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I, Laura A. Krugh, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History.

It is entitled:
"An Annunciation for Today: The Use of Imagery of the Annunciation in Contemporary Art"

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An Annunciation for Today: The Use of Imagery of the Annunciation in Contemporary Art

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the Art History Faculty
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Abstract

According to the account given in the Bible (St. Luke, I: 26-38), the annunciation is known as the meeting between the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary. During this encounter, Gabriel reveals to Mary that she will give birth to the “son of God.” Visually depicting this mysterious event has captivated artists for many centuries, and its representation became particularly prevalent during the Renaissance. Six hundred years later contemporary artists continue to depict this event. In this thesis I analyze how contemporary artists use the annunciation scene to communicate present-day ideals. In the first chapter I discuss versions of the annunciation that depict Mary as nude or highly sexualized and how this treatment may redefine Mary’s role in Christianity. In the second chapter I address the ways in which the annunciation can represent visual and transcendental systems of authority. In the third chapter I broaden the scope to discuss how concepts within the traditional annunciation scene links to the analysis of contemporary relationships between artist, beholder, and creation.
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Introduction

Contemporary artists demonstrate little hesitation responding to and drawing inspiration from many social, cultural, and historical influences. As social delineations are blurred in many areas of contemporary life, religiously themed imagery is no longer exclusive to religious art expression alone. Familiar images from the Christian tradition have become tools with which contemporary artists are able to engage a wide audience. In her dissertation on Kiki Smith, Margaret Randolph Wilkerson states: “[…] A large number of art audiences also hunger for and embrace contemporary art that engages with spiritual subjects and even challenges traditional tenets of faith.”\(^1\) In this thesis, I analyze depictions of the Christian-based annunciation scene, specifically addressing nontraditional representations. I use these works as entrance points for discussing the relationship between Western religion’s traditions, contemporary art, and society. This study focuses on three themes: 1) the ways in which artists use the annunciation to relay new ideas surrounding the Virgin Mary; 2) the ways in which the mystery of the annunciation leads to pictorial systems of authority that support transcendence; and 3) how traditional forms of the annunciation scene link contemporary approaches to the relationship between artist, beholder, and creation. Each chapter will address one of these themes.

As relayed in Christian doctrine, the annunciation is known as the encounter between the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary when Gabriel reveals to Mary that she will give birth to the “son of God.” In her book *Material Christianity*, Colleen McDannell states: “Christianity is rooted in the mystery of the incarnation, the infusing of the divine into one man. For orthodox Christians, God enters the world by fully participating in humanity through the character of Jesus

\(^1\) Margaret Randolph Wilkerson, “Making God: Incarnation and Somatic Piety in the Art of Kiki Smith” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2006), 38.
During the Renaissance, the annunciation was frequently painted, becoming a familiar image in Christian art. A number of canonical versions were produced during this time, such as Robert Campin’s version in the Mérode Altarpiece (fig.1). \(^2\) Though not central to the arguments in this thesis, works like this one provide and interesting and worthwhile point for comparison. The contemporary artists I consider often share and rework much of this symbolism.

Although there exists substantial scholarship regarding annunciation scenes from the Renaissance, I have not identified a large body of detailed, focused analysis on the treatment of the annunciation in contemporary art. My analysis, focusing on contemporary approaches to the theme of the annunciation, aims to address concepts that have not been thoroughly examined and to provide new insights and information. There continue to be a myriad of annunciations created in contemporary time. For this thesis, I selected artworks that not only depict the annunciation, but use this very familiar imagery to explore previously unrelated themes. Though I could not include every unique version of an annunciation, the artists and artworks I discuss do represent a wide range of treatment. If possible, I consider what art historians and critics have said about the artist’s handling of the annunciation. For most works I provide formal analysis that highlights aspects that specifically relate to the subject of the annunciation. When appropriate, I investigate and examine the way in which each artist situates herself or himself in regard to Christianity. A number of the artists included in this analysis were raised Catholic and create art that responds directly to that experience.

In Chapter One I discuss how contemporary artists such as Duane Michals (b. 1932), Chris Ofili (b. 1968), and Damien Hirst (b. 1965) portray Mary’s body and sexuality. I argue


\(^3\) Much of the traditional Renaissance iconography is present in Campin’s version, such as lilies, a vessel, an open window, rays of light piercing the window. Additionally Gabriel and Mary are positioned in a more conventional way with him kneeling towards her and Mary reading from the Bible.
that they emphasize her female sexuality to promote new ideas challenging Mary’s role as God’s compliant vessel. Their depictions provide a stark contrast to traditional representations of the Virgin Mary. To situate these works, I draw on arguments from Marina Warner’s book *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976) and from Eleanor Heartney’s article “Thinking Through the Body: Women Artists and the Catholic Imagination” (2003). Warner’s text provides extensive background on the female’s evolving role in Christianity across centuries of development. I use her discussion of Mary as “the Second Eve” to analyze Michals’ and Ofili’s versions of the annunciation. When appropriate I bring in additional texts to further expand and strengthen this argument. Hirst’s portrayal of the Virgin Mary, thought not specifically an annunciation scene, reveals further consideration for Mary’s significance in contemporary culture. He emphasizes Mary’s biology, which forms an integral part of her position within the annunciation. In this chapter, I emphasize the use of annunciation imagery to critique previously established ideologies. Overall, the artists considered in this chapter aim to redefine Mary.

While my analysis in the first chapter intends to highlight artists who use the annunciation to relay novel concepts, arguments in Chapter Two underscore the way contemporary artists use the annunciation to express persistent values of humanity. Though Jessica Harrison (b. 1982), Gottfried Helnwein (b. 1948), and Richard Hamilton (b. 1922) substantially alter and dislodge the traditional imagery of this story, they illustrate similarities regarding pictorial systems of authority and organization. I argue that like artists during the Renaissance they use particular forms of imagery as a way to investigate the mystery of the incarnation of God. To contextualize this approach, I draw from Hanneke Grootenboer’s reading of Daniel Arasse’s argument of the development of perspective in Renaissance art, particularly
annunciation scenes, in his book *L’Annonciation italienne: Une histoire de perspective* (1999). Along with Grootenboer’s text, Michael Kubovy’s book *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art* (1986) and Samuel Y. Edgerton’s book *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (1975) help establish the argument that the development of one-point perspective was partially born out of a desire to better comprehend God through works of art. On this basis, I discuss how Helnwein and Hamilton investigate the same concepts through contemporary technology. I argue that just as artists of the Renaissance created linear perspective to better visualize God through art, so contemporary artists use new technologies, such as television and digital media in an attempt to picture contemporary forms of “transcendent” experience.


In Chapter Three, I expand analysis of the annunciation from the tightly-defined story in the Bible to a broader interpretation that addresses concepts of the artist, the beholder, and the inception of creativity. Though the annunciation relays a “true” story with details of an encounter between two specific people, it also inherently incorporates concepts of presentation, reception, participation, authority, and faith. Using the annunciation as a point of departure, I explore artists like Kiki Smith (b. 1954) and Sylvie Blocher (b. 1953), among others, who investigate the relationship between artist and viewer. These artists use the annunciation as an event that supports the potential to share authority and ownership of creation. They shift the role
of the artist from a place of isolation to one of participation. Building on that argument, I highlight how artists can engage their viewers through active participation. As an example of radical inclusion and participatory self-expression on a very large scale, I discuss Burning Man, an annual art-making event attended by tens of thousands of people, and held in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada. Founded in 1990, this festival has taken place for over twenty years and its sustained growth suggests increasing interest in participatory art. I argue that all of artists discussed in this chapter create works that consider the inclusionary act of art-making, whether located within one individual, between the artist and beholder, or across a larger population. To situate their approaches I consider Thierry de Duve’s concepts of presentation in his essays for Look: One Hundred Years of Contemporary Art (2001), as well as Claire Bishop’s argument for “participatory art” in Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art (2006), and ideas found in “The Emancipated Spectator” (2009) by Jacques Rancière. I argue that the ideas in these texts illustrate the concerns of the contemporary artists I explore here.

Though the individual chapters address different aspects of the annunciation, many of the concepts pervade the entire thesis. When appropriate I identify relevant connections between chapters. This thesis investigates how contemporary artists use the story of the annunciation, one of the most pivotal events in the Christian tradition, to bring forth equally moving and equally vital aspects of life into the present.
Chapter One

Mary’s Body: The Virgin Annunciate as Second Eve and Sexual Being

The fundamental idea that the Incarnation of the godhead had overturned the Old Covenant of sin and death found one of its loveliest images in the concept of the Virgin who gives birth to the redeemer. She is the second Eve, mother of all the living in a new, spiritual sense.4

In Catholicism, the female body is less a battlefield than a minefield, intimately bound up with doctrinal and political struggles over contraception, abortion, virginity, and the nature and origin of sin. But… it is also a remarkable source of inspiration. Knowledge through the body… is knowledge that celebrates our sexual, sensual nature.5

Introduction

In this chapter I will examine concepts surrounding the presentation of Mary’s body in contemporary annunciation scenes, particularly representations that portray her as highly sexualized. I will discuss how this depiction draws attention to the concept of Mary’s function as the second Eve, an idea that suggests that Mary’s role as appointee for conceiving the “son of God” delivered humankind from Eve’s destructive act and initiation of “sin.” I will argue that this practice allows contemporary artists such as Duane Michals, Chris Ofili, and Damien Hirst to challenge the traditionally prescribed function of Mary in the Christian tradition. To some extent through their artworks, Michals, Ofili, and Hirst undermine established religious ideals in regards to Mary, bestowing her with a form of empowerment. Yet at the same time, there is danger of their works sustaining the categorization of women in general, as either pure or impure.

The artists analyzed in this chapter break away from long-standing conventions of depicting Mary in the annunciation. Here it is worth recalling the five categorical depictions of this scene as discussed by art historian Michael Baxandall. They are: 1) Disquiet, 2) Reflection,

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3) Inquiry, 4) Submission, and 5) Merit. Initially identified by Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce (1425-1495), a Florentine priest, and repeatedly represented by artists of the Italian Renaissance, these categories are chronologically aligned with the biblical account of St. Luke (I: 26-38) of Gabriel’s and Mary’s meeting and have served to illustrate the events for Christians for centuries. The artists discussed here entirely disregard the five accepted states, choosing instead to contemporize the narrative and present alternative “truths” of the encounter. Although their approaches to this theme may release Mary from some of the limitations of conventional Christian doctrine, my discussion raises the possibility that these new treatments of the annunciation may entail the further objectification of women. Closely related are other contemporary works that give particular attention to Mary’s biological gender and her innate ability as child-bearer. I will analyze how contemporary artists bring forth the raw physicality of Mary’s body, thus highlighting the necessity of her female form in incarnating God in humanity.

