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Review of Barbara Baert (ed.), *Fluid Flesh: The Body, Religion and the Visual Arts*, Leuven: Leuven University Press 2009, xvi + 125 pages, ISBN 9058677168

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The importance of the body in Christian art is at the core of religious art from the past into the present creations of artists, as this richly diverse volume attests. The interdisciplinary symposium which produced *Fluid Flesh*, as editor Barbara Baert writes, aimed to generate ‘epoch-transcending case studies’ (p viii). The book is organized into four parts, each consisting of two essays and mostly addressing modern art. The four subthemes are: the visual as a spiritual medium today; iconophilia/iconoclasm: pro-body/anti-body; the human body, religion and contemporary lifestyles; and premodern and postmodern perspectives on anatomy and the visual arts.

As eminent art history scholar James Elkins (author of the influential 2004 book *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*) points out in the introduction, ‘serious religious art cannot find a place in the contemporary art world’ (p x). This observation proves a worthwhile starting point for the two essayists in the first section, who offer sage insights into the body issue (typically, of Christ) in sacred art. Jan Koenot, in ‘When the Body Speaks Louder than Words: The Image of the Body as a Figure of the Unknown’, focuses on 20th-century artists Mark Rothko and Francis Bacon, with the latter especially revealing because of his declared

atheism as well as his desire never to offer explanations of his works of art. Nonetheless, Bacon brilliantly utilized Christian iconography, and Koenot cites Michael Peppiatt's writings about how 'Bacon assimilated the vocabulary of this religious art (the form of the triptych, the dais, the throne, etcetera) in order to reach the point of painting contemporary man in all his nakedness while bestowing upon him a majesty which raises him to the ranks of the sacred' (pp 4-5). Elkins also mines the spiritual in Henri Matisse's oeuvre, as well as that of Barnett Newman, Juan Muñoz and several others. Moreover, by means of comments on Jacques Derrida and Georges Steiner, he weighs the philosophical and theological dimensions of dealing with figures rather than mere words, and postulates the difficulties artists have today coping with this duality. How the body functions in relation to the absolute or the unknown is another concern, and Koenot proffers the psychoanalyst Guy Rosolato's writings as a useful touchstone of advice. The author also explores more esoteric aspects of the literally bloody nature of sacred representation, including sacrificial religions, mythological elaboration, works which transcend the mythological (for example, the tortured art forms by Egon Schiele), and artistic inspiration from spiritual and mystical sources (for example, Joseph Beuys' works or Bill Viola's video art).

Jan De Maeyer, in 'The Space, the Wound, the Body, and the (Im)possibility of Religious Art,' replies to Koenot's remarks on the existentially empty spaces in art created by Bacon and others, in which words or language are inadequate. For De Maeyer, the story of a wound, religious or artistic, and its healing are critical, but so is the spectator's state of mind and willingness to show 'some openness or readiness' to contemplate the body. De Maeyer's conclusion, unlike that of the Jesuit Koenot, is to speculate about the impossibility of religious art in modern times, an issue left necessarily open-ended yet provocative not only for this set of essays but also in general.

The next area of 'Iconophilia/Iconoclasm: Pro-Body/Anti-Body', is first tackled by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona in 'Icon of God: Is Christian Art Possible Without the Figure'. After briefly outlining the history of how the human body is a conveyer of meaning in past Western art, she moves on to offer various general principles on the body along with well-chosen case studies on this subject in religious Christian art from the Middle Ages to the present. The commentary alone on the spirituality of Mary's milk is well worth reading by either a neophyte or expert in the field. Similarly illuminating are her ideas about new directions in the study of the human

body in religious art, including her interest in 'the human effluvia of milk, blood, and tears' (p 51).

As its counterpart Ralph Dekoninck's 'Body as Image, Image as Body: The Christian Roots of an Anthropology of Art' injects the perspective of Christian anthropological assertions into the dialogue. These devolve upon the notion that man was 'created *ad imaginem et similitudinem Dei*' and that 'the Son, the Word made flesh, is the image of the Father.' (p 58) Concurring with Apostolos-Cappadon about how man is an image of action and flux, he posits that 'we understand, therefore, why the image has offered many *exempla* to be imitated and is becoming a powerful way to configure the body and the mind, in an almost mimetic contagion' (p 58). In terms of modern art, perhaps the author's most trenchant assertion is that 'the milk of the Virgin and the blood of Christ have been replaced today by the artist's excrement and urine from Manzoni to the Viennese Actionists' (p 61), as in Chris Olifi's elephant dung in *Holy Virgin Mary* (1999) and Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1989).

