Image and Performance: an Art Historian at the Crossroads

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— *For Pam Sheingorn*

One day, in the year 1343, a nun named Mechthilt die Rittrin prayed in the upper Rhenish convent of St. Katharinenthal before a Holy Sepulcher, a popular devotional object that recreated Christ's tomb in Jerusalem. The Sister-Book of St. Katharinenthal records Mechthilt taking "our Lord's hand and foot in her hand" and finding "him flesh and blood as if a real human body were laid there."[1] The Katharinenthal sepulcher was likely of the type popular in the fourteenth century: a wooden coffin with a removable effigy, both polychromed. The earliest extant example of such a set comes from the Cistercian convent of Maigrauge, created c. 1330, and so roughly contemporary with Mechthilt's experience: there, the life-sized statue of Christ lies supine in a sepulcher painted with Passion narratives (Figures 1-2).[2] Such a sepulcher, to borrow from Pamela Sheingorn, stood at the intersection of liturgy, drama, and social practices of the later Middle Ages.[3] In posing the fluid place of the image in the cultural production of the Middle Ages, Sheingorn was one of the first art historians to step away from the *prima-dopo* issue that predicated the lively debates on the relationship between medieval art and drama since the dawn of the twentieth century. Her work on English Easter sepulchers was among the earliest truly nuanced studies of this relationship, and it is for this reason that I would like to return to the subject, shifting the focus, however, to the visual valences of those performances enacted before and by an effigy in a painted coffin.

For there was much being performed at the Katharinenthal sepulcher. The sculpture performed a miracle, or perhaps a miracle was performed through it. The nun performed the role of the mourner at the Deposition, before the wooden Christ, and the role of the supplicant in her present-day convent, before the invisible resurrected Christ. Her cognitive faculties, with the help of her senses, performed her desires. Her touch effectively re-performed the Incarnation. An art historian making sense of the Maigrauge sepulcher through the lens of such performances that took place at St. Katharinenthal thus finds herself reaching to a series of interdisciplinary aids: the

fluid anthropology of medieval image theory, at least as it emerges from miracle compendia and convent chronicles; contemporary performance theory as it is formulated by theatre historians; and what can be loosely termed a somatosensory theory engaged with issues of materiality as much as with affective neuroscience.

Holy Sepulchers were often centerpieces of paschal liturgy, and the Passion narratives that adorn the Maigrauge coffin (see Figure 1) closely reflect liturgical performances that were enacted during the Easter rituals, including the *depositio crucis* and the *visitatio sepulchri*.[4] The Lamentation scene, which stresses the wounds inflicted upon Christ's body, is featured on the front inner lid: scourges and the crown of thorns are suspended from the cross; Nicodemus holds pliers, and Joseph of Arimathea carries the hammer and the three nails; the oversized Christ stretched on the ground bleeds profusely, uncannily echoing his doppelganger in the coffin. At the back, behind the sculpted corpus, stand the mourners: the three holy women and St. John holding up the Virgin. At the foot and the head of the effigy, Isaiah and Job painted on the inner side panels keep guard, holding scrolls inscribed with "Enim sepulchrum eius est gloriosum" ("For his sepulcher is glorious") and "Solum michi est super sepulcrum" ("Only the grave remains for me"). The front of the exterior features fragments of what appears to be the scene of the Deposition; the back is painted with four figures under the arcades. As the sepulcher opens, the pale effigy of Christ emerges into view, displacing its painted iteration, materializing before the viewers' eyes, and, as I will argue, implicating the beholders in the corporeality of the sculpted body (see Figure 2). Christ's wounds are deep, cut in relief, bloody – indeed, his entire body, covered with lacerations, seems to ooze blood. His body is wrapped in a shroud; only face, hands, feet, and a bit of torso remain bare, open to visual and haptic engagements. One easily envisions Mechthilt grasping at such limbs.

At a very basic level, then, a Holy Sepulcher complete with the bleeding Christ could activate what Antonio Damasio calls *somatic markers*: "feelings generated from secondary emotions [that] have been connected, by learning, to predicted future outcomes of certain scenarios."[5] If images, as has been argued, could serve as vehicles for bringing about and guiding a visionary experience, then the exaggerated, effluent wounds puncturing the ashen effigy would certainly target affective response on the part of the nuns at Maigrauge.[6] Common devotional exercises encouraged the pious to re-envision and to re-live the events of the Passion as part of their empathetic meditation on Christ's life; famously, Ludolph of Saxony (d. 1378) enjoined the worshipper to behave – to speak, to mourn, indeed, to live – "as though the Lord were suffering before thy very eyes."[7] If somatic markers label emotional responses to past events and thus condition future behaviors, then the formal qualities of the Maigrauge sepulcher could function as effective visual triggers both for the miraculous experience of the image's enfleshment and for the performance of what Richard Schechner has famously termed "restored" (repeatable, iterable) behavior on behalf of the viewer.[8]