*The Chaste Woman: A Christian Ideal*

Historian Vern L. Bullough argues in his book, *The Subordinate Sex: A History of Attitudes Toward Women* (1974), that during the third century early Christian doctrine was greatly influenced by the spiritual writings of the Greek philosopher Plotinus (ca. 204/5-270 C.E.), who maintained that the path of the ascetic life was one of the most valued forms of devotion for theologians. The removal of all peripheral distractions and temptations allowed followers to focus their attention solely on personal devotions and worship, giving themselves fully to their God. An individual in this situation was required to renounce attachment to

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worldly possessions and profess devotion “to the cultivation of the disciplines of self-restraint in relation to food, drink, bodily comfort, and above all sexuality.”

This practice provided religions with not only malleable followers, but also an example for the secular world of the most respected form of faith, and an indication that with true, unyielding belief in God little else was needed. For the individual, however, commitment to this discipline was not easy.

Naturally, as humans are in large part biologically driven, abstaining from all sexual relations with women was exceptionally difficult for many men who tried. In fact it was so trying that more extreme religious factions during the time, such as Gnosticism, provided in one bold concept both an excuse and a serious repercussion for those who tried and also for those who failed. As Bullough argues, female sexuality for these believers was seen as essentially evil, derived from the devil, and therefore extremely powerful.

Though weakness under this particular temptation was understood and to some extent expected, copulation with women was considered dangerous, as it indicated union with the devil. This thought process was a substantial influence on early Christianity at the time, and became an infinite cycle of warning and excuse, essentially justifying the limits of human restraint, particularly in men. Inevitably, Eve, the epitome of the tempting female and notorious instigator of “the fall of man” became the point of comparison for women.

As Western religions have often ordered life in terms of dualities, it is appropriate that the Christian Church was motivated to identify Mary, the mother of Jesus, as Eve’s complement.

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9 Bullough, 111.
10 Ibid., 113.
11 Margaret R. Miles. *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989), 86. Miles states, “Eve more than any other scriptural woman, was represented as the prototypical woman; her personality traits and behavior were understood to be characteristic of all women and to be instructive about how men should regard and treat women.”
Whereas Eve was the embodiment of untamed, sinful female, Mary became the new standard of femininity in Christianity and an ideal to which all women should aspire. In her book, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976), Marina Warner outlines early Christian thought within the second and third centuries regarding the biblical Eve and women in general. She writes, “For the Fathers of the Church after Augustine, woman is the cause of the Fall, the wicked temptress, the accomplice of Satan, and the destroyer of mankind.”\(^{12}\) However, through the actions of Mary, women were given a chance at redemption. Just as Eve was the earthly mother of all humankind, Mary became God’s earthly mother. As Eve fell from God’s favor by disobeying him, and thus repositioning the place of humans, Mary was given the opportunity to comply and assist in re-determining the fate of all. Additionally, Warner establishes why the Church had such strong motivations for repurposing Mary as the second Eve. By identifying Eve as essentially evil and Mary as sexual and societal redemption for women, Christianity was able to emphasize and further promote its parallel crux: the necessity of Christ and his personal sacrifice. Not surprisingly, the mother of God required an un tarnished persona.

The new era of Christ found in virginity a most satisfying image: a new, incorrupt, untainted world had been created by the Incarnation and the Redemption; just as God molded Adam from new clay, so he had fashioned his son anew. Because Jesus did not descend to earth but was born of woman, it was crucial that her clay too should be pristine and unspotted.\(^{13}\)

As Warner argues, Mary’s sexuality became the focal point. She became pure vessel for the Son of God with little or no indication of the need for her own reproductive powers. Historian Jaroslav Pelikan suggests that in an attempt to distance Mary from any indication of sin, the Church reasoned that her own birth was also a result of virginal conception.\(^{14}\) This relieved the Church of dealing with Mary’s own original sin – in this way implying that as products of sexual

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\(^{12}\) Warner, 58.  
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 59.  
\(^{14}\) Pelikan, 191.
relations all humans are founded in sin.\textsuperscript{15} Again, perceived as temptresses and also as child
bearers, women were demonized. Author and art critic Eleanor Heartney identifies the resulting
degradation of women with the Church’s representation of the Virgin Mary:

She is a symbol of the Catholic Church’s archaic attitude toward women. A crucial part of
her persona is her purity. This manifests itself in her lifelong virginity and her “Immaculate
Conception,” the miraculous circumstance by which she was born without the stain of sin
that infects the soul of all other humans born since the original transgression of Adam and
Eve. By denying Mary a sexual nature, many modern commentators believe that the
Catholic Church has seized upon a doctrinal justification for its refusal to deal honestly
with female equality and human sexuality.\textsuperscript{16}

Following the lead of pioneering feminists and those working for women’s equality from both
within and outside of Catholicism and Christianity in general, many contemporary artists
investigate and challenge these stereotypes through their art, utilizing Christian symbolism and
the long-established meanings of visual clues and icons.

It is understandable that as a symbol of human sexuality, Eve is customarily depicted as
nude. She is almost always shown with little or no physical covering. Presenting Eve this way
certainly alludes to the story of the Garden of Eden and what transpired. Originally in the Bible,
nudity was accepted and symbolized Eve’s and Adam’s closeness to God. Following their
disobedience, propelled by Eve’s temptation of Adam, nudity or rather nakedness became
translated as shame, vulnerability, and the need to cover the body.\textsuperscript{17} As a result, Eve’s visual
nudity also sustains the impression of a manipulative, sexual nature. The unclothed female body
has become an undeniable symbol of the allure of female sexuality. By removing Mary’s bodily
covering, contemporary artists like Michals and Ofili either intentionally or inadvertently invoke
the innately sexual and sinful presence of Eve in Mary, and potentially in every woman.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{16} Heartney, 5.
\textsuperscript{17} Miles, 96. As the author states, this was followed by subordination of women by men in many society
roles.
Consequently, in depicting the Virgin as a sexualized female, alluding to Eve, the artist is undermining the Church’s offered redemption through Mary. In discarding all of those blue robes and layered garments, the artist draws attention to the fact that Mary was physically a woman and reminds us that underneath all of that fabric was her body.

**Mary as Nude Woman: Unclothed, yet Empowered**

In David B. Boyce’s article, “Duane Michals: Photographer, Storyteller,” he quotes photography writer A. D. Coleman on Michals work:

> Perhaps Michals’ most significant creative achievement is the precise coordination between his prose voice and his imagistic sensibility. Through those intertwined communication systems he has enabled himself to address an assortment of recurrent concerns that were not previously assumed to be accessible to photographic investigation.¹⁸

Duane Michals’ black and white photograph, *The Annunciation*, 1969 (fig. 2), depicts a moment prior to the compliance of the Virgin, establishing an almost theatrical air. We are not provided evidence of Mary’s acceptance, but instead are left in anticipation of how she might respond. Shifting the focus from the moment during or after Mary’s agreement to the time before Gabriel’s announcement provides opportunity for further interpretation. The photograph does not convey her response. One may imagine that Mary says, “No” or “I’m not sure about this.” The photograph shows a sleeping Mary, entirely unaware of what will befall, thus partially relaying a sense of innocence and with that a premonition of the loss of innocence. The artist has addressed this theme in other works, such as the photographic series *The Fallen Angel*, 1968 (fig. 3-10). This series, closely related to Michals’ single-frame annunciation image, and showcasing the same room, bed, woman, and angel, depicts a male angel approaching the woman on the bed.

Through sequential images we know that they have sexual intercourse. Afterwards the man is shown in despair with his head between his hands. He has lost his wings and is dressed instead in a dark suit. Says the artist of this piece, “Once something occurs you can never go back to what happened, something as simple as losing your virginity, some sort of encounter, some sort of disaster or reward. But when you're profoundly changed it's simply about the perpetual loss of innocence.”\(^{19}\) In the photographs it is clear that the man is remorseful of his actions, while the woman, unconcerned, remains lying contently on the bed. This plotline seems to allude to Eve’s temptation of Adam, while the title suggests a break with God. One may assume that the man, not the woman, has experienced the loss of innocence mentioned by Michals. We may also imagine that the guilt-stricken man was moved in his actions through intense temptation of the woman on the bed, and in this way she is in control.

Formally, Michals’ annunciation photograph could easily be imagined as a frame within the previous series. While the change in title significantly shifts the meaning, the perceived relationship between the man and the woman remains the same. Mary is lying on her side on a bed, and although she is not entirely nude, she is dressed only in underwear and a brassiere. Her open position, with stomach and hips thrust forward and arms lifted up around her head, is welcoming and seductive. She has left herself open to Gabriel, who draws near. Though she is not consciously awake and active, her body language passively invites. From the man’s point of view she tempts. Michals highlights the allure of Mary as a sexual woman, and therefore a powerful woman. We may imagine that in place of the traditional, verbal pronouncement from Gabriel, we are about to witness an intimate, physical, and purely human exchange. References to an omniscient, powerful God are dispelled, and in their place exists the energy between a man and a woman. We see Gabriel from behind. He walks towards Mary from the right side of the

space. His figure is slightly blurred, communicating his movement. Aside from a pair of wings, Gabriel is fully nude. Both he and Mary are slender, exuding a healthy youthfulness and a suggestion of sexual primacy.

This is clearly an unconventional version of the annunciation. Initially, Mary appears vulnerable to the approaching Gabriel. Yet we realize all the power lies where she does. Gabriel is drawn towards her, suggesting that perhaps the annunciation was of her own accord and neither Gabriel’s nor God’s. Michals, who was raised Catholic, has reordered the hierarchy of the traditional annunciation. Mary is empowered in the spirit of her female predecessor, Eve. The loss of heavy cloaks signifies the gain of personal expression and sexuality. In a sense, the artist has extended freedom to women by presenting Mary as a contemporary version of the Second Eve. Michals seems to acknowledge an innate eroticism and magnetism of the female form in this image. Says Michals of his work in general, “I see women’s bodies as being very sexy and very provocative.”

Made in 1969, a time of social upheaval in numerous areas, the image brings forth notions of feminism and personal liberation.

