etc.), and then with a title, the artist’s name, and date. One never gets a sense that one is touring through the artist’s home. Instead, carefully framed images of bodies, books, and blankets flood the frame such that the image seems as though it could have been taken from anywhere, from inside anyone’s home. In week one, photographer and book-maker Claudia Hermano, interested in themes of home and belonging, contributes a photo, “Bedroom” (12 April 2020), in which we see a cascade of blue. The fitted bedsheets just slept in, unmade from the night before, evokes familiarity as it ripples, wave-like, across the mattress. In week three, Amsterdam-based artist Yvonne Lacet, whose work centers cityscapes, landscapes, and nature play, includes an image, “Kitchen” (26 April 2020), in which plant life develops; a thin and fragile root, much like the one that currently shoots out from the clippings of my own quarantine-era philodendron, spirals out atop vibrant green. And in week five, London-based artist Aude Hérail Jäger, who is inspired by dualities and finding meaning in the immediate environment, provides a silhouetted shadow of a body bathing in sunlight: “Bedroom” (8 May 2020).

Through these images, which stage the particularities of everyday life, the air of the online exhibition is filled with a sense of the personal that somehow, miraculously, one may even say “heavenly”, speaks to us universally.

Stirring feelings of what is familiar, the artists’ close-up frames provide obscured views of laundry lines, shadow puppets, and bodies splayed across
living-room floors. These views, not quite unique to one home, but not quite not, render the photographs universalizable. During a time when we feel alone, forced to reconcile with new realities, and trapped inside them, the exhibit connects us via the spaces that protect but also trap us. Comprising the mundane objects which constitute a bathroom, a bedroom, a kitchen, the images echo the objects that, if we are lucky enough, also texture our everyday. An orange towel splashed across a blue tiled floor (“Bathroom”, Sam Winston, 27 June 2020), a boy shrouded in a sheet as he plays piano (“Living Room, Buffalo New York”, Yola Monakhov Stockton, 15 June 2020); through that which is immanent the photographs allow us to transcend the monotony that is our own. Through what is commonplace, they invite us to miraculously be any place. Through a play with what is familiar, they make us feel connected through the things which surround us in our homes.

Roles of toilet paper centered by Justin Kimball and Sam Winston, vibrant collections of fruits and vegetables soaking in soapy water as framed by Guler Ates, spaces of sex and sleep transformed by Alyssa Coffin, Michael Takeo Magruder, Claudia Hermano, Gol Kamra, and Yola Monakhov Stockton; all of these are crafted into photographs that ocularly arouse. Thus, these spaces of washing and bathing and cooking and fucking meant to be inhabited only by those most intimately connected are exposed. The photographs appeal because they render the intimate public. Thus, the artist’s space becomes a snapshot upon which the world is meant to gaze. In this way, the images, as well as the artists who have photographed them and the curators who have staged them, open a space for connection by means of the home meant otherwise, and especially right now, to keep us apart.

The artists in this exhibition push against what it means, or what we think it means, to be “domestic”. The previously private domestic life (considered historically to be the realm of the womb and women) has been positioned in opposition to the public, the world of labor, economy, politics, and man. This exhibition invites the public eye into what we have deemed as the private, advancing our notions of what it means to be domestic, to be at home. Forging connections through the spaces that we consider as our most intimate, the artists transform the binary of private and public life.

While the exhibit predominantly centers the spaces of the home, other images captioned “Outside” are featured as well. Some “Outside” photographs center the OPEN signs hung on boarded-up corner stores (“Outside”, Barbara Takenaga, 22 May 2020) while others are of flyers that announce blood drives (“Outside”, Jordan Eagles, 17 June 2020). Many photos that fall into the “Outside” category feature community protests in response to Black lives lost due to police violence over the summer. One image of her sons by Janna Ireland, contributed on 24 May, is particularly poignant because of the history of blackness in America to which it speaks. As a caption to her photograph of her sons Ireland writes,

Posting early because this day is so heavy, and this is a picture about love and closeness. The feeling of watching Minneapolis burn last night was indescribable. My heart was full and empty and broken all at once, and today I am so tired. I have been trying and failing to organize my thoughts about this week, and George Floyd, and the wounds his death has prodded. The thought that keeps circling is that all of the pictures I share of my children are a form of propaganda, and that the idea they are trying to sell is that my people are people, and that we have a right to our lives. This world is absurd, but there is nowhere else to go. It is an awful kind of relief to have my longstanding fears – those of a mother of black children living in the United States – to distract me from my new fears about parenting during a pandemic. I know these old fears intimately, at least.

The exhibition highlights the contours and contrasts of identity. Ireland’s photograph speaks to these contours, and the impossibility of ever really getting beyond them, despite the feelings of connection that images can evoke. In other words, our identities, while they enable connection, also segregate us into racialized, stigmatized, and ostracized groups. The things which make us individually ourselves and thus able to connect with others implicate our social privilege or marginalization. The exhibition calls attention to these disparities of identities as much as to familiarities that can be drawn between them. Ireland’s photo traces life’s limits and edges. It alludes to the idea that there are certain experiences of race, of class, of sexuality that are more familiar to some than to others. In this way it forces us to attend to all the spaces in our lives that lack connection. It makes us realize that even through art connection is not always possible. Ireland’s photo and the accompanying caption evoke absurdity, fear, feelings of disconnection. Ireland’s photo is one
within the exhibition that brings disconnection to the fore so as to make viewers grapple with it.

In a recent interview with Poet's Country, philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler commented that it is “hard to stay sensate during these times, to see and feel and hear what is happening”. The exhibition Home Alone Together invites us to stay sensate. It invites us to attend to what is happening around us.

After all, Home Alone Together is a project of collaboration. The artists and curators summon us to come together as they have. They encourage us to notice our everyday, to look around and see so as to feel the ripples of blue in our slept-in bedsheets, the green roots growing, despite all odds, out from the leaves we clipped months ago, the way the light catches our bodies and casts us, silhouetted, onto our four walls. Perceiving others' lives as they continue inside the walls that separate them from us, we are invited to notice and thus feel connected through what is otherwise socially distant. The exhibition instantiates a feeling of connection through the places where we dwell. In so doing, it contributes to the very revolution of relating that is taking place in our midst. Home Alone Together is art that invites us to attend to our own surroundings through its attention to the surroundings of the artists. In this way the exhibition, to borrow language from Augustine, transforms the home through image into a place where “absolute concord and unity” can be enjoyed. This unity does not depend upon the home being “heavenly”, though. Rather, it depends upon sharing intimacies. The exhibition is a sight of transcendence. It encourages us to get beyond ourselves through the places we call “home”.

A selection of works from Home Alone Together will be shown alongside an exhibition by Julia Alcamo titled All We Have Stories at the Dadian Gallery in the Henry Luce III Center for the Arts & Religion in Washington, DC in the spring of 2021. Until it can be experienced in person, the exhibition will be shared through virtual tours and videos. It will be kept open until it can be shared in person, probably not before the summer.

Bibliography