

THE AESTHETICS OF LITURGICAL TRANSFIGURATION AND CONTEMPORARY ART

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Abstract: Christian liturgy involves a kind of transfiguration: a transformation and revelation of people, objects, and actions as they are transposed from common to holy. This paper uses works from contemporary artists such as Rothko, Hirst, Cage, and Abramović as non-liturgical examples of how ordinary things come to be seen as extraordinary things through their associations with artists, galleries, and audiences, suggesting that this reflexive process mirrors in some way the dynamics of Christian worship. Liturgy, like art, depends on context, intention, and perception to disclose the sacred within the mundane. This is demonstrated aesthetically in several ordinary things that become holy things in the context of liturgy: the cross, bread and wine, and silence, each of which points to a theology of transformation by which God makes common things and common people holy.

Keywords: liturgical theology, aesthetics, transfiguration, contemporary art, worship, sacramentality, phenomenology, Eucharist, sacred and mundane, theology of art, low liturgy

What happens when the church gathers for worship? That is to say, what kinds of acts are involved in Christian liturgy, and what do these acts tell us about what liturgy does and how it works?¹ There is no shortage of possible answers to this question: We might say that in the context of a worship gathering, people speak to God (in prayers, songs, perhaps even gestures) and that God

1. Note here that I am using “liturgy” throughout to refer not only to the texts and rubrics used for worship in certain traditions but the entirety of the things that happen when Christians are gathered for worship, including churches that would not typically use the word “liturgy” to describe what happens in their gathering.

speaks to us (in the proclamation of Scripture and in other ways) and thus that Christian liturgy involves both speaking and hearing. Or, we might notice that in many (if not all) traditions, people make offerings of some kind (food, money, or even themselves), even as God also makes offerings (we remember the kenotic offering of the Son on our behalf, even as we also receive the gifts of the Spirit anew, we call attention to God's offering of salvation to any who will receive it, and so on), and so liturgy involves giving and receiving. Perhaps on a more basic level still, liturgy calls attention to God's love for us, and calls us to adoration in response—liturgy involves loving and being loved. There are many kinds of liturgical actions (human and divine) that might be examined in order to consider the composition of Christian liturgy and the theology that it enacts.

My contention in this paper is that liturgy involves transfiguration. By *transfiguration*, I mean that something or someone is in some way changed and revealed in the course of involvement with liturgy. (I will further define my use of the term below.) Transfiguration is not necessarily what liturgy is *for*, but it is one of the things that liturgy *does*. That is to say, liturgy should not primarily be seen as, say, a tool for personal development, Christian education, faith formation, etc.—even though liturgy can, should, and will have some kind of formative effect on its participants. When I say that *transfiguration* is one of the things that liturgy does, I mean that liturgy tends to use common things and common people in extraordinary ways, and these people and things tend to be changed in the course of this involvement. Liturgy in many ways *depends* upon some kind of change. Common people and common things are hardly suitable for the worship of a holy God, and so common things must somehow become holy things, and a common people must become a holy people. Transfiguration is both an assumption and a result of involvement with liturgy.

Below, I will attempt to describe some aspects of transfiguration in Christian liturgy. In doing so, I will begin with a look into the world of contemporary art and the art-making capability of some of its entities. This digression into the world of contemporary art and its iconoclastic artisans deals with the process by which something that is mundane might come to be seen as art. This process is not entirely different (though there are still major

differences) from the process by which the mundane becomes spiritually significant in the context of liturgy. The usefulness of this extended metaphor is in its visibility: The transfiguration of art allows for a visual depiction of the way that liturgy involves the transfiguration of things and people into holy things and holy people. Subsequently, I will consider some instances of liturgical transfiguration as it is realized aesthetically and will suggest something of what this means for liturgical theology, particularly as it pertains to low liturgy.

Transfiguration and the Transfiguration

Before moving further, it will be helpful to further clarify the way I am using the term “transfiguration” in this paper. Transfiguration has a common, non-religious meaning, in that anything can be transfigured when its meaning and substance are changed in some significant, typically visible, way. Generally, there is a connotation of some kind of elevation or improvement in view in such uses of *transfiguration*. Considering that this is a theological paper, though, it is worth considering how this works out in the transfiguration of Christ as recorded in the Gospels. In this context (and in this paper), transfiguration involves two simultaneous actions: a change to the form (or the perception) of a thing and a revelation of the previously unknown nature of that thing. In Matt 17:2, we read that Jesus was “transfigured” (*μετεμορφώθη*) before his disciples: “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light” (NIV).² This appearance is distinct from the way that the disciples had seen Jesus up until this point—Jesus has been changed in some way. But is Jesus really different? Certainly, his clothing is different, and his face is doing something (shining) that it was not doing the day before. But there is another sense in which Jesus has not changed so much as he has been revealed for who and what has always been: the Son of God. Thus, the transfigura-

2. BDAG offers two meanings for *μεταμορφώω*: “to change in a manner visible to others” (as in the transfiguration of Jesus) and “to change inwardly in fundamental character or condition” (as in being “transformed in the renewing of your mind” in Rom 12:2). Both of these definitions are relevant to the idea of liturgical transfiguration, as will be seen below (see BDAG 639).

tion of Jesus demonstrates the two intertwined actions which together constitute transfiguration in general: something that is transfigured is simultaneously changed and revealed. Jesus looks different, but what the disciples see is not some other Jesus. The vision of Jesus has changed, but the reality of Jesus has not.

There is also a third, implicit action that occurs in the transfiguration of Christ, which is that the disciples' vision and self-understanding have been changed as well. Once they have seen the glory of Jesus, the disciples cannot go back to any previous understanding of Jesus as a teacher or a prophet—the disciples are no longer ordinary rabbinic students but have become “eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pet 1:16 NIV). Thus, transfiguration acts reflexively on those who view it. For the disciples to see the transfiguration of Jesus is for them to be in some way changed themselves.

All these things help define the way I am using “transfiguration” throughout this paper. Below, I will provide several artistic examples of transfiguration. These are not (generally) theological-oriented transfigurations, but they are instances in which something that was seen to be ordinary comes to be seen in a new way. Art tends to be transfigurative in the sense that artistic objects (paintings, songs, sculptures, etc.) come to be seen as significant even if they were previously seen to be mundane. To create a work of art is to change something in a way that is itself revelatory in relation to the nature of things. But this kind of artistic transfiguration also works reflexively in that the artistically transfigured thing has some effect on other aspects of the artistic endeavor—much as the transfiguration of Christ resulted in some kind of change in the disciples themselves. Artistic transfigurations may function reflexively with regard to the artist (that is, a person who makes a work of art is considered to be an artist), the gallery (a place that displays works of art is an art gallery), and the audience (a crowd of people becomes an audience when they are viewing a painting, or watching a play, or listening to a symphony).

These artistic examples of transfiguration help us understand the way that transfiguration works in the context of Christian worship as well. Liturgy involves vaguely similar dynamics to those of the creation and presentation of art when it transfigures a range of otherwise ordinary things into things that are extraordinary and

laden with spiritual significance.³ As these liturgical things are both changed and revealed, they act reflexively on other aspects of the liturgical enterprise. But more than art, liturgy can be seen as having a direct and dynamic relationship with the kind of theological transfiguration in view at the transfiguration of Jesus. God speaks, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (Matt 17:5 NIV). Having been made aware via the New Testament of this transfigurative moment, we gather for worship so that we hear God speak again in his word, so that we, too, can love his Son, so that we can revel in his goodness, and so that we can listen and obey. We (that is, the congregation of worshippers) are ourselves changed and shaped by this moment in a way that is not entirely separate from the way that the disciples were changed as they descended the mountain in the company of Jesus.

The Art-Making Capability of Artists, Galleries, and Audiences

In order to think about something invisible (namely, what liturgy does), it will be helpful to first consider something that is highly visible. Art is useful here for two reasons: It is (like liturgy) somewhat difficult to define despite being a regular part of life, and it is (also like liturgy) highly visible despite involving a number of invisible processes.⁴ For the past century or so (and perhaps for much longer than that), there has been an increasing sense of curiosity (at least in the Western world) concerning what art *is* and can be.⁵ Artists have introduced a variety of works that attempt to

3. The spirituality of art is an interesting topic in itself, but my focus here is more directly on the spirituality of liturgy, which I see as being distinct from the spirituality of art.

4. De Botton and Armstrong (*Art as Therapy*, 4) note that, despite the challenges involved in defining art, its functional significance is made evident in “the opening of new museums, the channelling of significant government resources towards the production and display of art, the desire on the part of the guardians of art to increase access to works (especially for children and minority groups), the prestige of academic art theory and the high valuations of the commercial art market.” Thus, while art may be difficult to define, it has nevertheless been put into practice in many concrete ways, involving all aspects of society.