Compare this work to John Dugdale’s cyanotype photograph, *The Annunciation*, 2003 (fig. 11), in which we are shown a nude Mary and as far as we know, a nude Gabriel. Though Dugdale also depicts Mary as nude, his presentation is more traditional and avoids endowing Mary with the feminine power that Michals’ photograph relayed. Entirely unclothed, Mary sits at a table to the right of the image reading a book. To the left of the scene, Gabriel appears suspended above Mary, extending his right arm and hand towards her and beckoning with one outstretched finger. Dugdale chose to illustrate Mary and Gabriel in communication. This is the moment of Gabriel’s proposition to Mary. As opposed to Michaels’ photograph where Gabriel is physically drawn to Mary, Dugdale’s photograph suggests that Mary will be the one to move,

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20 Enright, 18.
rising from her chair towards Gabriel in response. His composition in the piece indicates a slight shift. Though Mary in Michals’ work is not active, her alluring physicality as a woman propels the angel to move towards her. Conversely, Dugdale’s Mary sits with her knees together, hair pulled over her right side, and with a hunched back. She is drawn inward and requires Gabriel’s proposition to help her emerge. The nudity of Dugdale’s Mary emphasizes her vulnerability and humility, whereas Michals presents us with a confident woman whose openness provides her with the powerful tool of seduction.

*Mary as Naked Female: Objectified and Dominated*

Where Michals humanizes and hands authority to Mary as the Second Eve, Chris Ofili’s two bronze sculptures, *Annunciation*, 2006 (fig. 12-14), puts the traditional narrative into palpable tension. He eroticizes and glamorizes the annunciation story. This treatment of religious imagery comes as no surprise, considering the artist’s preceding controversial portrait, *The Holy Virgin Mother*, 1996 (fig. 15), which incorporated elephant dung and pornographic elements. Ofili Raised Catholic and an altar boy for part of his youth, Ofili often addresses religious themes and stories, which he says are still relevant today in his work. He comments:

> Stories within the Bible still have a relevance to my life and contemporary life in general. I'm still interested in ideas of morality. Last night I was thinking about how Christianity has structured the way we live our lives now. The stories are so well put together that they evoke very powerful images… The stories have stayed with me, although they're completely remixed in my head. And often when I do further reading, I'm quite surprised by the difference between the real story and my memory of the story. I'm interested in that difference and how it's affected the way I think about making images.\(^\text{21}\)

While Ofili’s piece retains the biblical aura he alludes to in this quote, like Michals he redefines the nature of the meeting of Mary and the angel Gabriel. Ofili’s sculptures illustrate a moment

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of drama and seduction between the subjects, compressing their interaction into a single, charged moment.

In form, the bronze figures are slightly larger than life-size, suggesting a distance from the mortal world. The larger figure, Gabriel, kneels with his arms outstretched. The massive wings extending from his back seem to overpower his body. The patina is dark, almost black, and roughly textured. It appears unrefined and harsh. Without question, he dominates the figure below him. His balanced, symmetrical pose conveys a sense of dominion. His stomach strangely protrudes in manner that may remind one of a pregnant body. Mary’s figure, on the other hand, is smaller and kneels with her left leg outstretched and her right knee positioned erotically between Gabriel’s knees. Her curvaceous body draws her towards the male counterpart. Instead of a respectful pronouncement from Gabriel, viewers are confronted with sex between Gabriel and Mary, though it is impossible to determine whether Mary is seducing or being controlled. Oddly, she has been given a thin, swooping tail.

The different manipulation of surface treatment between Gabriel and Mary is striking, and situates the two figures in a kind of opposition. Mary’s figure is highly polished, reflecting what surrounds her, possibly alluding to the Virgin Annunciate’s role as the vessel through which the rest of humankind is realized. It is the luster and shine of the golden metal of Mary in contrast to the raw, dark patinated surface of the Gabriel figure that successfully presents the figures as dualities that either complement or oppose. In addition, the artist has bound the figures to each other, both metaphorically and physically. At two points the material of the figures melt into one another. Mary’s left arm reaches up towards Gabriel’s right wing at one point; Gabriel’s left arm extends down towards the tip of Mary’s tail at another point. In this way Ofili suggests an unbreakable fusion of these seemingly separate entities. The work thus
exploits a sense of the fluidity inherent in liquid metal, which heightens the ambiguity of the pairing of the figures. Ofili blurs boundaries both symbolically and physically as one form becomes another. His other sculpture of the same title is almost identical in form except that rather than kneeling, Gabriel stands upright while Mary’s legs melt into his thighs. In this case, her structural support remains entirely dependent on Gabriel’s (see fig. 14), possibly alluding to the biblical narrative of Eve created from Adam.\textsuperscript{22} Though sexual penetration between the figures is not explicit, these points of connection illustrate the concept of “two becoming one” in a way that directly challenges the dominant, historical view of this encounter. Warner outlines this principle narrative:

\begin{quote}
The Virgin’s first systematic theologian, Francisco Suarez (d. 1617), even felt bound to deny that the encounter was sexual: The Blessed Virgin in conceiving a son neither lost her virginity nor experienced any venereal pleasures… it did not befit the Holy Spirit without any cause or utility to produce such an effect, or to excite any unbecoming movement of passion… on the contrary the effect of his overshadowing is to quench the fire of original sin.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

Not only does Ofili’s sculpture fail to extinguish flames of passion, it fans the fire. The artist infuses Mary with the persona of Eve through an overtly sexual figuration. The female figure’s exaggerated curves, whose allure is said to have “initiated the fall of the human race,”\textsuperscript{24} and glossy gold quality make her into an object of desire. Whereas Michals’ treatment affirms her power, Ofili’s treatment does something else. Her persona alludes to the sinful, tempting Eve. She embodies pure desire to which her counterpart succumbs. She appears defined by her connection to the angel. They are dependent on each other, though their dependency is founded in “weakness” (i.e. sexual “temptation”). It is difficult to imagine the Son of God as the result of this union. Ofili has transformed the story of the annunciation, which in many ways symbolizes

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{22} Miles, 87.
\textsuperscript{23} Warner, 39.
\textsuperscript{24} Miles, 99.
\end{flushright}
a synthesis of life: Gabriel, Mary, God, Jesus, humans, heaven, earth, death and life-everlasting. Ofili pulls apart, whittles down, and then rejoins the dualities of male and female, good and evil, controller and controlled, suggesting that perhaps this is a more appropriate context for contemporary humans. In an interview with Paul D. Miller, Ofili echoes this approach in his art-making. He states: “And in a way, what I’m trying to do is to promote contradiction because that’s the reality of the everyday… [I want my work to be] a magnet for people’s thoughts, ideas, and arguments, and hopefully, it will allow people to feel free to disagree with themselves. And to not be so intent on right and wrong.”

_Beneath Nudity: Mary’s Biological Body_

Directly related to the previous works and to themes surrounding the annunciation are the sculptures of Damien Hirst. His treatment of the Virgin Mary exemplifies the fact that Mary was biologically female and able to reproduce. Hirst’s sculptures aim to reclaim Mary’s biological body. They bring science and knowledge to the forefront of Mary’s story and in particular to her place as the Mother of Christ. They challenge ancient, archaic ideas surrounding virgin birth and “erroneous ideas about human generation,” for example the myth that “woman was womb and womb was evil.”

Damien Hirst’s large-scale sculptures, all titled *Virgin Mother*, 2005-2006 (fig. 16-20), differ in surface treatment only. All three are 35-foot tall bronze versions of an entirely naked and fully pregnant Virgin Mary. The sculptures are installed in highly visible locations. One is located in front of the Royal Academy of Arts in London. A second version is installed on the

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26 Warner, 34.
27 Ibid., 57. Warner situates this concept in relation to original sin and the woman’s role as child-bearer. She states, “For as childbirth was woman’s special function, and its pangs the special penalty decreed by God after the Fall, and as the child bore in her womb was stained by sin from the moment of its conception, the evils of sex were particularly identified with the female.”
oceanfront in Monaco, while the third is located in the plaza outside of the Lever House in New York City. Both of the sculptures in Monaco and New York City have brightly painted areas, while the one in London is uniformly dark. In all versions, Mary appears naturally modeled except for the upper right quadrant of her body where more than clothing is removed. In this area, the flesh has also been peeled back to reveal the make-up of her muscles, breast, skull, and most importantly, the child in her stomach. The grace in her stance is in no way diminished by the visibility of her internal organs. Instead their inclusion further communicates the beauty of Mary as a life-sustaining, biological system. While one hand swings back, the other rests gently on the top of her swollen belly relaying a sense of gentle yet protective motherhood. Her posture is open with one foot stepped forward. Her chin is lifted, thrusting her forehead and eyes to the sky. She appears engaged, confident, and capable. Unlike the previous works that I have discussed in this chapter where nudity demanded a central position, here Mary’s naked body is the safe place and what is located beneath that becomes the shocking gesture. Similarly, *Virgin Mother* by Kiki Smith, whose artistic practices will be further explored in Chapter Three, (fig. 21) also strips Mary of her garments as well as her flesh, revealing the connecting muscles and tendons of her body. In their sculptures, Hirst and Smith convey something deeper than nakedness.

In many Christian texts Mary is repeatedly referred to and symbolized as a vessel. In traditional annunciation scenes a vessel is typically present to emphasize this point. She is presented as the physical carrier for Christ. Instead of indirectly alluding to this, Hirst shows us the vessel on a grand scale and it is Mary. He ignites her role. He cuts away the vessel to reveal the inner workings and the child within, emphasizing the intimate, symbiotic relationship and dependency of a child on its mother, even when that child is Christ. The artist dispels the
mysticism and usurps the metaphors that much of Christianity has used to represent women. Here, science replaces religion. Mary is a woman and she looms large. The mystery of her pregnancy and motherhood is relayed strictly through biology.

The common thread through all of the works discussed so far is the focus given to the female figure. By stripping Mary of her garments, each artist consciously puts the physical form of femininity on display and therefore assigns it a particular importance. It is worth noting that the artists considered in this discussion happen to be male with the exception of Kiki Smith. The timeless dynamics between men and women, especially within the context of Christianity, cannot be disregarded.28 Both Michals’ and Ofili’s pieces eroticize Mary. It is possible that one may see their works as expressions of male fantasies. They chose to sexualize not just any woman, but the Virgin Mary, the epitome of chastity in Western culture. Their pieces bring forth notions of sexual temptation and Mary as the Second Eve. When compared with religious representations of nude women by female artists, such as God Giving Birth by Monica Sjoo, 1968 (fig. 22), and Self-Portrait as God by Cynthia Mailman, 1977 (fig. 23), Michals’ and Ofili’s works hint at the potentially vast differences between depictions of Mary as the creative Mother by men and by women. However, in all of these cases, and especially in the ways I have discussed in this chapter, presenting Mary like this dislodges her from her traditional role within annunciation scenes. These representations of Mary imply a critique of traditional religion, specifically Christianity, along with a critique of Western culture’s long-established ideas surrounding women’s roles within this religious framework.