But it is not enough to suggest that the visual characteristics of Christ's body imprinted by torments were inherent in enforcing Mechthilt's performance. Instead, we may wish to consider this tormented body as a performative site itself, the place where later medieval attitudes towards images – contradictory, laden with suspicion, laced with confusion – collided. Anthropologically speaking, the transformation of the ef-

figy into flesh and blood – a moment of quasi-transubstantiation that casts Mechthilt as the priest and the wood as the sacrament – structures the performative space of the sepulcher as sacral and liminal.[9] This kind of space is frequently described in contemporary miracle collections that feature stories about animated sculptures, none denser than the *Dialogus Miraculorum* by the Cistercian prior Caesarius of Heisterbach (d. c. 1240).[10] His collection was mined for exempla by generations of preachers, who wished to discuss not only the movement but also the enfleshment of images, such as the one that took place in the oratory of St. Goar in Trèves, where a wooden crucifix, wounded by an enemy artillerist, began dripping blood "as if from human veins."[11] The casual ease with which Christ's images in particular come to life in miracle tales – and the equally casual narrative acceptance of such enlivening – suggests that an object such as the Holy Sepulcher effigy had the potential not only to be used as a movable prop in a liturgical performance, but also to become the living, responsive protagonist of any kind of embodied engagement. For example, to a knight who spared his father's murderer in Christ's honor and took a subsequent pilgrimage to the church of the Holy Sepulcher, Caesarius writes, "the image of the Lord's body bowed very plainly … from the cross" in full view of his companions.[12] Conversely, in another miracle, a bell-ringer of the church of St. George in Cologne, who was stealing candles lit before a cross-shaped reliquary, was attacked by this cross when it came to life: the object "smote him so heavily that he fell sick and spat blood forth for days."[13] A Cistercian nun, who once saw light emanating from the arm of a sculpted crucifix in her church, experienced another miracle soon thereafter while reading a Psalter in front of a wooden Virgin and Child sculpture: "the little child came to her unexpectedly, and as if He desired to know what she was reading, looked at the book and went back to His mother."[14]

Miracle stories present us with a world in which any image has the potential for animation, and in which the elision of living matter and dead wood is implicit. Like the effigy that was enfleshed for Mechthilt, we might recognize the wooden Christ at Maigrauge – his pale bloody hands, his elongated, wounded feet – as an agent, poised to come alive for any Cistercian nun who used it for pietistic exercises. The medium of wood is important here. In discussing Isidore of Seville's explication of *materia* as a maternal, "fertile and capable of becoming" material, Caroline Walker Bynum draws attention to Isidore's identification of matter with wood: "All wood is called matter because from it something is made, so if you refer to a door or a statue, it will be matter."[15] As a generative body, the wood is never inert; its material indexes the wood of the cross, which in contemporary theological discourses was conflated with Christ's flesh.[16] The intimate association between the wood and the body crucified on it implicates both material images and living bodies in the re-performance of scriptural narratives: in the York plays, for instance, the largely silent presence of Christ stages his body as an artifact, a devotional image, as well as a living actor, eliding the fleshly body and its mute inanimate representation.[17]

But the effigy supine in the sepulcher did not merely transform for Mechthilt; it also transformed Mechthilt herself. Its enlivening reconstituted the nun, reformulated her very essence. As performance theorist Herbert Blau has posited, the audience "does not exist before the play but is initiated or precipitated by it; it is not an entity to begin with but a consciousness constructed."[18] The performer's desires are mapped

onto the effigy, and yet the effigy constructs the performance along with the performer: in essence, Mechthilt and the wooden Christ respond to one another. The notion of conceptual integration, or blending, recently explored by theatre scholars, is useful to consider for the kind of performative embodiment that could take place before convent sepulchers.[19] It suggests, to quote cognitive scientist Mark Turner, "a powerful basic mental operation in which input mental arrays are integrated to create a new mental array."[20] Mechthilt's brush with Christ's flesh was a sensual encounter, which effectively precipitated all manner of conceptual integration, collapsing the space of the monastery and the site of Christ's burial, the flesh of the dead body and the dead wood that represented it, the present-day nun and the mourner of the past. In the convent of Wienhausen, for example, the blending of two spaces – the imaginary space of Jerusalem and the immediate environment of the monastery – allowed the monastics to travel, as is detailed in the convent sister-book, from locus to locus, re-performing Christ's Passion through their immediate environment and their own bodies. The Holy Sepulcher of Wienhausen – a wooden coffin with an effigy akin to that at Maigrauge and probably to that of Katharinenthal – stood in the nun's choir, and so perpetually marked it as Golgotha (Figure 3).[21] And yet, as Blau writes, "[a]bout any audience one must ask not only what they are likely to see and respond to but what they are likely to overlook and resist."[22] In the blended locus of the Maigrauge sepulcher, the praying nun would overlook the effigy's inert materiality and resist its conspicuous artifice. Instead, she would perform the representation of the dead body *as* the dead body – that is, Christ is not immobile because he is a sculpture but because he is dead. If "a performance act," to quote Carole Stern and Bill Henderson, "is interactional in nature [because] it involves symbolic forms and live bodies," then in this instance conceptual integration allows not only interaction between but also conflation of the symbolic and the living, both in regard to Christ's body and in regard to the body of the viewer.[23]