5. Nanay (*Aesthetics*, 5–6) suggests that many of the presuppositions about art that are embedded in museums and galleries (e.g., high versus low art)

find the boundaries of this question, ranging from the highly stylized—though still representative—angularity of Picasso's *Guernica*, to the vaguely representative landscapes-turned-shapes-and-lines of Lawren Harris (e.g., *Nature Rhythms*), all the way to the totally non-representative (or is it?) abstraction of Rothko's color field paintings. These and many other works do not answer the question of what art *is*, but they do expand the boundaries of art far beyond the representation of things, real or imagined.⁶ These works take a phenomenological or even ascetic approach to the making and presentation of art (that is, they are reducing away everything that can be reduced in order to make something else more apparent), raising the question of how something mundane might become art.⁷

The process of artmaking is often mysterious, even when the means of art production seem obvious. We think of Michelangelo taking hammer and chisel to a block of marble until it becomes *David*, or van Gogh dabbing cerulean and ochre paint on a canvas until he arrives at *Starry Night*. We know in theory how these works came to be, but their artistic magnitude is so great that it seems to transcend the process and materials that led to each of the works. By contrast, the works discussed below are extremely simple, and thus easier to see in terms of their artistic processes. These are works that are done in the open, in a contemporary con-

are Western concepts that are not reflected in the artistic traditions of most other parts of the world. See also Crowther, *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts*, 216.

6. In some sense, these are works that attempt to justify art. After the camera was able to replicate images in a way that was far more accurate than any painter could hope to do, painters had to justify their continued existence, and many of them did so by making paintings that were intentionally un-realistic or non-representative. The explorations of visual art in the twentieth century can be seen in some sense as an attempt to justify art itself. However, Gadamer ("Relevance of the Beautiful," 3) writes, "The question of how art can be justified is not simply a modern problem, but one that has been with us from the very earliest times." That is, this has been a philosophical, theological, and artistic question for as long as art has been made.

7. Crowther writes, "Modernist art tends to emphasize the significance of form, color, and gesture at the expense of 'finish,' narrative, and perspectival organization. In so doing it makes use of structural factors . . . which are always present in art but which, hitherto, were not objects of aesthetic interest in their own right" (*Phenomenology of the Visual Arts*, 23).

text. There is little or no mystery in the creation and presentation of these works, allowing them to make certain aspects of artistic transfiguration evident in a way that might otherwise be obscured in a masterpiece by, say, Vermeer or Rembrandt. I want to suggest here that one way that something can come to be art—or come to be seen as art—is based on its association with certain significant artistic entities. I have in mind here three such entities: The artist, the gallery, and the audience. Each of these will be relevant metaphorically for understanding the transfigurative effect of liturgy in the second half of this essay.

The Artist

Things can be transfigured into art based in part on their association with the artist. This is evident in the case of Michelangelo, chipping away at a block of marble until it becomes something of great artistic significance, but it can also occur in cases where an artist presents, in an overtly artistic mode, some kind of otherwise mundane object as a work of art. Rothko's paintings are interesting to consider in this light. Take *Light, Earth and Blue* for example. The painting can be described as two large blotches of color smeared on a gray background. One might say that it looks like it might be the first layer of background color for what will later become a painting—it seems unfinished, if it has begun at all. How did these two blotches of color on a piece of canvas come to be seen as an important work of art? One possible answer is to relate Rothko's painting to other significant works of art, thus allowing *Light, Earth and Blue* to stand in some sense as a proxy for and commentary on a range of landscapes by other artists—we know this is art because it reminds us of works by other established artists. Perhaps this painting is similar in this way to Harris's reductive landscapes; *Light, Earth and Blue* looks vaguely like a seascape, inspiring some viewers to make comparisons to esteemed landscape painters (e.g., Turner), and even to speculate about human finitude in relation to the vastness of the sea.⁸ But

8. Stoker writes that *Light, Earth and Blue* recalls the sublimity of a number of English landscape painters, saying that frayed edges of the shapes in the painting “seem to evoke the infinite. The painting evokes a transcendent experience” (*Where Heaven and Earth Meet*, 102).

many of Rothko's paintings cannot be so easily related to works by other artists (aside from other abstract artists, that is). Rothko's *Orange, Red, Yellow* consists of a yellow line suspended above two orange rectangles against a red background.⁹ The painting makes a statement in its scale (it measures 93×81 in or 236×205 cm) and in the boldness of its color. But what makes this an esteemed (and extremely valuable) piece of art over and above a partially painted exterior wall, perhaps a shoddy coverup for a bit of graffiti, on the side of a building somewhere? Why is it that Rothko's paintings hang in galleries and are studied by art students and philosophers while the mismatched colors on a brick wall are seen as urban blight, if they are seen at all? One of the common words used to describe Rothko's paintings is "sublime"; some writers go further still to describe Rothko's paintings as having "innately religious 'imagery.'"¹⁰ The sheer volume of consideration given to Rothko and others suggests that there is something in works like *Orange, Red, Yellow* that is worthy of serious consideration. I am not interested in debating whether these works have artistic merit—they plainly do—I am rather interested in how it happens that a particular configuration of shape and color might be overlooked on a city street, even as it is lauded when it hangs in a gallery or an auction house.

The difference between a Rothko painting and a block of color on a wall somewhere is partially found in the strength of the painting's associations with various significant figures in the art world. The first of these is the association with Rothko himself. By the time Rothko was working on his color field paintings, he was already an established artist with some degree of acclaim.¹¹ When a known, respected artist such as Rothko chooses to transition from painting representative images to something like *Orange, Red,*

9. This is to date the most expensive Rothko painting ever sold, fetching \$86.6 million at Christie's Auction House. This valuation says something about the meaning this work has for some people but probably says more about the economic factors that drive the art world ("Mark Rothko [1903–1970]").

10. Landau, "Abstract Expressionism," 50.

11. Even prior to the development of his signature style, Rothko was well enough known to the general public that his works, as well as his own defense of those works, were covered in the *New York Times* (Landau, "Abstract Expressionism," 5).

Yellow (or the hundreds of similarly-styled paintings also made by Rothko), there is a kind of credibility that is lent to the image itself: Even if someone does not “get” the painting, they might give it the benefit of the doubt based on the knowledge that it was created by an artist who is known to do worthwhile work. Thus, the credibility of the artist *as an artist* is a part of what allows us to take *Orange, Red, Yellow* seriously *as a piece of art*, even as we might ignore a similar pattern when we pass by it on a city street. *Orange, Red, Yellow* is transfigured from an unimportant assemblage of shapes and colors into a significant work of art in part by its association with the artist.¹²

The Gallery

Rothko’s paintings benefit from Rothko’s own credibility as an artist precisely because *he* made the paintings. But what about a work made by someone who is not yet known to be a significant artist? Or, what happens when the artist is only minimally involved in the actual physical work of making a particular piece? Is it still art if the artist is unknown or was barely involved in making the work (that is, if the association with the artist is weak)? At this point, we could easily turn to Marcel Duchamp’s “ready-made” works, *Fountain*, in particular, or to any number of provocative works by Andy Warhol involving exacting recreations of mass-produced objects. But I want to consider a somewhat more recent example, that of Damien Hirst’s *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. The work consists of a dead, 14-foot tiger shark suspended in a glass and steel box filled with a formaldehyde solution.¹³ A tiger shark is not exactly an everyday object for most of us, but it is also not something one would expect to find in an art gallery. It might have been different if Hirst had made a painting of a shark or perhaps sculpted a shark. But this is an actual shark that was caught and killed for this pur-

12. This relates to the role of the audience as well since they are the ones who recognize (or fail to recognize) the significance of the artist and who form “an aesthetic empathy” with certain artists, opening themselves up to new experiences of that artist’s work (Crowther, *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts*, 216).

13. Broglio, *Surface Encounters*, 14.

pose.¹⁴ This work is ultra-real; it is exactly what it represents. Hirst's role was not to represent the shark artistically but rather to embalm it, a process involving the artist and his assistants wading in a pool of formaldehyde and giving the dead shark hundreds of injections.¹⁵ Hirst was a relatively unknown artist at the time the work was created, but the work earned such press that he quickly became a critically and popularly relevant British artist.¹⁶ This raises again the question of how this work came to be known as "art"—as opposed to an exhibit for a natural history museum or a decoration for a bait and tackle shop. Whereas Rothko's color fields were seriously considered as meaningful works of art in part due to Rothko's own reputation as an artist, Hirst and his work had no such advantage. Rather, it is *Physical Impossibility of Death* that gave Hirst his reputation as a serious and daring artist.¹⁷

So, if it is not Hirst as an artist that first gave credibility to *Physical Impossibility of Death*, how exactly did this piece of non-art (a dead shark) come to be seen as art? There are a number of factors contributing to the establishment of *Physical Impossibility of Death* as a significant work of art, not the least of which is the economic situation of London Art in the 1990s—a situation that Hirst learned to exploit to its fullest potential. But I want to draw attention to something far more basic at this point: Hirst's shark takes on special artistic meaning simply because it is presented in an art gallery as a work of art. If the shark were presented at a bait and tackle shop, or at a deep-sea fishing business, or in a natural history museum, it would have been understood very differently by most, if not all, of the public (and would have fetched a very different price, as well). But because this particular work was presented in an art gallery as a work of art, it is considered, mulled over, interpreted, and reinterpreted.¹⁸ Because it is presented as

14. Broglio, *Surface Encounters*, 15.

15. Silverman, "Marketing Thanatos," 399.

16. Worley, *Memento Mori in Contemporary Art*, 189.

17. Note that this illustrates the reflexivity of the artistic transfiguration—Hirst becomes an artist because of his art, whereas Rothko's paintings become art because of Rothko. Art establishes the role of the artist and vice versa. For more on this reflexivity, see below.