28 Margaret Miles refers to the relationships between men and women as “one of the most volatile and intimate aspects of communal life.” Miles, 85.
Chapter Two

Seeing is Believing: Pictorial Mechanics in the Annunciation

The incarnation mystery as a double paradox: Eternity appears in time, immensity in measurement, the Creator in the creature... the unfigurable in the figure, the unnarratable in discourse, the inexplicable in speech, the uncircumscribable in the place, the invisible in vision, the unhearable in sound.29

All in all, I believe that this divine dimension raises the question of transcendence [...] People agree to say that it is rationality and science which have eliminated what is called magic and religion. But ultimately, the ironic outcome of this techno-scientific development is a renewed need for the idea of God. [...] it's just that technologies seriously challenge the status of the human being. All technologies converge toward the same spot, they all lead to a deus ex machina, a machine-God. In a way, technologies have negated the transcendentald God in order to invent the machine-God.30

Introduction

In this chapter I will analyze contemporary versions of the annunciation that highlight the pictorial mechanics of representing the incarnation of Christ in Christianity. I will argue that through a synthesis of seemingly disparate entities such as the divine and the earthly, these works suggest that shared and comparable imperatives mark the present and the past. I will discuss the advent of the use of perspective, a pictorial system that in the Renaissance helped to validate and bridge the incomprehensible incident of the incarnation of God. Perspective became a tool to regulate disparate spaces, such as earth and heaven, and orders of existence, such as human and God. I will discuss Daniel Arasse’s argument that the development of perspective within an art historical context is closely tied to the presentation and reception of annunciation scenes. In his book The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective (1975) Samuel Y. Edgerton states that

during the thirteenth century the Franciscan monk Roger Bacon (ca. 1220-1292) began encouraging artists to use a geometric system for depicting God’s order. Edgerton states: “Bacon wanted the sacred stories illustrated in ‘literal truth,’ according to the laws of optics and geometry, which he believed underlay God’s master plan for the universe.” I will discuss how the contemporary artists included here respond to a similar need for a divine system of authority.

The artists I include in this chapter also give particular attention to the medium of communication between Mary and Gabriel, as well as the pictorial system that frames their encounter. While the biblical narrative of the Annunciation suggests that Gabriel as an angel spoke to Mary, the artists discussed here, Jessica Harrison, Gottfried Helnwein, and Richard Hamilton, reinterpret and reapply the details of their meeting. In annunciation imagery from the Renaissance, the passage from the Bible is often directly transcribed into the scene. One can see the written words leaving Gabriel’s mouth and entering Mary’s ear, head, or womb. This handling emphasizes that it was the literal “Word of God” that impregnated Mary. The artists in this chapter play with the mystery of the incarnation. They pull from pervasive aspects of contemporary life, applying new meanings while strengthening the familiar ones.

Though the artists included in the previous chapter also significantly alter the dynamics between Gabriel and Mary, they did so by igniting gender roles and exaggerating the sexual interplay between Mary and Gabriel. Duane Michals, Chris Ofili and Damien Hirst pulled Mary from her firmly prescribed function and accented her sexuality and womanhood. They further revealed the possible fallacies of a limited understanding of Mary as solely a virgin vessel for the Son of God. In this chapter, the artists also reconsider relationships and roles within the annunciation scene. One way this is done is through the depiction of space, and the way Gabriel

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and Mary are located in the space. However, whereas those artists focused on the representation of Mary, in this chapter I will discuss how Harrison, Helnwein, and Hamilton reinterpret Gabriel’s position as announcer and catalyst for the incarnation. They transform Gabriel from Mary’s divine counterpart to a symbol of “the proclamation,” removing entirely Gabriel’s human form. He becomes a disembodied communication device: a television, a mouth with wings, or a telephone. I will argue that while these artists use relatively extreme and seemingly critical iconography for the annunciation, they are highlighting the role of forms of transcendence in contemporary life. Whereas in Renaissance annunciations it was the mechanics of perspective that helped realize this, these contemporary artists consider contemporary technologies. While Helnwein alludes to the present-day authority of technology experienced through television, Hamilton utilizes digital technology to render illusory spaces for presenting the annunciation. Though their imagery appears to disassemble and devalue this holy event, they are truly revealing the persistent force of awe-inducing encounters. They help us realize that religious experiences are not so removed from our contemporary lives but rather that their expressions have evolved and changed.

**Containing God: Perspective and the Annunciation**

The development of linear perspective in the fourteenth century helped to create a pictorial system that supported a more realistic depiction of space. As experimental psychologist Michael Kubovy states in his book *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art* (1988), “The most obvious function of perspective was to rationalize the representation of space: With the advent of perspective, it became much easier to stage, as it were, elaborate group scenes
organized in a spatially complex fashion.”  

As a creative force, it demonstrated that within the flat plane of a painting the perception of theoretical space could become tangible. Three dimensions appeared to exist in two and the brain, an ever-adaptive tool, was able to accept the construction of seemingly real space. With this “suspension of belief” strengthened, visual imagery was propelled along the spectrum from imagination and artistic representation to acceptance of renderings as potentially true occurrences.

Drawing from the work of art historians including Erwin Panofsky and Daniel Arasse, art historian Hanneke Grootenboer acknowledges the argument that the earliest definitive example of perspective appeared in Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Annunciation (fig. 24) in 1344 in Siena, Italy. In this painting, one can clearly identify the vanishing point of the floor tiles. This system creates a believable space, with the depth of the room firmly situating Gabriel and Mary on the tiled floor. As Grootenboer argues, this was not an arbitrary development within any random subject matter, but rather an advance born out of the necessity to support the story. Grootenboer writes: “The Incarnation that begins with the dialogue between Gabriel and Mary needs a locus in order somehow to take place, and as Marin and Arasse have explained, perspective has legitimized the existence of this place.”

She cites Arasse’s argument in his book L’Annonciation italienne: Une histoire de perspective (1999) that rather than slowly progress and develop, the advent of perspective was a “radical rupture brought about by an Annunciation painting by Masaccio.” Unfortunately, this painting has since been lost and now many consider Masaccio’s painting, The Holy Trinity (1426-27), to herald the inception of linear perspective.

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33 Ibid., 355.
34 Ibid., 354.
As Arasse, Grootenboer, and Kubovy demonstrate, the development of perspective in Renaissance art and particularly in annunciation scenes was steeped in meaning. Kubovy writes: “Perspective often enabled the Renaissance artist to cast the deeply religious contents of his art in a form that could produce in the viewer spiritual effects that could not have been achieved by any other formal means.”36 Perspective actually facilitated a clearer understanding for the viewers, and presented an ordered system for people to internalize. Edgerton states, “The picture, as constructed according to the laws of perspective, was to set an example for moral order and human perfection.”37 As cognitive psychologist Robert L. Solso states in his book *Cognition and the Visual Arts* (1996), based on what the eyes detects, the brain has the ability to recall “stored knowledge about forms, colors, shapes, juxtapositions, and the meaning of life.”38 Utilizing prior information, one was perhaps able to envision himself or herself within a similar space, and therefore within the realm of the particular spiritual event as well. Placing the setting of the annunciation within a visually “real” space, which the viewers could relate to, humanized the encounter. Edgerton quotes Bacon here:

Surely the mere vision perceptible to our senses would be beautiful, but more beautiful since we should see in our presence the form of our truth […] I count nothing more fitting for a man diligent in the study of God’s wisdom than the exhibition of geometrical forms of this kind before his eyes.39

The seeming reality of the pictorial space helped elucidate the extraordinary event of the annunciation. In the case of this story, one may share in Mary’s wonder at the appearance and subsequent message from Gabriel.

Along with promoting personal veneration for this religious event, perspectival space provided a metaphor for validating the possibility and actual existence of the annunciation and

36 Kubovy, 169.  
37 Edgerton, 24.  
39 Edgerton, 18.
incarnation of Christ. Just as artists were able to create space where space did not exist, so God was able to impregnate a woman. The analogy of light entering an eye without damaging the outer membrane was used to explain how God may have entered Mary. Similarly this rational was applied to the “magic” of perspective, that allowed one’s eye to penetrate the two dimensional space of a painting. As Grootenboer writes: “the new, perfect, geometrical space rendered by perspective conceived of as virgin territory in which the invisible becomes visible as an optical ‘passage’ that we do not see as we see through it.” The mathematically constructed room became wondrous vessel, and in the same way the flesh and blood Virgin Mary became the vessel for God incarnate. The depiction of “real” space helped rationalize this event. It provided a physical location: the room, the garden, the loggia. It provided a place for Mary to sit and read and a place for Gabriel to address her. Often, the lines of sight converged in the middle of the painting where a door, window, or other opening existed, as seen in Domenico Veneziano’s *The Annunciation* from 1442-48 (fig. 25). The opening created an entryway for God, signifying a portal from heaven to earth. Perspective shaped the space for energy to pass from Gabriel to Mary. It metaphorically synthesized earth with heaven by directing all lines of sight towards a single, theoretical point. Grootenboer highlights how the vanishing point came to symbolize an imaginary space that only God could inhabit. By using perspective to create the setting for the annunciation, artists were visually manifesting God. In her essay “The Rebirth of Perspective and the Fragmentation of Illusion,” Kim H. Veltman makes a distinction between Renaissance perspective and modern systems of order. She states: “Whereas Renaissance artists favored

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40 Grootenboer states: “Lippi may have reasoned that if pure rays of sunlight could enter a window to emerge ‘unspoiled’ as St Bernard writes, such rays could also fall through the second membrane of the human eye without hurting it. Correspondingly, I would add that perspective, literally meaning ‘a seeing through,’ has enabled the viewer’s eye to plunge deep into the pictorial space without damaging the image.” Grootenboer.
41 Ibid., 360.
42 Ibid., 357.
static, one-point, linear perspective, modern perspective has focused ever more attention to dynamic transformations.” As our relationships with our physical surroundings continue to evolve, so do our artistic depictions of space. The following contemporary artists use alternative systems to visualize God.

A Contemporary God in Pictorial Systems of Authority

Like numerous predecessors, Jessica Harrison’s lithograph, Annunciation, 2007 (fig. 26), employs aural reception as the medium of incarnation. Harrison pushes the expression of conception through the ear to an extreme. In this piece, Mary appears dutifully alarmed at hearing the unexpected news. As tradition dictates, she is clothed in layered robes and kneels at a small table reading. Gabriel’s entrance from the upper left portion of the work has startled her and she turns towards him. However, in the place of his body we see a colossal mouth with wings. The open mouth swoops down towards Mary, presumably delivering God’s message. Gabriel and the announcement are one and the same. His physical body has succumbed to representing the single, essential aspect of his being: his spoken word. We can sense the influence and power of the mouth. In her artist statement, Harrison reveals how concepts of the body fill a central role in her art. She states: “The things I make are about the body: the body in space, the space within the body and the space in-between the two. The body is something we all share in one shape or form, the filter through which we all experience the world around us and the objects in front of us.” Its disembodiment helps situate Mary’s humanity. She appears small and vulnerable. One may interpret Mary as entirely at the will of the winged-mouth and its message. From above, it dictates Mary’s future, while incarnating authority. It ascends from a

realm where word and thought are combined. The surrounding space has been rendered blank. The mouth and Mary exist in no real place. This overtly contradicts the Renaissance scenes where Mary and Gabriel are located in some sort of identifiable interior or exterior setting. The omission of concrete surroundings also negates the need for perspective. Reliance on true space is unnecessary in Harrison’s piece. She has subverted the foundation, and no longer relies on that particular trick to draw God into the human territory.