The beholder's role is therefore quintessential to the performance of enlivening, especially because the living images that conflate and purposefully confuse the prototype and its representation find no place in the theological trajectory of what has been termed the *région de dissemblance*.[24] The trajectory of this dissemblance is initiated by humanity's creation in God's image, and it turns, to borrow from Robert Javelet, on the pivot of Christ's advent, when exiled and spiritually blinded humankind begins the recovery of this divine image, now available in an approximate material representation only.[25] But the alterity of living images functions precisely from its disjunction with lived reality, mended by the agency of a viewer such as Mechthilt. We read her presence as a catalyst for the transformation, for the kaleidoscopic dislocation of space and matter within and around the sepulcher. The effigy in the coffin thus becomes a performance image, a performing body made neither of flesh nor of wood, and by granting agency to the beholder it indicates the act of viewing as a fully embodied experience.

The concept of embodied experience stands at the crux of phenomenological studies of response and memory, from neurocultural fields to somaesthetics. Neuroaffective studies that consider images, to quote Semir Zeki, as "an extension of the major function of the visual brain," serve as a useful complement to Merleau-Ponty's philosophical explorations of reception; for instance, the findings on the mirror neuron

mechanism – which allows beholders to respond empathetically and mimetically to images through visuomotor interaction – could yield valuable insight into Mechthilt's interaction with the sepulcher. [26]In turn, somaesthetics – a subdiscipline of philosophy concerned, to borrow from its founder Robert Shusterman, with "one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning" – may offer the possibility of studying Mechthilt's affective performance in terms of ameliorative kinesthesis of perception, in which her haptic interaction with the sepulcher sought an efficacious engagement with Christ's effigy, thus improving her "environment to which [her] movements contribute and from which they draw their energies and significance."[27] By way of conclusion, then, we might suggest that the examination of the Maigrauge sepulcher through the multifaceted notion of embodiment could allow us to consider the manner in which Mechthilt's mind and body produced a state of consciousness in which Christ's limbs turned into flesh; to posit the role of material imagery in this series of cognitive, emotional, and somatic performances; and to confirm the significance of Mechthilt's "corporeal vision, which is seen," as Caesarius would have it, "after a bodily appearance, by the bodily eyes."[28]

Figures

Figure 1. The Holy Sepulcher from the Cistercian Abbey of Maigrauge (Magerau), mid-fourteenth century. (Photo: author)

Figure 2. The Holy Sepulcher from the Cistercian Abbey of Maigrauge (Magerau), mid-fourteenth century; detail: Christ's effigy. Christ: about 155 cm, the sepulcher: 101 by 189 by 52 cm. (Photo: author)

Figure 3. The Holy Sepulcher at Wienhausen. Christ: 13th c., coffin: 15th c. (Photo: author)