18. Calloway compares Hirst's shark to a similar (albeit better preserved) dead shark display created by biologist Gunther von Hagens. The two sharks

art, every detail of the work takes on a depth of meaning that warrants further consideration. The title is a possible reference to Heidegger's questions around the possibility of death as something to be (non)experienced phenomenologically.¹⁹ The shark itself is the incarnation of the primordial fear of death. The fact that it is contained represents the desire, however futile, to bracket and control death. And then, the fact that the shark has been killed for such a show represents humanity's own super-predatory nature.²⁰ The panes of glass are a window on death (and also a nod to Francis Bacon [the artist], to whom Hirst is widely considered the heir apparent).²¹ The use of formaldehyde as a preservative is seen in an artistically meaningful sense as well. For Hirst, formaldehyde itself represents death in the sense that it burns exposed skin and causes lung damage to those who work with it.²² Since the production of the piece, formaldehyde has become known as a carcinogen, representing another kind of danger in the work—a danger that became all the more real when certain similar pieces created by Hirst began to leak.²³ In the years since the work was first created, the shark has decomposed, leaving the tank so murky and filled with detritus that the shark and formaldehyde solution had to be replaced, leading to further thoughts on the process of death and decay.²⁴ All of this speculation on death, creativity, and so on, is made possible by the basic fact that Hirst's shark was displayed in a gallery instead of in some other setting. It is the gallery that

were showing concurrently at two museums in London: The Tate Modern and the Natural History Museum, with Hirst's shark presented as art and von Hagens's presented as science. "Here, intention and context are everything. Hirst's animals and objects are art because he says they are, and galleries such as the Tate Modern agree. Von Hagens, who purposefully chose the NHM as his venue, summed up his position in a 2007 interview: 'I don't do Damien Hirst,' he said. 'I am an anatomist, not an artist'" ("Anatomy," 457).

19. For example, "The nearest nearness of being-toward-death is as far removed as possible from anything real" (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 242).

20. Or, maybe just Hirst's super-predatory nature; a 2017 tally by *Artnet* counts 913,450 animals and insects that have been killed for Hirst's thanatotic exhibitions (Goldstein, "How Many Animals Have Died?").

21. Worley, *Memento Mori in Contemporary Art*, 186.

22. Worley, *Memento Mori in Contemporary Art*, 186.

23. Silverman, "Marketing Thanatos," 399.

24. Broglio, *Surface Encounters*, 17.

transfigures Hirst's shark from something one might find strung up at the docks into something that allows for serious consideration of the nature of art, life, and death—again, considerations that would have been very different had the shark been displayed in a different setting.

The Audience

Above, I have demonstrated examples of the ways that something mundane might become *art* based on its association with a known and reputable artist, as well as its association with a known gallery (or museum, etc.). There is a third figure that matters considerably in all this, which is the audience. Works of art are (typically) made to be shown to others. A work of art becomes significant in part when an audience sees it, engages with it, and in some way responds to it. There are, of course, exceptions to this—there may be certain instances in which a piece of art is made without intent to show it to anyone aside from the artist. But any of these pieces that are known have found an audience in one way or another, even if that audience is extremely small. I want to consider here two examples that fall outside the world of visual art, which help to exemplify the dynamic relationship between the audience and the work itself.²⁵ The more dynamic this relationship is, the more significant the “artness” (for lack of a better term) tends to be.

The first example is a piece of music, the in/famous “4'33'” by John Cage. This piece of music benefits from both of the above kinds of association, in that it is written by an influential, established composer (the *artist* in this instance) and that it has been performed in known, credible concert halls (the *gallery* in this instance) where other important pieces of music have been performed. But this piece of music makes quite explicit the role of the audience because the entire piece is composed of rest notes. While this seems at first like a prank (not unlike the surprising works of some contemporary visual artists), Cage composed the piece to demonstrate that every sound can be a kind of music, even

25. There is or can be an “aesthetic bonding between the specific phenomenal character of the work and the specific character of the intended audience” (Crowther, *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts*, 220).

the sound of an audience sitting still in their seats.²⁶ The audience *is* the music. “4’33’” is a piece that becomes art when it is performed for an audience (regardless of the size of that audience). It is the attention of an audience that makes this piece different from, say, a pianist sitting idly at the piano for a few minutes alone.²⁷ This invites questions about the role of the audience in performances of more conventional musical compositions, as well.²⁸ Musicians can readily acknowledge that there is a difference between performing for an empty concert hall and one that has been filled with people—the room sounds different because the people in their seats are absorbing and deflecting sound waves in a way that shapes the sound of the whole room. Not to mention other factors, such as whether the audience is paying attention, whether they know the music well enough to applaud at the end of the piece rather than at the end of the movement, whether they are a vocal, expressive crowd, or are more reserved.²⁹ The audience is an inextricable part of the performance of music, and this is true in other forms of art as well.

Another example makes the role of the audience even more explicit. Performance artist Marina Abramović’s “Rhythm 0” makes the relationship between art, artist, and audience clear in a disturb-

26. Notably, Cage was motivated to create this piece after thinking about the questions about the nature of art raised by his friend Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*. See Allain and Harvie, *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance*, 42.

27. This is not to say that the pianist could not function as an audience, as well.

28. One way to think of “4’33’” is as the ultimate expression of the idea of *absolute music*—music that exists purely for its own sake as a kind of expression of its own inexpressibility—transcendence that points to nothing beyond itself. Daniel Chua (*Absolute Music*, 5) writes that one tangible sign of the cultural adoption of absolute music was “the eradication of audience chatter. The hushed expectancy that descended upon the concert halls of Europe by the 1840s was an acknowledgement of music’s ineffability.”

29. David Byrne (*How Music Works*, 19, 47, 93) writes how musical genres—opera, punk rock, and jazz, to name a few—are shaped not only by the musicians, but by the interplay between the musicians, the audience, and the space they are in. Sometimes this interplay happens in real time, like when a jazz band chooses in the moment to extend a saxophone solo because the audience is enjoying it.

ing fashion. Again, this piece can be related to the other kinds of associations identified above; by the time the piece was performed in 1974, Abramović was a known performance artist (meaning, her performances were understood to be art because they were performed by her *as* art). Additionally, “Rhythm 0” was performed in a kind of gallery: Studio Morra, a venue that had been newly established for the presentation of performance art and body art. Similarly to Cage’s silent composition, the substance of Abramović’s work in “Rhythm 0” is her commitment to inaction, forcing the presence and action of the audience to come to the fore. The performance began with Abramović standing before her audience next to a table containing seventy-two items, ranging from the innocuous (a piece of cotton, a sprig of rosemary) to the dangerous (razor blades, a bullet, and a gun).³⁰ The audience was instructed that, for the next six hours, they were free to use any of the objects on Abramović in any way they desired and that she would accept full responsibility for whatever happened during that time. While at first the audience used the objects in a curious, playful way (tickling Abramović’s face with a rose, for instance), the event quickly took a malevolent turn as audience members egged each other on to do progressively more violent things. By the third hour of the performance, much of Abramović’s clothing had been cut off and her throat was bleeding; at one point, someone loaded the gun and pointed it at her head. The event only ended when some of the audience members banded together to protect Abramović from the more hostile members of the audience.³¹

Disturbing as it is, “Rhythm 0” demonstrates something essential about how the participation of the audience functions transfiguratively in making something ordinary into a work of art. If Abramović were to stand next to a table filled with objects on her own without an audience to observe her, she would simply be standing there. Her performance becomes art when it is performed for someone.³² Abramović’s total passivity in the performance al-

30. Allain and Harvie, *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance*, 15.

31. Richards, *Marina Abramović*, 100.

32. This is not to say that someone could not do something artistically meaningful in private. But the significance of this piece is in the relationship be-

lows the role of the audience to come to the fore, revealing the power of the audience to radically shape—and even to destroy—a piece of art. The work of art cannot be neatly separated from its audience. What “Rhythm 0” reveals is a dynamic that exists in every other work of art (though it is seldom so apparent). Take, for example, a painting. Paintings are also subject to the same kind of vulnerability to their audience that Abramović demonstrated. A viewer can look with appreciation at a painting, or photograph the painting, or even touch the painting. But they could, theoretically, also do great damage to the painting if they chose; they could burn it, or draw on it, or cut it to pieces. More than this, though, a painting draws its meaning in part from the way in which the audience engages with it. There are many accounts of people sitting in front of a Rothko painting and openly weeping, moved by something they cannot name.³³ These accounts help to give the painting a sense of meaning, even for people who are not moved in the same way. Someone might say, “If the painting means so much for her, then maybe I should give it a second look, too.” In this case, rather than destroying the work, the audience applies a kind of intentionality to the work that allows it to function for them as a meaningful piece of art.