Though details of the space are ambiguous, there is ample information to suggest the confines of a small bedroom. A woman sits on the edge of a bed and leans toward a large television on a small table. As far as the viewer can surmise, these are the only pieces of furniture within the room. The walls are blank and there are no pillows on the mattress. The artist further emphasizes the starkness of the scene through a monochromatic color palette in which both extremes of dark and light are strongly present. The darkness threatening to consume the entire space is expelled solely by light emanating from the television. In a bizarre twist of traditional imagery, Helnwein shows us that an angel embodies the ethereal glow of the television.

Like Harrison, Gottfried Helnwein finds an alternative method for depicting systems of authority experienced through communion with God. His painting, *The Annunciation*, 1993 (fig. 27), resituates the meeting of Gabriel and Mary through severe, wholly contemporary imagery. Here Helnwein critiques our increasing dependence on technology, suggesting that we use it to incarnate God. In her article “Dark Inspiration,” Lynell George states: “Gottfried Helnwein's artistic and intellectual approach is to aim quite subtly at producing a crucial feeling of insecurity and a concomitant change of consciousness in the viewer, by using seemingly familiar or usual
images that have a certain amount of tradition and an apparently well known composition.”

Helnwein uses the prevalent story of the annunciation as a framework for situating contemporary issues. Familiar storylines or imagery assists the viewer in her or his translation of the piece. By pairing traditional, religious stories with updated imagery, the artist is able to re-present ideas deeply lodged within the collective conscious.

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One of the most striking aspects of the work is that the artist borrows the angel Gabriel from Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of the annunciation (fig. 28). The side profile, hairstyle, and hand motion of Helnwein’s angel immediately alludes to Leonardo’s, thus unquestionably situating this piece as an updated annunciation. In Leonardo’s version, there is ample distance between the couple, approximately four to five feet, relaying the typical sense of veneration in the meeting. In the background between Gabriel and Mary, one can see a majestic, remote

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46 In his painting Adoration of the Magi (fig. 29) completed three years after Annunciation, Helnwein uses the compositional imagery of this biblical scene, but replaces the baby Jesus with an infantile Hitler and the adoring Magi with inspecting political officials. While Helnwein’s baby appears more innocent and child-like than most representations of baby Jesus, the feeling of the surrounding men has shifted from admiration and awe to calculation.
mountain perhaps alluding to heaven or God’s territory. Conversely, Helnwein collapses this space, placing Gabriel’s hand inches from Mary’s face indicating the likelihood of the two physically touching. The artist blurs the boundary between our physical world and the electronic realm. Additionally, the figures’ altered scale greatly affects the politics of their relationship. Mary and Gabriel are depicted as relatively equal in size in Leonardo’s painting; Helnwein shrinks the angel to fit within the confines of the television, keeping Mary life-size. Like Harrison and her enormous mouth, Helnwein tells us this exchange is not purely human. Gabriel, sustains a compact, yet intense power as he seemingly hypnotizes Mary. While Mary’s body indicates her firm existence in the physical realm, Gabriel represents the spiritual through technology.

Helnwein’s annunciation is a springboard for examining our current relationships with technology. In her book *Idolatry to Advertising: Visual Art and Contemporary Culture* (1996), Susan G. Josephson is critical of our increasing dependency on mass media and material technology suggesting that as our use of technology becomes more engrained into culture, the need for transcendent art has disappeared. She states:

> We sense how our mentality has changed from the last resurgence of mythic culture in the medieval age. We no longer try to reach a more spiritual space outside our bodies through art, even art that serves mythic needs [...] There is no transcendence or mystical space for art to point us toward. Thus the yearning in us to be attuned to a more universal unity or spirituality is directed into our everyday lives and our material existence.\(^{47}\)

Though I disagree with Josephson’s argument that the “mystical space for art to point us toward” is obsolete, her insights into our increasing need for individual experiences of transcendence through material and technological venues seem accurate. I would argue that contemporary

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artists are exploring ways to present art through these current methods as the following examples imply.

In his painting, Helnwein calls into question the mysterious mechanics of the manifestation of God. Gabriel is transmitted through the television into Mary’s eyes. Here, the eye parallels Mary’s womb as a vessel. Light enters the eye and gives rise to images, while God entered Mary’s womb and gave rise to Christ. Then again, all light may not be created equal. We must consider the particular light source from which Helnwein’s rays enter Mary’s optical receptors: an electronic screen. In Wim Wender’s film, Until the End of the World (1991), advanced technology allows people to record and view their dreams. The main character becomes addicted to seeing her dreams replayed. She is seduced by the visual presentation of her thoughts, whose lure usurps her need to experience her immediate surroundings. In her article “Televisual Architecture of the Dream Body,” Amelia Jones points to “the capacity of the image to turn the subject inside out, to produce a dreamscape on the outside of the body that is more seductive than life itself.” In his eerie painting, Helnwein is speaking to the power of electronic images to create new realities.

Cultural critic and artist Lynn Randolph writes: “We are all cyborgs in that we rely on various chemicals and communication technologies to see us through each day.” As Josephson suggests, technology has become our version of transcendental authority – a devotional practice for present-day times. Devotion to interfacing with electronic screens augments our experience of the world. Throughout history and across countless cultures, religious ritual has provided the forum for connection to something beyond ourselves. In the same way that the incarnation of the

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annunciation pulled seemingly contradictory entities near to each other, so do virtual manifestations connect distinct existences, as Margaret Morse suggests in her book *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyber Culture* (1998). Like perspective for the individual of the Renaissance, digital and virtual imagery augments the way we see the world, and therefore the way we experience the world. Morse states:

> Virtual environments can signify liminal spaces, sacred places of social and personal transformation like the cave or the sweat lodge, if only by reason of their virtuality – neither imaginary nor real, animate but neither living nor dead, a subjunctive realm of externalized imagination wherein events happen in effect, but not actually.50

The Christian annunciation scene relays the mystifying concept of spiritual existence. In Helnwein’s perceptive piece, God is born of the machine: TV as God. Technology becomes the “no place” where we can exist separately, though only temporarily, from our precarious, fleeting lives. Virtual experiences allow us to separate from our bodies – freed of physical confines one becomes bodiless. According to Christianity, God’s will through the incarnation suggests that humans can attain ever-lasting life and transcend one’s physical body. In an interview with cultural critic Paul Virilio regarding technology and God, Louise K. Wilson asks: “Is there a transcendence of the body?” Virilio responds:

> That notion of transcendence is a complex one, but it is true that there is something divine in this new technology. The research on cyberspace is a quest for God. To be God. To be here and there. […] The technologies of virtual reality are attempting to make us see from beneath, from inside, from behind … as if we were God. I am a Christian, and even though I know we are talking about metaphysics and not about religion, I must say that cyberspace is acting like God and deals with the idea of God who is, sees, and hears everything.51

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50 Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyber Culture*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 180.

Virilio seems to suggest that the contemporary annunciation of God is perhaps more present in our use of technology and entry into virtual worlds than in other aspects of life. This uncharted territory becomes the new system for embodying God and a world order.  

**Annunciation in Digital Space**

In Richard Hamilton’s perplexing hybridic work, *The annunciation*, 2005 (fig. 30), he uses technology and computer software to create a fictional setting for his painting. Comprised of various photographs of his own bedroom and living space, he presents the viewer with what appears to be a modern gallery. On the wall hangs a photorealist painting. The digital montage shows a nude woman sitting on a wooden chair in a room. She leans back in the chair while on the phone. Directly to the right of her in the corner of the room is a bright light. The illumination is so intense it obscures the lamp and the surrounding details. Like Harrison’s and Helnwein’s pieces, this work appears to be an updated interpretation of the annunciation that acknowledges our inextricable link with technology. In place of Gabriel, the medium for the message, we find a telephone. The Mary figure receives the holy news via modern intervention, through a phone call. Her expression sustains the questioning and slightly fearful look shared by traditional and contemporary Mary figures alike. The bright light manifests a sense of the divine presence of God and perhaps symbolizes the wonder of the incarnation. All of the components of an annunciation scene are present. Hamilton has chosen to present the scene as a work of art hanging in a pristine setting. This forces us to question what is being presented.

In her article “Richard Hamilton’s *The annunciation*” (2011), Fanny Singer identifies a direct parallel between the intended reception of Hamilton’s annunciation and Fra Angelico’s

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52 Regarding cyberspace, Morse offers a cautionary view: “However, drawing on signs of transcendence, especially when understood as a cultural relation to another realm beyond this mortal life, has disturbing implications, because unlike prior illusion-producing modes of expression, cyberspace is a means of enchanting not only liminal realms, but everyday life.” Morse, 180.
well-known annunciation from 1440, located at San Marco Monastery in Florence, Italy. States Singer:

That Hamilton’s *annunciation* should be located in the pristine, but minimalist, interior of a gallery seems a deliberate choice: the ‘modern art space’ may be thought of as a contemporary parallel to the unembellished chambers of the San Marco monastery. Hamilton invites us to [practice] our secular rituals of reverence, just as Fra Angelico intended his viewers, the resident Dominican friars, to genuflect in imitation of Gabriel while repeating an ‘Ave’ before the sacred image.\(^{53}\)

As Singer suggests, Hamilton is very aware of our continuous need to create sites of devotion within contemporary culture. He recognizes the role of transcendent experiences. In this piece he connects the religiosity and aura of the museum and/or gallery with that of monasteries of the sixteenth centuries. Both sites help contextualize, preserve, present, and reify the sacred, drawing a distinction from the profane. Of particular interest is that Hamilton chose to synthesize images of his own living space in order to create a virtual space that resembles and relays the mystique of a museum.\(^{54}\) Through the use of digital tools, such as Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop, he reinvents and infuses typically mundane domesticity by alluding to the awe-inspiring qualities of our museums as reliquaries.