Notes

1. *Das "St. Katharinentaler Schwesternbuch": Untersuchung, Edition, Kommentar*, ed. Ruth Meyer (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1995), 133; trans. and briefly discussed in William Forsyth, *The Entombment of Christ: French Sculptures of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 17.
2. Now located in the Musée d'art et d'histoire de Fribourg; see J.E.A. Kroesen, *The* Sepulchrum Domini *through the Ages: Its Form and Function* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 64-65.
3. Pamela Sheingorn, *The Easter Sepulchre in England* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1987), 3.
4. Peter Kurmann, "Das Heilige Grab in Konstanz, Gestalt und Funktion," in *Tagung der Dombaumeister, Münsterbaumeister, Hüttenmeister, 10. – 14. September 1985 in Konstanz. = Dokumentation der Dombaumeistertagung* (Constance, 1985), 65-75, cites dramatic texts written for Easter performances around specific Holy Tombs, including those at Magdeburg and Constance.
5. Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon Books, 1994), 174.
6. Jeffrey Hamburger, "The Visual and the Visionary: The Image in Late Medieval Monastic Devotions," *Viator* 20 (1989): 161 – 82, at 174.
7. Ludolph of Saxony, *The Hours of the Passion taken from* The Life of Christ *by Ludolph the Saxon*, ed. and trans. Henry James Coleridge (London, 1887), p. 2.
8. This is behavior defined as "symbolic and reflexive: not empty but loaded behavior multivocally broadcasting significances." Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 36.
9. On the concept of the liminal, see first and foremost Victor Witter Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).
10. Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Caesarii Heisterbacensis monachi ordinis Cisterciensis... Dialogus miraculorum. Textum ad quatuor codicum manuscriptorum editionisque principis fidem*, ed. Joseph Strange (Cologne: Heberle, 1966 [1851]); trans. H. von Essen Scott and C.C. Swinton Bland as *The Dialogues on Miracles*, intro. G.G. Coulton (London: Routledge, 1929).
11. *Dialogues*, "Of Miracles," Chapter XIX, vol. 2, 188-89; on blood miracles, see Jean-Marie Sansterre, "L'image blessée, l'image souffrante," *Bulletin de l'Institut historique belge de Rome* 69 (1999): 113 – 30 and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), esp. 158-61 on Christ's body as the stuff of Mary's blood. For the brief discussion of Byzantine bleeding images with useful bibliography, see Maria Vassilaki, "Bleeding Icons," in *Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium: Studies Presented to Robin Cormack*, ed. Antony Eastmond and Liz James (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 121-33.
12. Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogues*, "Of Divers Visions," Chap. XXI, 2: 23-24.
13. *Dialogues*, "Of Divers Visions," Chap. XXVI, 2: 26.
14. *Dialogues*, "Of Divers Visions," Chap. XXII, 2: 24.
15. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: an Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), esp. 231-39, at 231.

16. Thomas Aquinas, for example, argues that because the wood of the cross “represents to us the figure of Christ extended thereon” and because it came into contact with Christ’s body and was “saturated with His blood … in each way it is worshipped with the same adoration as Christ, viz. the adoration of ‘latria.’ And for this reason also we speak to the cross and pray to it, as to the Crucified himself.” See *Summa theologica*, pt. III, question 25, article 4, “Of the Adoration of Christ.”
17. See, e.g., Jill Stevenson, *Performance, Cognitive Theory, and Devotional Culture: Sensual Piety in Late Medieval York* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 120-25; for an art historical perspective, see Elina Gertsman, *Worlds Within: Opening the Shrine Madonna* (University Park: Penn State University Press., forthcoming), Chap. 3.
18. Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 25.
19. E.g., Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), and Mark Turner, “Creative Blends” and “Many Spaces” (Chaps. 5 and 6), in *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). For the theory in its application to medieval theatre, see, e.g., Stevenson, *Performance*, Chap. 4; for early modern drama, see Amy Cook, *Shakespearean Neuroplay: Reinvigorating the Study of Dramatic Texts and Performance through Cognitive Science* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
20. Mark Turner, “Blending Box Experiments, Build 1.0,” 23 January 2010, Working Paper, p. 1.
21. June L. Mecham, “A Northern Jerusalem: Transforming the Spatial Geography of the Convent of Wienhausen,” in *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Andrew Spicer and Sarah Hamilton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 139-60.
22. Blau, *Audience*, 203.
23. Carol Simpson Stern and Bruce Henderson, *Performance: Texts and Contexts* (New York: Longman, 1993), 3.
24. Jean-Claude Schmitt, “Imago: de l’image à l’imaginaire,” in *L’image: fonctions et usages des images dans l’Occident médiéval*, ed. Jérôme Baschet and Jean-Claude Schmitt (Paris: Le Léopard d’or, 1996), 31-2. See also Gerhard B. Ladner, *Ad imaginem Dei. The Image of Man in Medieval Art* (Latrobe, PA: Archabbey Press, 1965).
25. Robert Javelet, *Image et ressemblance au XIIe siècle de saint Anselme à Alain de Lille*, 2 vols (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1967), esp. 1:224-36, 45-59.
26. Derek Lyons, “The Rational Continuum of Human Imitation,” in *Mirror Neuron Systems: The Role of Mirroring Processes in Social Cognition*, ed. Jaime A. Pineda (New York: Humana Press, 2008), 77-193; for application of this theory in medieval and early modern art history, see Sheingorn, “Making the Cognitive Turn in Art History: A Case Study,” in *Emerging Disciplines: Shaping New Fields of Scholarly Inquiry in and beyond the Humanities*, ed. Melissa Bailar (Houston: Rice University Press, 2010), 145-200, as well as extensive publications by David Freedberg, e.g. “Choirs of Praise: Some Aspects of Action Understanding in Fifteenth Century Painting and Sculpture,” in *Medieval Renaissance Baroque: A Cat's Cradle for Marilyn Aronberg Lavin*, eds. David Levine and Jack Freiberg (New York: Italica Press, 2009), 65-81.
27. See Richard Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 27.

28. Caesarius of Heisterbach, “Of visions of different kinds,” in *Cistercian Legends of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Henry Collins (London, 1872), 136.