Reflexivity

“Rhythm 0” makes evident the way that an audience and a work continually influence one another, recalling the idea of reflexivity as I mentioned above in relation to the transfiguration of Christ. Reflexivity is an important concept in art as well. A significant work of art will act reflexively on the entities with which it is associated. This is particularly evident in the examples of the audience, above, where there is a continual interplay between the work of art (the painting, song, etc.) and the audience, where each continues to influence the other. Bence Nanay writes about a person who, after a first date with a potential partner, would visit a museum to sit in front of a Rothko painting, finding that her emotional reaction to the painting “was coloured by the previous encounter,”

tween the artist and the audience, without either of which the performance would have a very different meaning.

33. Arya, “Reflections,” 323.

that is, she reacted differently to the painting based on how she felt about the date she had just had.³⁴ She brings her own disposition to her viewing, but it might also be said that the painting in some way gives shape to her disposition. There is a back and forth to this interaction with art. Nanay's anecdote is indicative (among other things) of the way that the predisposition of the audience comes to bear on the artwork, as well as the way that the transfigurative effect of the audience on a piece of art (and vice versa) is not fixed—there are many possible meanings that the audience might bring to a piece of work, raising the issue of the subject/object relationship in art. Is a piece of art (a painting, song, or performance) the subject or the object?³⁵ There seems to be a push and pull between the audience and the work itself, wherein the audience projects meaning and artistic value upon a particular work, even as the work may also assert itself back upon the audience: Hirst's shark is a particularly visceral example of a work forcing itself upon the sub/consciousness of its audience.

But it is not only the audience that is influenced by a work of art. Consider a gallery. A gallery that includes particularly significant works of art will gain credibility from those works. The Louvre is known as an important museum because it houses significant works of art. If the Louvre was one day emptied out and instead hosted a collection of trite and derivative works, it would no doubt begin to be seen as a less important museum; similarly, if the most important works in the Louvre were transferred to another gallery (say, the Art Gallery of Hamilton, ON, Canada), then that gallery would then become an important entity. Further still, if these same works were displayed in an empty warehouse, then that warehouse would likely come to be seen as an artistically significant place—it would become not a warehouse but an important gallery, at least while the paintings were still on display. The artworks within the Louvre act reflexively on the gallery itself, making it an artistically significant entity. This significance in turn works on any new piece that is brought into the Louvre as well. If

34. Nanay, *Aesthetics*, 15–16.

35. Crowther writes, "To create a visual image involves acting on reality in a way that changes the existing relation of subject and object of all levels" (*Phenomenology of the Visual Arts*, 18).

a previously unknown artist were to have her painting hung in the Louvre, it would give credibility to that painting itself, and by extension to the artist who made it. Thus, there is an ongoing, interactive relationship between a work of art, the artist, the gallery, and the audience—all these things influence each other. The strength of these associations correlates directly with the perception of artistic significance in a given work. This means not only that a great masterpiece can give credibility to a gallery or allow for meaningful engagement with an audience, but also that a relatively mundane object (a block of color on a canvas, a dead shark in a tank, or a moment of silence) can come to be seen as a meaningful work of art when it is viewed by an artistically-engaged audience or displayed in an artistically-significant gallery.

Six Ideas about Artistic Transfiguration

Before moving on to discuss how all of this relates to Christian liturgy, it will be helpful to draw a few summative conclusions from the discussion above. These conclusions about art should allow for a few helpful points of reference in the considerably more abstract discussion of liturgy that follows.

(1) It is possible for something mundane to be transfigured into a work of art.

(2) This transfiguration can occur in several ways, often involving association with certain entities (artist, gallery, and audience) within the art world—the strength of these associations can in some cases determine the significance ascribed to a work of art.

(3) If a work is associated with/created by a significant artist, it is more likely to be considered to be a significant work of art, as it inherits credibility from its creator.

(4) If a work is associated with/presented in a significant gallery or other institution (concert hall, venue, museum, etc.), it is more likely to be considered as a significant work of art. This is because the gallery itself is a powerful hermeneutic preparation, allowing for consideration of the object *as art*.³⁶

(5) If a work is associated with/viewed by an audience that is looking for art, it is more likely to be considered as art. The atten-

36. On hermeneutic preparation, see Gschwandtner, *Degrees of Givenness*, 91.

tiveness and predisposition of the audience can have a radical effect on the *artness* and meaning of a work.

(6) Art functions reflexively with each of the above associations. A potent work of art can come to bear on each of these by bolstering the reputation of the artist, raising the profile of the gallery (and the other works contained therein), and shaping the audience affectively. This means that the same factors that allow a mundane object to be transfigured into a work of art are themselves changed in some way simply by their association with the work.

Liturgical Transfigurations

The above digression into the world of art is more than an amusement; whether or not one finds any particular artistic merit in all the works described above, they give a number of concrete examples that can become helpful points of reference as I turn to my primary concern: What liturgy does, and how it works. Whether Catholic or Orthodox, Baptist, or Pentecostal, Christian liturgy tends to involve certain kinds of practices, assumptions, and results that suggest several ideas relating to what liturgy is and does. I am not interested here so much in the specifics of any particular liturgical style as in describing something common to liturgy across the full gamut of Christian practice—though the specifics of style are the medium in which the general shape of liturgy is made manifest.³⁷ I will only discuss one of these ideas here, which is that liturgy involves transfiguration. This involvement can be so integral to the liturgical enterprise that it is easily overlooked or misconstrued, and so here I will attempt to describe liturgical transfiguration as explicitly as possible in terms of how it is experienced and expressed aesthetically; the point here is not aesthetics per se, but the transfiguration in faith that is illustrated in these aesthetics.³⁸

37. Ellis (*Gathering*, 230) writes, “Because liturgical theology is the establishing and explaining of the faith of the Church through a study of its worship, this faith will normally have a concrete, devotional form.”

38. Kavanagh (*On Liturgical Theology*, 41–42) follows a somewhat similar approach in identifying the distinction between paintings and icons: “Painting

The aesthetics of liturgy (in any stylistic/denominational milieu) help to make liturgical transfiguration visible and give expression to the theology that is embedded within the liturgical practice. That is to say, the things that we see and hear (and the way these things change) in the midst of the worship gathering tell us something about what we believe about God and about ourselves: “What Christians believe is embodied in what they say and do when they gather for worship.”³⁹ Below, I will provide a number of artistic and aesthetic examples of transfiguration that can be commonly found in liturgy. I will subsequently describe what exactly these aesthetic transfigurations suggest as to the kind of theology that emerges from the practice of Christian liturgy. Note that my intent is first to demonstrate what liturgy looks and sounds like, second to think about what such aesthetics suggest about how liturgy works, and third to make explicit the theology that is embedded within such liturgy. This means that I will start with the thing itself (e.g., bread and wine) and then build toward a theology of that thing rather than beginning with a theology and working backward to how that theology is expressed in a given liturgical practice.

Liturgy, like art in the Western world, transfigures ordinary objects, places, times, and actions into meaningful—even holy—things. In some cases, these transfigurations allow something to represent something else (much as a painting might represent a particular person or place), but in other cases, these transfigurations change the meaning of the thing itself in a fundamental way. Whereas something can be seen as art because it is created by an artist, something might be seen as worship because it is done in a consciously worshipful mode by someone who is a worshipper.⁴⁰

and Icon are both artifacts, but the latter is raised to the level of high sacrament. It is a faith-made thing, the result of a supremely civil transaction with the real and done in the city center of the World changed in Christ. So too are bread and wine, oil and water. Every sacrament, being an act of faith, inverts the perspective natural to humanity’s city.”