As Morse suggests this is less importantly about the tool and more about the effect of that tool. Morse says: “Electronically produced virtual realms and induced experiences are only superficially about technology. They are about transcendence.”\(^{55}\) No longer necessarily reliant on the production of religion, we can visually manufacture the aura from our own homes and of our own homes. Had we not been told that Hamilton digitally created this setting, we would have most likely accepted that his piece has found its home among the pristine whiteness of the museum world. Either way, the effect remains. The point that Hamilton constructed his own

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\(^{54}\) Ibid.

\(^{55}\) Morse, 179.
site promotes the notion that in contemporary times we manufacture our experiences through the use of technology. Singer reminds us of this, “That the print itself might serve as a place holder, or substitute, for the Virgin may have been a peripheral intention of Hamilton’s; […] Perhaps the print is not at all what the title suggests (a variant of the Christian miracle), but a meditation on the act of creation, be it biological or technological.”56

So while God creates through the annunciation, we are also creating God. This creation of God occurs through the invention of perspective. By creating a space to be viewed, the system of visual perspective helped solidify the necessity of the viewer.57 The existence of a vanishing point suggests the presence of a set of eyes from which the visual information recedes. While in some ways it separates the observer from the observed world, it also forges a bond between the two. The same drama of creation and transcendence exists in the work of the contemporary artists included here, though employed in varying ways. In essence, their works speak to the authority of visual images and the faith that seeing can induce, sustaining the familiar, enduring adage that “seeing is believing.”58

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56 Singer, “Richard Hamilton’s The annunciation.”
57 States Kubovy: “The emergence of perspective as a formal logic, applicable to any content whatsoever, but still confined to empirical reality and to the concrete features of the perceptual world. Based on the static viewpoint of a single observer.” Kubovy, 167.
58 Virilio gives a particularly insightful response to Wilson’s question, “But what shall we dream of when everything becomes visible?” Virilio responds: “We’ll dream of being blind” Wilson, 328.
Chapter Three

Disseminating Authority: The Annunciation and Artistic Creation

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, people are hungry for authentic culture to which they feel connected, and what better way to connect than by creating it ourselves? 59

The collective power that is common to these spectators […] is the power to translate in their own way what they are looking at. It is the power to connect it with the intellectual adventure that makes any of them similar to any other insofar as his or her path looks unlike any other. The common power is the power of the equality of intelligences. This power binds individuals together to the very extent that it keeps them apart from each other; it is the power each of us possesses in equal measure to make our own way in the world. 60

Introduction

In the final chapter I will expand my scope from the boundaries of literal representations of Christian-based annunciation scenes to include pieces that consider artistic creation more broadly. In this section, I will posit the Christian annunciation to be largely about God’s creative act and its irreversible effect on humankind. In her book Material Christianity (1995), Colleen McDannell states: “on a more conceptual level, through the Incarnation, the divine and the human worlds are brought together. God became flesh in the body of Christ and in doing so created the possibility that the sacred can be embodied in nature and humanity.” 61 In this one gesture, the boundary separating humanity from the divine was dissolved. I discussed in the second chapter how the annunciation combined seemingly disparate entities, supporting harmonious integration where we may not have previously imagined it possible. In many ways, an artist’s work can provide similar results. Artist Kiki Smith has long identified ties between

Christianity – in particular Catholicism – and art-making. She said, “Catholicism is ‘a religion that’s about making things physical, about taking very un-physical things – emotional and spiritual ideas – and making them physical.’” Art, like many aspects of religion, gives tangible form to intangible concepts. The metaphor of the annunciation becomes an especially significant moment. I will consider the divine intervention present in the annunciation as a metaphor for the artistic process, from the inception of an idea to formation of an artwork. While all of the previous pieces have been recognizable as annunciation scenes, the following artworks do not necessarily depict the familiar narrative between Gabriel and Mary.

Through discussion of various artworks, I will liken our collective spiritual experiences to the relationship between the artist-as-creator and his or her beholder. Additionally, I will address the role of the viewer-as-participant and what happens when artists invite their viewers to join them, just as the advent of the annunciation facilitated the union between God and humankind. I will suggest that the potential of an artwork is most fully realized when those who receive it become active participants in its creation. The annunciation is truly a conversation about life. The symbolic exchange between Gabriel and Mary can be identified in daily life as the presentation and acknowledgement of ourselves.

The exhibition catalogue written by art historian and critic Thierry de Duve for Look: One Hundred Years of Contemporary Art (2001) addresses and deconstructs the action of presenting oneself. De Duve reasons that just as humans are consistently engaged in this symbolic and physical exchange, so are works of art. In fact in many ways a work of art becomes a stand-in for the human relationship in its attempt to address its beholder. De Duve states:

62 Wilkerson, 104.
To say: “Here I am” is to introduce oneself. Only a living being endowed with language can do this; inanimate things cannot. Works of art, however, are things. We lend them human properties we judge them to be alive, and we call them eloquent when they are successful; we treat them with the respect due human beings; and we deem it barbaric to destroy them.⁶³

Through the creation of objects we transpose our human qualities on inanimate things.

We bestow on art the potential to draw forth the supernatural parts of life. By presenting itself – the “Here I Am” – forces us to address what it offers. Often, without realizing it, we reflect and pull in the messages art relays the same way we respond to each other. This exchange becomes a significant event that has the potential to alter and enrich our understanding. Philosopher and author Jim Long speaks to the necessity of these types of experiences in his recent article, “Being-in-the-World and Being-in-the-Situation.” He states:

Since in everyday life I am absorbed in the things that I deal with and the normal affairs that happen daily, I tacitly understand the meaning of life in terms of them. So it takes some special event to bring me back to face my life as a meaningful whole, a whole that is quite different from the world in which I can manipulate things to fulfill my purposes.⁶⁴

One can imagine the reception of a creative idea as a “special event” possible of re-presenting oneself with the “meaningful whole.” As Long suggests, in this exchange we may lose the safety of our self-defined and controlled arena. The beholder is vulnerable to the influence of the artwork, just as the artist must be open to receive the creative spark.

Annunciation as the Inception of Artistic Creation

A large part of the scholarship and discussion surrounding Kiki Smith’s artwork highlights her ties to Catholicism. Though she has not been a practicing Catholic during adulthood, Smith openly acknowledges and celebrates the influence religion has brought to her

work. Much of Smith’s artworks address concepts of spirituality, myth-making, and ritual – all ideas embedded in both ancient and contemporary religious practices. In her dissertation, “Making God: Incarnation and Somatic Piety in the Art of Kiki Smith” (2006), Margaret Randolph Wilkerson states that for Smith, “Christianity and art both share a belief in the power that can be invested in the image and in inanimate objects.”65 Christianity, and in Smith’s case, Catholicism in particular, lend themselves as a reference point and source of already established inspiration. As addressed in previous chapters, many artists who have experienced Christianity, either in childhood or as adults, are inspired by many of its “truths” and incorporate these ideals to express secular values. Wilkerson aligns the artist Chris Ofili, discussed in Chapter One, with Smith in the following quote:

[Kiki] Smith is joined by a number of contemporary artists, including [Chris] Ofili, who, under the sway of their Catholic upbringing in one way or another, understandably use the image of the body as a metaphor for larger truths and a conduit for spiritual transcendence. They possess what has been called an “incarnational creative consciousness.”66

For Smith, as with countless other artists, the century-old stories of the Bible can be applied in myriad ways. She sees scant separation between these myths and experience of the everyday. Says the artist, “In Catholicism, […] it’s the representation of the God, or the spiritual, or something or other. It's believing in a kind of vivid world, where things are imbued with power.”67 Smith draws from this innate power and infuses her own artwork with it.

65 Wilkerson, 34.
66 Wilkerson, 3.
One of Smith’s more recent sculptural pieces, *Annunciation*, 2008 (fig. 31), formed part of a solo installation *Sojourn*\(^{68}\) (fig. 32-34) in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. According to a review on the museum’s website, “religion, mythology, and spirituality surface repeatedly throughout Smith’s work, and in this installation, the Annunciation is used as a metaphor for identifying the unknown and unexpected sources female artists draw upon for inspiration.”\(^{69}\) Smith’s *Annunciation* is a small figure seated on a short wooden bench. Through its androgyny the figure may relate to both women and men, though Smith suggests it is female. The artist-figure, modeled in shiny cast aluminum, raises her right hand in front of and to the side of her face with the palm facing outwards. The gesture immediately suggests reception. With blank eyes gazing seemingly towards a point in front of her hand, the petite figure relays a quiet, serious mood. While her gesture is gentle, it also appears firm and assured. Her seated position alludes to conventional depictions of Mary seated and reading, though in this case, the Mary-figure sits erect with full awareness of the encounter.

Smith recalls the mystery and energy of the annunciation to relay her own experience as an artist. She attempts to communicate the unidentifiable source of artistic inspiration. Said Smith in a video about *Sojourn*, “In a way I was making a model for being an artist […] In general it’s like the messenger. It’s like the Holy Ghost coming and like you’re just minding your own business and then things appear to you or become evident to you […]”\(^{70}\)

Smith’s sculpture, placed within the larger installation, makes its allusion to the setting of the Christian-based annunciation. It is situated in the center of the room and faces a large

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\(^{68}\) The show was curated by Catherine J. Morris and ran from February 5, 2010 through September 12, 2010.


drawing of a window on an opposing wall (see fig. 33). The sketchy, yet delicately rendered, window may suggest the spiritual void – a source of divine intervention with the figure’s raised hand is poised to accept something from this gateway. Historically, windows were a prominent feature of numerous annunciation scenes. Often they were included as a metaphor for the entry point of the Holy Spirit. Smith’s figure faces the drawn window, suggesting a direct exchange. Intersecting shadows fall mysteriously over the window. The cause of shadows, Smith’s sculpture Messenger I, 2008 (fig. 35), is suspended above the space between the figure and the window. This piece, made from cast aluminum and gold leaf, depicts a golden bird with open wings alighted among crisscrossing, flat rods. The linear pieces form a loose structure, which supports, rather than contains, the bird. One may infer this winged “messenger” symbolizes the angel Gabriel from the annunciation. Its placement above the seated figure suggests its divinity and spiritual energy. Whatever the artist receives from the window may be embodied in the bird as well. Smith creates a magical, triangular dialogue between the three pieces – each one transfers energy and momentum to the other two works. Here Smith opens a dialogue within the three works that the beholder can fill. 