The penultimate section, 'The Human Body, Religion and Contemporary Lifestyles', is also amplified by two essays. The first, Regina Ammicht Quinn's 'Cult, Culture and Ambivalence: Images and Imaginations of the Body in Christian Traditions and Contemporary Lifestyles', proposes a novel position regarding the 'missing' body and its evolution as a container, even prison, of both sin and salvation from late 15th-century art to the current day. Foregrounding the philosopher Plotinus and his 'negation of the body', the author contrasts how 'today the body has shifted to the center of a person's and society's life in a historically unique way' (p 72). Accordingly, 'the body culture generates a body cult and the body cult establishes the body as a project of perfect design' (ibid.). This has various ramifications, including the myth of female beauty and the transformation of the ample-bodied woman (symbolic of female eroticism) into the thin female form. On Jesus' body specifically, Ammicht Quinn highlights his healing powers and function as the Incarnation at the highest level.

Renaat Devisch's response in 'Women Figured in (Post-)Christianity and in Today's Feminine Spirituality', on the other hand, salutes Ammicht Quinn's feminist and other arguments while zeroing in on how the Platonic mind/body/soul conceptualization is 'passionately opposing throughout modernity a behavioristic, if not mechanistic, corporeality' (p 84). With a novel twist, Devisch suggests that 'fitness studios – alongside the catwalks and other model managements – have largely replaced the traditional temples and churches of worship' (ibid.). These sites are compared with

museums and other places of 'ceremonial practice, where participants in virtual communities construct and recount to themselves their narratives of group membership, self-ascribed identity, moral integrity, and perfectibility' (ibid.). In questioning various aspects of feminine spirituality, the author, moreover, queries whether the bodily effluvia and other elements that contemporary artists use express 'a genuine feminine sensitivity of the "mystery of divine incarnation"' (p 85).

The final pairing, intended to personify both premodern and postmodern perspectives on anatomy and the visual arts, opens with Catrien Santing's 'Cynical Vanity or Fons Vitae: Anatomical Relics in Premodern and Contemporary Art'. Santing examines the corpse and body relics as both pre-modern cult objects and modern tropes. While much of this essay explores what might be termed Christian anthropological issues, the author also considers (partially echoing Devish) how Michel Onfray's recent writings on beauty claim that 'phenomena such as cosmetic make-over programs, fitness schools, and plastic surgery all provide evidence of the body's increasing importance in society' (p 91). An overview of relics in Christian art and culture is provided, along with persuasive visual examples about the veneration of saintly remains and the impact on art. Modern artists like Serrano, Marina Abramovič, and Marc Quinn are mentioned as contemporary body artists, with all three actually using their own bodily fluids for their artwork. Still other artists like Kiki Smith and Teresa Margolles are investigated, making this the strongest of all the essays in terms of visual examples of contemporary interpretations of sacred subjects.

The last chapter, Ann-Sophie Lehmann's 'The Missing Sex: Absence and Presence of a Female Body Part in the Visual Arts' takes the 'missing' aspects alluded to by Ammicht Quinn and makes it the central focus. As if in unacknowledged yet powerful reply to *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, Leo Steinberg's 1983 classic book on the display of the baby Jesus' genitals, Lehman shifts the dialogue to the lack of female genitalia in Western religious art. In noting, furthermore, the absence of scholarly deliberation on this topic, she asks whether this phenomenon is due to the depilation of pubic hair or to a fear of castration from seeing the potent site of feminine sexuality. She wonders whether such fear might have 'prevented pornography', although ultimately it seems that 'neither idealization deriving from the supposed ugliness of the female genitalia, nor the fear of castration offers a satisfactory explanation for their absence in art' (p 111). Treating a variety of related subjects such as the depiction of female body parts like the vulva in earlier art and the

'black triangle' that covered the pubic area of 19th-century female nudes, she concludes that the female nude and its sex were reunited by modern art 'when the nude developed into a central motif and ... the female body was depicted surprisingly often in its entire completeness, and not only in marginal genres, such as pornography, medical illustrations or grotesques, but in monumental, religious works intended for the public' (p 114).

To end with Lehmann's essay in this collection is both refreshing and provocative, a fine intersection of art, gender, and religion. This strong conclusion is a reminder of how much more can and needs to be written about the survival and extension of religion in past as well as contemporary art. Readers in multiple disciplines will find this volume intellectually invigorating, and thus may themselves be inspired to venture into the ironically 'taboo' realm of religious art, or so it has become in the highly secularized, often conflicted, late 20th century and beyond.