39. Ellis, *Gathering*, 225.

40. The *who* of this can be difficult to identify theologically, which presents a number of other questions for liturgical theology. Does credibility come from the congregant, the minister, the church, or is it possibly the Holy Spirit? If liturgy is, as Fagerberg (*Consecrating the World*, 6) writes, a participation in “the

Similarly, something can be seen as art when it is presented in the context of a credible gallery (or theatre, or concert hall, etc.), just as something may be seen as worship when it is done in a liturgical context.⁴¹ Additionally, something can be seen as art when it is viewed by an audience that is in some way prepared to see it as such just as something can be seen (anthropologically speaking) as worship when it is viewed by an audience that is accordingly liturgically engaged.⁴² Finally, just as art functions reflexively in each of its associations, liturgy acts reflexively on its creators, its setting, and its audience, imbuing them with liturgical meaning. Liturgical things are transfigured: They are changed but also revealed for what they are. Below, I will present a selection of “image entries” that help to make evident how these liturgical transfigurations occur.⁴³

The Roman Cross

The cross is a helpful place to begin thinking about liturgical transfiguration for three reasons: It is highly visible; it is commonly found in liturgical contexts across a range of traditions; and it is a common, ugly thing that has been imbued with sacred meaning and beauty through its use in Christian liturgy. Crucifixion was a common mode of execution for enemies of Rome, particularly for people without social status—slaves and foreign rebels.⁴⁴ Aside from the obvious physical brutality of the procedure (which is doc-

perchoreosis of the Trinity,” then the *who* of worship becomes an extremely complex topic.

41. Context here can also vary wildly, ranging from intense and historic practices that might be found in a cathedral, all the way to the informal and unacknowledged norms of a small group Bible study. As Geldhof (*Liturgical Theology*, 8–9) writes, “It is much more fruitful to ask questions such as ‘where is liturgy,’ ‘when is liturgy,’ or ‘how much liturgy is there’ than to ask ‘what is liturgy.’”

42. Again, the question of *who* arises: Who is the audience? To whom is our liturgy oriented? Is it toward the congregation, or to God? Or to the world? My assumption throughout has been that liturgy involves both God and people, meaning that the role of “audience” is not always fixed.

43. The term “image entries” is borrowed from Philip Rieff (*My Life among the Deathworks*, 20), who includes “visual, verbal, acoustic, or sociohistorical” categories as “images” that in some way depict the sacred order.

44. Chapman and Schnabel, *Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus*, 534.

umented well in the Gospels), crucifixion was associated in the first century with shame and humiliation (also documented well in the New Testament). Crucifixion was performed both by the state and by private slave owners and was generally used for slaves and criminals without sufficient social status (i.e., without Roman citizenship).⁴⁵ Accordingly, when Paul writes to the Galatians, “Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified” (Gal 3:1 NIV), we have in mind an image of shame and deadly humiliation.⁴⁶

It might be reasonable, then, to imagine that any visual representation of Christ’s death would follow in the crude, mocking lines of the *Alexamenos Graffito*, a hasty and ill-formed bit of graffiti found scratched on the wall of a building, possibly a dormitory for imperial slaves, dating very roughly from sometime around the second century.⁴⁷ The scene depicts a man hung on a cross, naked (at least from the waist down), with the head of a donkey. Another man raises his hand in a gesture of honor or worship toward the donkey-headed victim. A text scrawled around the drawing reads, ΑΛΕΞΑΜΕΝΟC CEBETE ΘΕΟΝ, which is often translated as “Alexamenos worships his God.”⁴⁸ The graffito seems intended to make fun of someone, namely, Alexamenos, as well as his religion. The mockery here is “almost certainly directed at the Christian religion” as Christians were accused by some in the Greco-Roman world of worshipping a God with the head of a donkey.⁴⁹ Moreover, the mockery is directed toward the idea of a crucified God. The artist of the graffito likely means to mock Alexamenos for worshipping a God who has suffered the death typically re-

45. Chapman and Schnabel, *Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus*, 607.

46. It is quite possible that many of the original recipients of Paul’s letter had fresh memories of their own friends and family members having died by crucifixion, and so a visual depiction might have been unnecessary, not to mention traumatizing for the colonized Galatians. See Niang, “Seeing and Hearing Jesus Christ Crucified,” 175.

47. Yarbrough, “Shadow of an Ass,” 242.

48. Chapman and Schnabel, *Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus*, 754. The writing is crude, both in the form of the letters and in its grammar. Yarbrough (“Shadow of an Ass,” 241) writes that not only do the subject and verb not agree, but it is difficult to be certain about most of the letters making up the last word, suggesting that other readings should be considered.

49. Chapman and Schnabel, *Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus*, 754.

served for slaves and insurrectionists, following in the then-common criticism that Christians “worship not a god . . . but a corpse.”⁵⁰

Aside from the donkey head, the *Alexamenos Graffito* says something meaningful and accurate about the shameful reality of crucifixion in the Greco-Roman world. Based on this, we might imagine that Christians would try to avoid using any cruciform imagery, especially in the context of liturgy.⁵¹ Who would want to bring something shameful and violent into a setting where people are trying to think of whatever is noble, pure, and lovely (Phil 4:8)? Of course, the reality today is quite the opposite: Crosses are ubiquitous in Christian worship. Consider the main stained-glass window at St. Michael’s Cathedral Basilica in Toronto, created by the Parisian Neo-classical stained-glass artist Étienne Thévenot.⁵² The window is featured prominently on the east wall of the sanctuary, behind and above the altar. Though the subject matter (i.e., the Crucifixion) is essentially the same as that of the *Alexamenos Graffito*, Thévenot’s stained glass is qualitatively different in virtually every other way. Whereas the former is a crude, hasty etching meant to vandalize the wall of a shared living space, the latter is a commissioned work created with great intentionality and skill and meant for the setting of a holy space. Thévenot’s artistic method involved not only the illustration of the image itself but also the revival of a medieval, labor-intensive leaded glass approach, using many small pieces and vibrant colors to create the image.⁵³ This is a work that would have been quite expensive to produce, not to mention the cost of shipping the pieces across the Atlantic and then installing them in the large window.

The vast difference between the *Alexamenos Graffito* and the window at St. Michael’s can be seen as an instance of liturgical transfiguration. To begin, consider both works as examples of art.

50. Taken from Celsus, quoted in Yarbrough, “Shadow of an Ass,” 250–51.

51. In the earliest centuries of the church, this kind of avoidance may have been the case. Aside from second century uses of the staurogram in certain manuscripts, the early church was not known to engage in visual/artistic depictions of crucifixion. See Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 139.

52. Bey, “Les édifices néogothiques parisiens,” 16.

53. Bey, “Les édifices néogothiques parisiens,” 10–11, 17.

The *Graffito* falls artistically short; not only does it seem (in my opinion) to lack any of its own artistic quality, it does not exhibit any of the kinds of artistic associations that would suggest that it is significant *as art*: It is not made by a known artist (no one knows who etched it on the wall); it is not displayed in an artistically credible setting but is scratched on the wall of a dormitory; it is not made to be viewed by an audience that is primed for viewing art but rather by an audience that is presumably interested in mocking Alexamenos and his religion.⁵⁴ The *Graffito* is not, in my opinion, artistically significant, though it is historically and theologically significant. By contrast, the window at St. Michaels was made by a notable stained glass artist (Thévenot), is displayed in an artistically-significant setting (the cathedral, which contains many other beautiful works as well), and is viewed by an audience that is (presumably) primed to recognize the artistic merits of various pieces in the cathedral, not the least of which is the building itself. Thévenot's window also demonstrates how an object comes to be recognized as *liturgically* significant, based on similar criteria: It is created by a person known for creating liturgically-oriented works (Thévenot created works for a number of historic cathedrals in Paris); it is placed in a liturgically significant setting (St. Michaels); and it is viewed by an audience that is gathered for the purpose of worship.

The artistic transfiguration of these pieces helps us to understand the concept of liturgical transfiguration as it is rendered aesthetically in cruciform images. The *Graffito* and the window both depict essentially the same subject—the Crucifixion of the Son of God—but one is an image of mockery, and the other is an image of beauty and of worship. Thévenot's window takes an object of disgust, shame, and brutality and presents it on a massive scale, centered in an intricate pattern of shapes and lines, filled with panes of cobalt blue glass. In place of a donkey's head, Jesus is depicted with a halo, expressing divine glory even in the midst of suffering. At the bottom of the window, there is a row of identical cathedrals depicted, perhaps representing the worship of the global church. At the top of the window are images representing the

54. Another audience for the *Graffito* might include Alexamenos himself, the object of ridicule.

worship of Christ in heaven: angels with trumpets, creatures representing the four-faced tetramorph (Ezek 1:10; Rev 4:7); the Ark of the Covenant; the *agnus Dei*; and a pelican (a symbol for Christ in the middle ages).⁵⁵ What was once an image of humiliation and defeat is depicted here as an image of supreme hope and glory—Thévenot’s window is an aesthetic expression that shows us how the meaning of the cross has changed in a radical way because of the Christ event and how that event has been retold time and again in Christian liturgy.