She further emphasizes the connection of these entities through combined imagery of the bird, bars, and figure. Surrounding the sculpture are numerous versions of the same three components sketched onto large pieces of paper and hung around the perimeter of the room (see fig. 30). One of these drawings, Vision of the Bird I, 2008 (fig. 36), is located directly to the left of the seated figure. Within the drawing, the figure appears more human-like with detailed facial features and clothing. The bird is shown flying directly towards the woman’s raised palm. Filling the space between the bird and the artist are chaotic lines, most likely representing

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71 Grootenboer, 357.
72 Smith’s piece is very open allowing viewers to move through it, compared with, say, Ofili’s more “closed” version of the annunciation, which conversely required beholders to remain outside of its space.’
concentrated, directional energy. Smith illustrates a charged space where the creative force is rendered tangible. Like Gabriel’s word or the rays of light sent forth to impregnate the Virgin Mary, these beams penetrate not only the artist’s open hand but all parts of her being. And as with the Virgin Mary, an abstract idea becomes incarnate.

In Sojourn, the theme of annunciation pervades the entire installation. However, the overarching theme is that of the life of a female artist, from childhood to death, as described by Benjamin Sutton in a review for L Magazine, “Smith builds on this triptych [infancy, adulthood, and death] to unfold the stages of life into seven rooms, inserting frequent allusions to the Annunciation […] not as that moment when a woman finds out her life is subordinate to that of a more important man, but rather as an analogy for artistic inspiration.” Subsequent rooms depict the same woman with another figure rising from her body, most likely her own spirit upon death (see fig. 34). So while the female artist’s entire life is evoked here, Smith chose to align imagery of the annunciation with the height of the artist’s creativity. One may liken motherhood, perhaps more traditionally considered the pinnacle of a woman’s lifetime experience, with the manifestation of an artwork.

Like de Duve’s concept of “Here I Am” as related to the annunciation, Smith’s pieces in this installation present themselves. They open themselves up as receivers, welcoming, enfolding, and incorporating what enters. However, where we may understand that it is God whose presence is foretold in the annunciation, positioning Mary as the accepting, yet somewhat powerless recipient, Smith represents the opposite. She shows us it is the female artist who willingly chooses and insists on filling the role. As the figure raises her hand she simultaneously manifests and accepts power. She embodies both the creator and what is created. Wilkerson

says, “Smith attests to the incarnate nature of the art-making process, that making art constitutes ‘making God.’”\textsuperscript{74} It is through creative communion with God, initiated by the artist, that she is in turn wholly able to state “Here I Am” to her beholders.

\textit{An Invitation to Join: Artist as Initiator}

Jacques Rancière emphasizes the importance of individual autonomy within a collective group. In his essay, “The Emancipated Spectator,” he outlines a new approach towards education and the transfer of knowledge and experience in general. According to Rancière, this approach, “calls for spectators who are active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it. An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators.”\textsuperscript{75} All members of the group are valued for the perspectives they provide, and transformed from reticent viewers to wise persons professing everyday truths. The artist can create a space for the spectator’s insights to be realized and shared.

Returning to de Duve’s concepts of presentation, once the artist releases the viewer from his or her controlled and secondary role a new relationship is formed. When the artist and beholder reciprocate acknowledgement they become a single unit comprised of multiples with the ability to say “Here We Are.”\textsuperscript{76} Authority is shared and ownership becomes collective. De Duve suggests that the contemporary annunciation can be read as a transfer of God’s authority and ownership. In his essay in \textit{Look}, de Duve uses Sylvie Blocher’s video work \textit{L’Annonce amoureuse} from 1995 as a related, yet divergent point from the Christian annunciation. As a

\textsuperscript{74} Wilkerson, 9.
\textsuperscript{75} Rancière, 278.
\textsuperscript{76} As de Duve goes on to define the group “We” consists of either “You and I” or “Them and Me” and by definition requires the presence of an “outsider” or third party to whom the “We” is presented. One may imagine the third party to be God acting as the omniscient, ever-present observer. de Duve, 250.
female artist organizing participants, Blocher challenges the tradition of a masculine God as
director. In *L’Announce amoureuse*, Blocher asked a group of men and women to speak to the
camera as if they were addressing their own lovers. They were free to say whatever they chose.
De Duve states that Blocher “addressed the performers with a request that forced them to
confront their own freedom.”

She shares ownership with her participants, turning one artist’s
creation into a reflection of many people. After providing the instruction, Blocher moved to the
side allowing space for the actor to engage the camera and nullifying the artist’s implied
guidance. De Duve writes: “It is this physical void, this withdrawal of the author, and this
renunciation of authority which enable the camera to presentify the beloved one for the actor.”

Beholders of the work become the recipients of the filmed “declarations of love.” Blocher
extends her piece to include both participants and beholders, creating an intimate exchange and
personalizing the encounter.

In her introduction to the book *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art* (2006),
Claire Bishop identifies three aspects of participatory art: “activation, authorship, and
community.” Her sequential ordering of these principles suggests their interdependency where
each principle is a result of previous action. According to Bishop, “The first concerns the desire
to create an active subject, one who will be empowered by the experience of physical or
symbolic participation […] and find themselves able to determine their own social and political
reality.” The artist has to lay the initial framework, and it is the artist’s wish to include his or
her viewers that creates the potential for participation. Following this the artist needs to
demonstrate a willingness and ability to share authority. Says Bishop, “the gesture of ceding

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77 de Duve, 257.
78 Ibid., 259.
79 Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press,
2006), 12.
80 Ibid., 12.
some or all authorial control is conventionally regarded as more egalitarian and democratic […] while shared production is also seen to entail the aesthetic benefits of greater risk and unpredictability.”\textsuperscript{81} The participant needs to feel the potential for autonomy. When artist and participants experience freedom in decision-making and partial control then the benefits of group effort can be realized. Bishop goes on to write: “The third issue [involves] a perceived crisis in community and collective responsibility […] a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning.”\textsuperscript{82} Participatory art encompasses the potential for heightened investment among all parties. We can apply Kiki Smith’s interpretation of the annunciation as an internal event that is both instigated and received by one individual to many individuals forming a larger group. Each person becomes activated in her or his own role and is able to participate in creative art-making. Art becomes a group tool that can facilitate enhanced relationships. It can build communities, however ephemeral they might be.

\textit{New Territory: Transcending Artist and Beholder}

A contemporary example of large-scale participatory art is the festival \textit{Burning Man} in Nevada. Every summer since 1990, people have been gathering for one week in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada to participate in this alternative art-making festival.\textsuperscript{83} Like many contemporary art exhibitions, the festival organizers identify and announce a corresponding theme for the event. Usually, the overarching theme is significant to the times and is accompanied by a contextualizing manifesto.\textsuperscript{84} In recent years, attendance has risen

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{84} For example, the theme for 2010 was “Metropolis.” Organizers hoped to explore ideas surrounding growing cities, like Mumbai and Lagos, and tools for supporting positive growth and urban planning.
exponentially and is now more than 40,000 people (see fig. 37). The annual event, founded by artist Larry Harvey, lists radical inclusion, radical self-expression, and participation among its ten principles. Through radical inclusion, according to Harvey: “Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community.” Similarly the event’s website states that radical self-expression “arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or collective group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others.” The event’s head curator, Christine Kristen, echoes these themes in the following statement:

At Burning Man, art-making is inclusive and does not require degrees or the approval of critics. In one sense this genre is not new at all, but harkens back to a time when there was no separation between art and life. In Black Rock City art […] is a vital part of the community, whose shared experiences in its creation and its life on the playa give it meaning and value.

Throughout the week, the desert becomes the setting of a unique community comprised of diverse people, including more adept artists, as well as novices. Though most individuals are not traditionally trained artists, all who attend are encouraged to create something. The resulting works exhibit a range of artistic skill, though most are so well-crafted they could easily be at home in a gallery setting. Many of the pieces are unbelievably large (see fig. 38-41) and produced through communal efforts where individuals create and share novel construction techniques with each other. Often built on-site, the monumental artworks become markers in the vast, empty desert. Their presence is homage to the collective energy required to produce such

85 The remaining eight principles are: gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation, and immediacy.
works. For one week, all are invited to live in and around the results of their group efforts, adding and augmenting the spaces as needed. In many ways, the desert provides a severely de-contextualized setting for the works. By removing all of the common contextual elements of time and place, the organizers of *Burning Man* have provided participants with a setting devoted solely to free creation. Because of this, the sight seems imbued with visual powers that mimic the magic of pictorial perspective. They present themselves through their mere existence in such an empty landscape (see fig. 42). All extraneous elements have been stripped away leaving the beholders and the works to fully engage one another.

A statement from *Burning Man*’s website, which provides exhaustive information on all aspects of the event, the guiding philosophy, and the artworks produced, aligns with Rancière’s concept of the emancipated spectator. Harvey states: “Our intention is to generate society that connects each individual to his or her creative powers, to participation in community, to the larger realm of civic life, and to the even greater world of nature that exists beyond society.”

Just as Rancière called for “active interpreters” and a “community of storytellers,” Harvey strives to support a communal culture that engages, connects, and creates. An integral part of the week-long experience is the absence of all commercial venues. Nothing is officially bought or sold within the community. Attendees are required to bring in all provisions to subsist during their stay. Instead of monetary trade, people are encouraged to give gifts and establish negations and trade between individuals. Through these actions, the organizers are attempting to provide the most democratic space possible. It is this atmosphere that allows individuals to fully participate. All three of Bishop’s descriptors – activation, authority, and community – for identifying “participatory art” are present.

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Though existing and operating outside the confines of the established “art world,” the *Burning Man* festival has attracted attention from those within more traditional art venues. The lead curator, Christine Kristen, received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the seventies. In her essay “Reconnecting Art and Life” published in *Raw Vision*, a publication that surveys “outsider” art, she reflects on her gradual migration from the New York art scene to dedicated involvement at *Burning Man*. Her formal education and knowledge of art history provides a telling context for her experiences with artists at the event. She recounts seeing one popular sculpture comprised mainly of white fluorescent tubes. Says Kristen, “I assumed that the artist, Hedley Davis, had been influenced by Minimalist sculpture, and I asked him if he was a fan of Dan Flavin. He looked at me blankly and responded, ‘Who’s Dan Flavin?’”\(^90\) Kristen’s anecdote illuminates an interesting point about art outside the established art world. The environment of the *Burning Man* festival appears to sustain creation that is not necessarily founded on precedents or thorough knowledge of art history. One could argue this sort of freedom allows for a broader range of expression. Through shared ownership and authority of their art-making, the participants are made aware of their own creative abilities. Another piece created for *Burning Man*, *YOU*, 2001 (fig. 43), by Steven Raspa, presents viewers with their own reflection in a mirror just as Gerard Richter’s *Spiegel* (see fig. 44) did in 1986.\(^91\) Whether the artist knew of *Spiegel* is inconsequential in this situation. The fact that the artists at this event are exploring similar ideas to contemporary artists elsewhere is relevant. It shows that

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\(^91\) de Duve uses Richter’s piece to discuss presentational strategies. He states: “In front of any mirror there’s a man or a woman asking questions about themselves, and addressing their image; human beings seeing and sensing themselves in the second person in order to get to know themselves in the first. Mirrors speak to us if we speak to them. They do so not because they are alive and talking, but because they bounce our image back to us, and because we are so made that our image speaks to us if we speak to them.” de Duve, 120.
though their approaches and knowledge base may be quite diverse, their intentions behind the
works of art may be similar.