Bread and Wine

Having engaged in an overtly artistic example of liturgical transfiguration, I want to consider here a distinctly non-artistic (but still highly visible) example: bread and wine. Bread and wine are, generally, very common things. But they can become holy things when they are introduced into the setting of worship. They are transfigured by their involvement in liturgy. But how does this transfiguration happen, exactly? At what point do bread and wine cross the threshold to become holy things?⁵⁶ I remember a Sunday morning where someone visiting my church pulled out a box of Cheerios during the sermon and was eating them by the handful. This was surprising enough, but after a few minutes, the same person also pulled a bottle of wine from his bag and began drinking straight from the bottle! Was this bread (or cereal) and wine an example of the Lord’s Supper?⁵⁷ The Cheerios and wine were mate-

55. On the pelican as a Christ symbol, see Beal, “Life of Christ,” 631.

56. Obviously there is a long standing theological disagreement over this exact question. I relate some aspects of that disagreement below. I am not particularly interested here in delving into the historic arguments around the distinction between the words of institution and the *epiclesis*, nor in the discussions on any other means of consecration. The question is more basic than that: In a given liturgical context, whatever consecratory rites are employed, how is it that bread and wine are understood as something more than the bread and wine sitting on my kitchen counter?

57. Note here that I am using “communion,” “the Lord’s Supper,” and “Eucharist” synonymously to refer to the ordinance/sacrament of bread and wine as instituted by Jesus. I recognize that in many traditions these terms have precise meanings that may be quite distinct from one another, but I am using all of them to refer generally to the meal that is typically found at the center of Christian worship across a range of traditions.

rially similar to the wafers and juice that the congregation would later consume together as a part of our communion ritual—and yet there was a clear difference between the significance of this man’s breakfast and the Supper we would share only minutes later. So, what is the difference, exactly, between bread and wine—even bread and wine consumed during a worship service—and the bread and wine that are “the gifts of God for the people of God”?⁵⁸ That is to say, how are bread and wine transfigured in and for liturgy?

What allows bread and wine to become something more than bread and wine is that they are presented as such by liturgically significant persons, not unlike the way that a contemporary artist might present a found object as a work of art.⁵⁹ In many Christian traditions, the Eucharist is a sacrament that can only be administered by an ordained member of the clergy. In some cases, as in the Roman rite, the celebrant will offer a prayer of consecration for the bread and wine, setting them apart as holy.⁶⁰ In the Anglican tradition, the bread and wine might be brought into the service by a congregant, who places them upon the table (or, in this case, the altar) before the priest officially asks for God to consecrate them in the eucharistic prayer: “We offer you, Father, this bread and this cup. Send your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts.”⁶¹ In some cases, the consecration of bread and wine may begin well before the worship service itself as in the Orthodox *prospora* (“offering,” in this case referring to the bread that will later be used for the Eucharist), which is prepared by lay and clergy alike using a recipe that calls for prayer and fasting in addition to its material ingredients.⁶² Later on, the priest will perform the

58. *Book of Alternative Services*, 181.

59. Obviously, *the* liturgically significant person is Jesus, who presents these things to his disciples at the last supper, and presents these things again in Spirit to the gathered congregation. But rather than start here, I want to build to this idea in order to demonstrate how the practice of *meal* in Christian liturgy embeds and gives rise *to* these theological ideas, rather than serving strictly as an expression *of* these ideas. In other words, the “practice carries the understanding” (Taylor, *Secular Age*, 173), and not the other way around.

60. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, §156.

61. *Book of Alternative Services*, 192, 195.

62. See an exemplar recipe at “Guide to Baking Prospora.”

proskomedia (“liturgy of preparation”), wherein a piece (called the *Lamb*) will be ceremonially cut out of the *prosphora* and set apart to be used for the actual eucharistic meal.⁶³ These various “high” liturgical traditions make visible (in the raising up of the elements, the use of special instruments and dishes, and so on) and audible (in the spoken prayers of the priests and the responses of the people) a kind of transition, wherein ordinary bread and wine become sacred objects, offerings given to God by his people, and given to the people by God. These transitions demonstrate potent, multi-sensory, and aesthetic sensibilities that are theological in nature.

But what of the various “low” traditions that may not have a liturgical script that explicitly consecrates the bread and wine for communion? Do Baptists, Pentecostals, etc. have any way of marking the difference between bread and wine that are reserved for lunch, and others that are reserved for communion? Are the bread and wine still holy if we do not have a script that tells us as such? Alexander Schmemmann writes that, while Catholic tradition has long held that it is the words of institution that mark the transition from ordinary bread to the sacred *host*, his own Orthodox tradition instead points to the *epiclesis* (“the invocation of the Holy Spirit”). Schmemmann goes on to say that it is not the words of the *epiclesis* themselves that count—it is the response of the Holy Spirit that actually consecrates the elements. It is the Holy Spirit who “manifests the elements of our offering as communion in the Holy Spirit. This is the consecration.”⁶⁴ If it is not the words of the liturgy themselves that consecrate the bread and wine but instead the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, then perhaps it is reasonable to also believe that the Holy Spirit might also do this same work in the casual eucharistic practices of many low churches.⁶⁵

63. *Service Books*, 15–17.

64. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 56.

65. If I have stretched Schmemmann beyond what is reasonable, it should at least be conceded that Christian liturgy in general shares the practice of *meal*, and that the generally accepted theological notion that this *meal* has a meaning beyond other meals can be attributed to the presence of the Spirit within the church. One way to describe Christians is to say, “In their Sunday meeting Chris-

While many low church traditions might not use terms like “consecrate” or “Eucharist,” there is still a strongly-felt—though often tacit—understanding that communion is something entirely beyond any other kind of meal. This understanding is often conveyed aesthetically (both visibly and audibly). Aside from the informal prayers that are typically given before and after communion, it is common in many low-church settings to read from the Gospels or from 1 Cor 11; this is a strongly held liturgical norm in many churches.⁶⁶ But there are other markers, too. In many churches, there is a piece of furniture set aside for communion, often called a “table” (emphasizing Jesus’ invitation to eat and drink with him) rather than an altar (as in many *high* churches, emphasizing Jesus’ sacrifice). Notably, this piece of furniture is not usually used for other purposes unless it is used to display a Bible.⁶⁷ This restricted use signifies that what is on the table is distinct from the kinds of things that might be put on other, general-purpose tables—this is a sacred meal. Additionally, communion in low churches is often served using strange dishes: small plastic cups that contain no more than a sip of wine or juice to accompany a fragment of unleavened bread. These cups demonstrate a dramatically ascetic posture towards communion: This is not enough food to nourish our bodies nor enough wine to go to our heads. Faced with the severe limitations of this meal, we are forced to acknowledge that its purpose is other than sustaining the body; we must ask ourselves what else is left.⁶⁸ What is left is that this is a

tians gather around the scriptures. They also hold a meal” (Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 35).

66. See, e.g., *Manual for Worship and Service*, 111 (Baptist); Cherry, *Worship Architect*, 90; and even *Discipline*, 72–74 (Pentecostal Holiness). David Long interviews a number of Canadian Pentecostal pastors and finds that most of them read 1 Cor 11 as a part of the communion rite, despite none of them naming the reading of this text as being necessary (“Pentecostal Sacramentality,” 178).

67. In settings where a general-use table is used for communion, the table is often decorated for communion, with special table cloths, grapes, flowers, or other objects marking it for special use.

68. The reductive nature of this approach to the meal is not unlike Rothko stripping representation and form from his paintings, or the composers of absolute music reducing away everything but the essential part of what they want to communicate. The tiny portions of bread and wine strip away nutrition, satiation,

meal that is something other than a meal—perhaps it is a holy thing.

Far beyond furniture, prayers, songs, or dishes, the predominant aesthetic factor in any eucharistic service is the people. Above, I briefly related the significant role of the priest as the celebrant in a variety of high liturgical traditions. Low liturgies also depend upon certain, highly visible leaders. Often, a pastor, elder, or known leader in the congregation might be responsible for praying, reading, or singing prior to the distribution of the communion elements. This may not be a person with the same kind of formal, hierarchical authority exercised by a Catholic or Orthodox priest, nor a minister recognized as a part of the Anglican apostolic succession, and yet it is significant that it is very often an authority figure of some kind who serves as the celebrant even in the lowest liturgical traditions. But there is another figure present in every eucharistic service: the congregation. In many low traditions, the congregants take an active role in the communion service by serving one another. Perhaps this takes place in the passing of trays filled with bread and wine, or perhaps in the distribution of single-use bread and juice packets at the door. In these instances, individual congregants are fulfilling part of the duties taken on by priests and deacons in other traditions, reflecting a high value placed on the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. In many low churches, ordinary congregants serve one another, not out of a desire for the church to reflect the ideals of a democratic society but because of the belief that God is at work in and through the gathering.⁶⁹

Returning to my earlier idea that art is seen as art in part because it is presented as such by a known artist, we can say by analogy that bread and wine are understood to be the Eucharist in part because they are presented as such by a liturgically significant person—a priest, or, in some contexts, some member of the kingdom of priests who comprise the church. The more credible the present-

even pleasure from the normal experience of eating and drinking, raising the question: What is left that cannot be reduced away from this experience?

69. Ellis (*Gathering*, 242–43) writes that the “horizontal” (person-to-person) relationships in the congregation are to be understood in the context of the “vertical” of our new covenant with God as initiated by Jesus. “It is the epicletic nature of worship which enables it to be truly communal.”

ing figure is, the more credible (in theory) the idea that this is indeed a eucharistic meal—the gifts of God for the people of God. And it is precisely here that we should ask who the liturgical “artist” might actually be. Is it the priest/pastor? Or is it the congregant? Of course, it is neither of these—the liturgical “artist,” the figure whose credibility is strong enough to so transfigure bread and wine to become the table of the Lord, is none other than God himself. Echoing Schmemmann’s thoughts from earlier, we must acknowledge that what counts is not the prayers of the celebrant, it is that God hears these prayers. It is not that we have a ritual that matters, it is that this ritual in some way is derived from what was instituted by Jesus himself. It is not that we are gathered around the table, it is that the Spirit ministers among us, to us, through us as we gather.

Silence

There is in the eucharistic meal a sense that we (the congregants) are the audience and that God is the artist, so to speak. This sense is pervasively felt throughout many other parts of Christian liturgy beyond the meal itself. Consider the practice of keeping silence. It is common across a range of Christian traditions to keep silence at certain moments. This silence is not unlike the silence that is kept at the beginning of a play, or a movie, or an orchestral performance. Silence is kept by an audience that is making room (acoustically) for a performance of some kind. In a similar way, a congregation might keep silent when someone steps up to the pulpit to pray or preach. We might think in this scenario of the preacher as the performer and the congregation as the audience. But what about moments where the entire congregation—clergy and lay alike—keep silence? There are often moments in which no one speaks at all, perhaps in the midst of a prayer or after a sermon. Sometimes silence precedes a prayer, as in a collect; silence in this case is a kind of focusing, an ascetic setting aside of all of the other things we might want to say so that we can together say this one thing to God.⁷⁰ Such silence stands in marked contrast to the cacophony of the world outside, construing the world and its many

70. Day, *Reading the Liturgy*, 51–52.

words as nothing more than empty talk. At other times, silence follows a spoken prayer, perhaps in a time of confession.⁷¹ This silence is intended to allow congregants to quietly offer their own prayers to God, meaning that this silence is a moment in which the congregation functions as the “artist” and God is functionally the “audience.”

But what is the function of silence when it occurs around a sermon or a Scripture reading? The choice not to speak says something not only about the congregation’s posture toward the reader or the preacher but also toward the word of God. Keeping silence in this way is an act of reverence. Consider the Orthodox liturgy for Holy Saturday, a day characterized by multiple layers of silence, in which the priest says, “Let all mortal flesh keep silent, and in fear and trembling stand, pondering nothing earthly-minded. For the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords comes to be slain, to give Himself as food to the faithful.”⁷² Here, silence is a response to the presence and action—both in history and in the midst of the service—of a holy God. Keeping silence can be a sign not only of reverence but also of amazement, that is, we are so in awe of what God has done that we cannot find words to express ourselves.⁷³ Thus, keeping silence in this instance is an action that configures the congregation as the audience and God as the performer—the roles are reversed from the above instance of silence preceding the collect or after the confession of sin. But there is more to silence than reverence alone. What is crucial here is that the congregation understands themselves to be a congregation engaged in attending to something apart from themselves. One might keep silence at home because there is nothing to say or no one to

71. See, e.g., the Anglican penitential rite, in which the priest offers the prompt, “Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor,” after which silence is kept so that congregants can privately confess their sins to God (*Book of Alternative Services*, 46). *Book of Alternative Services* explains regarding silence in the Eucharistic service that “the aim of the silence is to enable the congregation to become a praying community. If the eucharistic liturgy is to become the prayer of the People of God, the community needs to be given time to reflect on the word of God and the action of the liturgy, so that it can respond in prayer, repentance, and offering” (175).

72. *Service Books*, 128.

73. Fodor, “Alien Beauty,” 196

talk to, but for a crowd of people in a concert hall, theater, or church sanctuary to keep silence, they must have some kind of trust and expectation that the performer will do something to fill the acoustic and attentive space created by the audience. Silence conveys expectation.

The keeping of silence in the context of a worship service implies that *Someone* other than we will say or do something—we are leaving room for the presence, action, and word of God. This is conveyed in some traditions via the church calendar. I have above noted the Orthodox Holy Saturday liturgy, but consider also the Anglican Maundy Thursday liturgy, which ends with the stripping of the altar and the silent exit of the congregation without any word of blessing or dismissal from the priest.⁷⁴ Having celebrated the Eucharist and the washing of feet, each congregant “is finally thrust into an encounter with the absence of the Word of God. The order of the universe is breaking down.”⁷⁵ William Butler Yeats writes, “Things fall apart, the center cannot hold.”⁷⁶ Taken on its own, such a liturgy is confusing, alienating, possibly even atheistic in its implications. But, of course, the liturgy of Maundy Thursday is not taken on its own but as part of a cycle that flows into Good Friday and Easter, on to Pentecost, and so on. The choice to conclude a Maundy Thursday service with such bleak and heavy silence is also an act of faith and expectation that into this silence: God speaks. The implication of the silence of Maundy Thursday is the opposite of what it appears: Jesus has not left us; God’s word is not absent; evil has not won.

A very similar dynamic can be found in the closing moments of many Pentecostal and Charismatic services. It is not uncommon to end a sermon with some kind of an altar call and a pastoral encouragement to allow God to “speak to your heart” (or something to that effect). These times are not, strictly speaking, silent. There is often light music happening. But they are distinctly wordless in the sense that there is no pastor or worship leader speaking to the people. In one sense, this reflects the desolation of the Anglican Maundy Thursday service, in that the Charismatic service might

74. Jones, “Phenomenology of the Liturgy,” 9.

75. Jones, “Phenomenology of the Liturgy,” 9.

76. Yeats, “The Second Coming.”

end without any pastoral words to affirm the people, to send them out, or to assure them of God's presence. The leadership is momentarily absent. And yet the purpose of this wordless interval in the Charismatic/Pentecostal liturgical style is precisely to draw attention to the presence and work of God's Spirit.⁷⁷ For example, a recent service at Church of the City in New York followed the sermon with an extended period of congregational singing, during which one of the pastors came up to say that the leaders of the church had been praying before the service, asking, "if there's anything specific that God might want to do in the room."⁷⁸ This was followed by another song and a wordless musical interlude, after which the pastor returned to the stage to close the service by saying, "So, while God is continuing to meet with people, our prayer team is up here if you want to receive prayer tonight."⁷⁹ It is revealing that the wordless musical interlude was bookended first with the idea that God might want to do something "in the room" and second by the idea that "God is *continuing* to meet with people." Clearly, the wordless part of this service is a moment in which the silence of the church leaders is meant to make room for God to speak or to do some work in the hearts of the congregants. The lack of speech from the leaders and congregants positions them as an audience for whatever God might do or say. Their silence is an act of faith.

The use of silence in a worship service is an aesthetic choice, one that is not wholly distinct from the silence of Cage's "4'33". In Cage's composition, the silence of the performer brings to the fore the sound of the audience in the concert hall, in a certain sense making them into the performers of the "music." The audience is thus transfigured into the artist. Liturgical silence is an aesthetic

77. Vondey ("Pentecostal Sacramentality," 102) writes, "The Holy Spirit, not the human person, is the mediator of the grace of God and the acting subject of the celebration, even if the sacramental action of the church requires the participation of the community." These interludes in which the leader allows an extended period to pass in silence or with background music has been a feature of Pentecostal worship since Azusa, and has been theologically understood to convey the leadership of the Holy Spirit since that time as well (Albrecht, *Rites in the Spirit*, 33).

78. "Sunday Service Live," 1:36:39.

79. "Sunday Service Live," 1:44:46.

choice that can have multiple meanings (even within a single service). Silence may function pragmatically, as can be seen when the congregation comes to a hush in order to allow a speaker to be heard by all (e.g., in a sermon, prayer, or some kind of announcement). In some cases, silence allows temporal and acoustic space for the congregation to function as performers themselves by speaking (out loud or inaudibly) to God. But in other cases, silence is transfigured from its usual aesthetic connotation of absence into one of presence. The fact that nothing is being said in the setting of a worship service may have great meaning because it relies upon an understanding that though we have nothing left to say: God speaks.