Participatory art at the *Burning Man* festival also responds to the collective needs of the
participants during the week. Though neither Bishop nor Rancière explicitly address this aspect
of interactive art, it informs many of the event’s projects. The art produced throughout the event
is often intended to satisfy physical and experiential needs. Since the event takes place in such
an extreme landscape, with high temperatures, wind, and intense sun exposure, organizers and
participants must consider utilities. In keeping with *Burning Man*’s principles of radical
expression, services such as showers and shelters become art as well, further blending the
boundaries between artistic creation and utilitarian objects. In an interview with Darryl Van
Rhey, “Burning Man and Art of the Nineties” (1997), Harvey illuminates the extent to which
*Burning Man* does this. One is example is Ray Cerino’s piece *Water Woman* (fig. 45 and 46).
Harvey says about the work, “[Cerino] created a public shower for us in the desert. A stream of
water spouted from between its legs. The piece itself was very elegant, but beyond any question
of form, it required an action. It was grounded in need. It was based on survival.”

Through art-making participants create unique, multifunctional objects. As Harvey goes on to explain, these
endeavors support not only a certain level of physical comfort in the moment, but also help
increase art’s value in the greater society. Says Harvey:

> It's part of giving art a greater social function. Our technique is to appropriate elements of
> mass culture, symbols that pervade popular consciousness. We turn pop culture back into
> myth that expresses the life of an actual community. We appropriate the appropriators.
> It's a survival tactic for the Nineties. 

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92 Darryl Van Rhey, “Burning Man and the Art of the Nineties,” an interview from 1997 with Larry
93 Van Rhey, “Burning Man and the Art of the Nineties.” I believe Harvey would continue to represent
*Burning Man*’s “survival tactics” are still relevant in contemporary culture.
Like almost all of the artists discussed throughout my thesis, Harvey recognizes the power of appropriating established cultural signs in order to reinterpre, resituate, and reignite them. Most of the artists I included in my discussion have identified something in the annunciation scene that propels them to make a statement through their artwork using this familiar imagery. Though their resulting messages vary, they make use of shared perspectives. By presenting artworks to us that touch on pervasive themes, artists are entreating us to engage them. Because of this, I think many contemporary artists could agree with Harvey’s belief that “collaboration is the soul of culture,”94 whether it takes place within the artist herself, between the artist and his beholder, or among thousands of inspired participants. Through the discussion of these artists we may be able to understand the annunciation as the ultimate invitation to collaborate.

94 Ibid.
In this discussion, I have shown that numerous contemporary artists use the familiar imagery of the Christian-based annunciation scene to highlight, investigate, and critique uniquely contemporary themes. Though founded in religion, contemporary artists find ways to appropriate aspects of this encounter to represent a range of ideas from both within and outside of Christianity. In many cases, their use of the annunciation, even within a seemingly secular context, sustains and strengthens a connection between art and religion and spirituality.

In the first chapter, I discussed how artists use Mary’s image in the annunciation to redefine her position in Christianity and society in general. All of the artists discussed in this chapter perform the “unthinkable” by presenting the traditionally modest Mary in the nude. Duane Michals and Chris Ofili use nudity to eroticize and sexualize her presentation. Though this passes a certain amount of sexual authority to Mary as a woman, it also threatens to objectify her. Damien Hirst and Kiki Smith use nudity to highlight Mary’s biology. I suggested that their sculptures, particularly Hirst’s, empower Mary by showcasing her ability to bear a child. The artists in this chapter reject traditional depictions of the annunciation. Instead they use the annunciation to present an alternate view of Mary.

In the second chapter, I investigated how contemporary artists use the annunciation as a springboard for identifying and critiquing contemporary systems of authority. I presented how during the Renaissance the annunciation helped herald linear perspective, and along with that a way of visualizing God’s presence. Similarly, Helnwein and Hamilton use the annunciation to investigate the role of technology within contemporary society. Their pieces hint at the ever-present need for us to transcend our physical surroundings. Additionally, we can see that their artworks allude to our growing dependency on technology and its use to augment our
experiences. Though these artists alter and replace some of the most vital and embedded symbols of traditional annunciation scenes, they do so in a way that actually allows them to showcase enduring themes.

In the third chapter, I expanded the scope from pure depictions of the annunciation to artworks that attempt to engage artists and beholders, signifying shared ownership over creation. We can liken this experience to a contemporary expression of the annunciation where individuals are bestowed equal value and authority. Kiki Smith’s sculpture addressed the possibility that the creator and receiver are simultaneously present in individuals. She connects these typically separate entities, emphasizing that they are located in each other. She equates the artist-as-creator experience to that of an annunciation, where Mary and God, human and divine, may become a single unit within the artist. I also discussed the ability of participatory experiences, like Sylvie Blocher’s work and the *Burning Man* art festival to disseminate authority. I suggested that these types of democratic practices can lead to positive, inclusive creation.

Artists, as creators, incarnate their own energy into the pieces they make. Kiki Smith comments: “I like that feeling when you’re making art, that you’re taking the energy out of your body and putting it into a physical object… Artists are people who are making a physical manifestation of their sense of possibility.” Jing Long describes that as humans we search for ways to incarnate meaning. He states:

> In such curiosity we wait for something unknown to expose itself so that we can feel the meaning of life as more than just the routine of everyday business – there is always something beyond. This is the way to compensate for the enigmatic meaning of life that has become inaccessible to our worldly thinking.\(^95\)

Artists have the ability to create opportunities for meaning-making through art. As I discussed in this thesis, the annunciation – a story about creation – provides artists with the framework to do

\(^{95}\) Long, 232.
so. The annunciation continues to be a story about many things. Although during some periods in history annunciation imagery was used to propagate stereotypes and maintain control, it has also been a symbol of hope and a source of inspiration for many people. As evidenced by the arguments I established, contemporary artists show us that we can still use the annunciation to tell contemporary stories, and that the relevance of these images continues to grow and evolve.
Figure 1
Robert Campin, *Merode Altarpiece*, 1425, oil on wood, 25.25 x 24 inches

Figure 2
Duane Michals, *The Annunciation*, 1969, black & white photograph, 4.5 x 7 inches
Figure 3
Duane Michals, *The Fallen Angel 1 of 8*, 1968, gelatin silver print, 5 x 7 inches

Figure 4
Duane Michals, *The Fallen Angel 2 of 8*, 1968, gelatin silver print, 5 x 7 inches
Figure 5
Duane Michals, *The Fallen Angel 3 of 8*, 1968, gelatin silver print, 5 x 7 inches

Figure 6
Duane Michals, *The Fallen Angel 4 of 8*, 1968, gelatin silver print, 5 x 7 inches
Figure 7
Duane Michals, *The Fallen Angel 5 of 8*, 1968, gelatin silver print, 5 x 7 inches

Figure 8
Duane Michals, *The Fallen Angel 6 of 8*, 1968, gelatin silver print, 5 x 7 inches
Figure 9
Duane Michals, *The Fallen Angel 7 of 8*, 1968, gelatin silver print, 5 x 7 inches

Figure 10
Duane Michals, *The Fallen Angel 8 of 8*, 1968, gelatin silver print, 5 x 7 inches
Figure 11

Figure 12
Chris Ofili, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, 1996, acrylic, oil, resin and elephant dung on canvas
Chris Ofili, *Annunciation*, 2006, bronze, 79 x 84 x 47 inches

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Chris Ofili, *Annunciation*, 2006, bronze, 79 x 84 x 47 inches
Figure 16
Damien Hirst, *Virgin Mother*, 2005, bronze, 35 feet

Figure 17
Damien Hirst, *Virgin Mother*, 2006, painted bronze, 35 feet
Figure 18
Damien Hirst, *Virgin Mother*, 2006, painted bronze, 35 feet

Figure 19
Damien Hirst, *Virgin Mother*, 2004, bronze, 35 feet

Figure 20
Figure 21
Kiki Smith, *Virgin Mary*, 1992, beeswax, microcrystalline wax, cheesecloth, and wood on steel base, 67.5 x 26 x 14.5 inches

Figure 22
Monica Sjoo, *God Giving Birth*, 1968, oil on canvas, dimensions not found
Figure 23
Cynthia Mailman, *Self-Portrait as God*, 1977, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 108 inches

Figure 24
Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Annunciation*, 1344, tempera on wood, 127 x 120 cm
Figure 25
Domenico Veneziano, *The Annunciation*, 1442-48, tempera on panel, 27 x 54 cm

Figure 26
Jessica Harrison, *Annunciation*, 2007. lithograph, 28 x 39.5 inches
Figure 27
Gottfried Helnwein, *Annunciation*, 1993, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 66 inches

Figure 28
Leonardo da Vinci, *The Annunciation*, 1474, tempera on panel, 38.75 x 85.5 inches
Figure 29
Gottfried Helnwein, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1996, oil on canvas, 210 x 333 cm

Figure 30
Richard Hamilton, *The annunciation*, 2005, inkjet digital print, dimensions not found
Figure 31
Kiki Smith, *Annunciation*, 2008, cast aluminum 61.5 x 32 x 19 inches

Figure 32
Kiki Smith, *Sojourn*, 2009, Brooklyn Museum of Art, view of installation
Figure 33
Kiki Smith, *Sojourn*, 2009, Brooklyn Museum of Art, view of installation

Figure 34
Kiki Smith, *Sojourn*, 2009, Brooklyn Museum of Art, view of installation
Figure 35
Kiki Smith, *Messenger I*, 2008, cast aluminum with white gold and gold leaf, 10.5 x 39 x 55 inches

Figure 36
Kiki Smith, *Vision of the Bird*, 2008, ink, graphite, and colored pencil on paper, dimensions not found
Figure 37
Aerial view of *Burning Man* at the Black Rock Desert in Nevada

Figure 38
Designed by Mark Grieve, *Temple of Hope*, 2006

Figure 39
Designed by Dan Das Mann, *NiT Grit*, 2010
Figure 40
Designed by Mike Ross, Big Rig Jig, 2007

Figure 41
Designed by David Best, Temple of Joy, 2002

Figure 42
Artist Unknown, Aural Mouth, 2003
Figure 43
Steven Raspa, *YOU*, 2001 (with Larry Harvey)

Figure 44
Gerhard Richter, *Spiegel*, mirror, 200 cm x 180 cm
Figures 45

Figure 46
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