Leaving the Gallery

There is much more that could be said about liturgical transfiguration and how that transfiguration comes to bear upon and is realized in matters such as music and congregational singing, sermons, architecture, and so on. But I want to transition here to a consideration of the ways that liturgical transfiguration applies to the worshippers themselves even outside of the time and space of liturgy. To illustrate this transfiguration, I want to turn again to the artistic examples provided in the first section of this paper. Each of these examples helps us to understand that what happens to objects as they become art also happens to people who engage with these works. Artistic transfiguration can act reflexively on the artist, the gallery, and the audience. This helps us to metaphorically understand something of the change that happens to liturgically-involved people as well.

I chose the artistic examples in the first section of this paper for their reductive nature; each of them in some way eliminates typical elements of its own art form in order to bring some other element into focus. Rothko's paintings do away with representative forms in order to bring emphasis to color itself. Hirst's shark does away with the actual work of sculpting in order to bring attention to the presence of death as it is embodied by the shark itself (not just by the form of the shark, as in a traditional sculpture). What is notable in all of the reductive works above is that something re-

markably similar to each one of them can be found in the world outside of the gallery.



Figure 1. A Wall in my Neighborhood (Photo by Jesse Hill, 2023)

For example, Rothko's paintings are not entirely different from a patch of paint found on a wall somewhere. This, on the one hand, can be used as a criticism against Rothko (e.g., "This isn't art, you can find things like this anywhere"). There is a brick wall on the side of a building in my neighborhood that is frequently vandalized (see Figure 1 above). Each time it is vandalized, the building owners paint over the graffiti using a paint color that is presumably meant to look something like the color of the brick wall. The color never matches all that well, and as a result, there are large patches of varying colors marked on the wall. This patchwork configuration of mismatched colors is not really all that different from a Rothko painting—it is a color field of a considerable size. However, while a Rothko painting hung in a gallery will garner significant acclaim and an emotional response from its viewers (not to mention a high price tag), this wall is likely to be ignored by passersby. One way to approach the relationship between a Rothko painting and this wall is to say that, because the wall has no value and may even be ugly, the Rothko painting should not be valued, either. However, it is also possible to work in the opposite direction. A person who has experienced and appreciated a Rothko painting might be inclined to see the wall and to appreciate it as something beautiful or meaningful. I took the picture in Figure 1 as I was walking home one day while thinking about Rothko.

Though I had passed this wall many times, this was the first time I ever stopped to consider the interaction between the shades of red, maroon, and mauve, and how they interacted with each other. The colors prompted an emotional response, something like the feeling of a sunset in a faraway place in the midst of a long and tiring journey. Because of my previous interaction with Rothko, this dilapidated, vandalized wall functioned for me in the same way that a piece of art in a gallery might. It was not the wall that changed but my ability to see the wall as beautiful and meaningful.

Here is another example; Hirst's work has been justifiably criticized on many accounts, not the least of which is that he did not actually do anything particularly artistic to make the work. Hirst did not sculpt the shark in *Physical Impossibility of Death*. Compare Hirst's piece to a hammerhead shark that was originally caught and mounted in an electrical supply shop by the shop's owner, Eddie Saunders, two years before Hirst's creation. It is not unusual for an angler to display a significant catch in some way, and the casual atmosphere of Saunders' shop seemed like a good place to mount the shark. Saunders is not an artist, his shop is not a gallery, and his customers were not looking for art. However, after Hirst's shark was displayed in the Saatchi gallery, an artist collective called the "Stuckists" bought Saunders's shark and displayed it in the window of their gallery, with the title, *A Dead Shark Isn't Art*.⁸⁰ The Stuckists postulate that since Saunders mounted his shark two years before Hirst's and because Saunders's shop was in the same area where Hirst did much of his work, Hirst might have plagiarized the idea for the work from Saunders.⁸¹ Even aside from the accusation of plagiarism, the Stuckist's title says enough on its own. As with Rothko and the brick wall, two options are possible here: One might say (as the Stuckists do) that, because people sometimes catch and mount dead sharks to show off their fishing prowess, Hirst's shark is unoriginal and not artistically significant. Or one might say that, because Hirst's shark was presented in a serious setting, dubbed with a thought-provoking title, and considered carefully by its audience, then sharks like Saunders's are also consequently transfig-

80. "Dead Shark."

81. "Dead Shark."

ured into meaningful things that help us to think about the reality of death in new ways.⁸² Perhaps Hirst's shark helps us to name and reconsider something that was always present in many other preservations and depictions of predators, which is the otherwise unacknowledged spark of primordial fear at the sight of a gaping, toothy maw, and the often-suppressed knowledge that we, too are "being[s]-toward-death."⁸³ While Hirst himself may be something of a shark in his art business dealings, it is worth considering that *Physical Impossibility of Death* does something to its viewers that allows them to think, see, and act differently after they have left the gallery.

Furthering the same line of thought, Cage's "4'33'" might be seen as something that does not belong in a concert hall, because it is not music (at least, it does not sound like other music). It is just silence, and anyone can hear silence at home without going out to see the symphony. Silence (that is, the sound of a symphony, pianist, etc., *not* playing) is a common thing. But the nature of Cage's composition is such that it teaches the audience how to hear the sound of the room they are in and the people sitting in their seats as a kind of music. The first time I "heard" "4'33'" performed, people sat uncomfortably still for the first minute or so, and then someone laughed, prompting a few more stifled laughs through the audience. Then, the creaking of a chair echoing in the room. The sound of breathing. Clothes rustling as someone leans toward her friend. Dental consonants echoing off the ceiling as someone in the back whispers a word I cannot make out. The performance ended with the sound of applause as the pianist stood to bow at the end of the piece. All of these sounds and more are present in all kinds of settings aside from a concert hall, and now that I have had the experience of sitting in the audience for a performance of "4'33'," I have learned to notice the sounds of other

82. The same could be said for the shark in the movie *Jaws*, or the sharks in the local aquarium, or sharks in the sea, or predators and predation in the natural world.

83. Heidegger writes about human existence as being framed between the two horizons of birth and death, and thus our being is "being-toward-death" (*Being and Time*, 357).

kinds of rooms, and the way I listen to music is different as a result.

Homo Liturgicus

The kinds of changes that happen in gallery viewers (or concert goers) as they leave the gallery help us to think about the kinds of changes that happen in liturgically involved people, too. The transfiguration that applies to liturgical things (food, silence, a cross, and much more) can act reflexively on the people involved in liturgy as well. A crowd, for instance, becomes a congregation when they gather to sing to the Lord together.⁸⁴ Similarly, a person who passes a tray of bread and wine to the next person in the pew is not functioning only as a waiter—they are in some sense functioning as a picture of Jesus.⁸⁵ Taking again the idea of transfiguration as both a change and a revelation, we see that these people are changed into something new: worshippers, pictures of Jesus, etc.⁸⁶ As we behold the Lord's glory, we “are being transformed (*μεταμορφούμεθα*) into his image with ever-increasing glory” (2 Cor 3:18). There is a sense in which people are changed in the course of liturgy—when we cross the threshold into the time and space of the worship gathering (be it a cathedral or a gymnasium), we are no longer first and foremost consumers, workers, citizens of a particular country, and so on; we are first and foremost worshippers. But this leads to the other half of *transfiguration*, which is the revealing of the true nature of things. People involved in liturgy are revealed for what they have always been called to be—every human is called to be a worshipper, to be an image of

84. Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 68–69.

85. While I have in view here the practice of seated communion commonly found in many low-churches, it should be noted that congregants have a part to play in any and all communion rites. Even in the context of the Episcopalian rite, Weil writes, “Eucharistic celebration in which all participants are understood to be ‘con-celebrants’ is simply an embodiment of an understanding of the nature of the Church itself” (*Liturgical Sense*, 62).

86. Kavanagh (*On Liturgical Theology*, 73–74) says, “What results in the first instance from [the experience of God in liturgy] is deep change in the very lives of those who participate in the liturgical act. And deep change will affect their next liturgical act, however slightly.”

God, etc. This is in some sense what we already are, and the liturgical transfiguration gives us a means by which this identity is realized and put into motion.

We thus become *homo liturgicus*.⁸⁷ That is, we are characterized by our newfound “orientation towards God, readiness to listen, obedience, grateful reception, wonder, adoration, and praise. It is an attitude of listening and seeing.”⁸⁸ What *homo liturgicus* does on Sunday morning (listening, seeing, and praising) becomes—ideally—what *homo liturgicus* does on Monday morning as well. Contra Heidegger’s construals of the human as “being-there” or “being-toward-death,” Christian liturgy posits *being-toward-God*.⁸⁹ Liturgy is “the resolute deliberate gesture made by those who ordain their being-in-the-world a being-before-God and who do violence to the former in the name of the latter.”⁹⁰ To participate in liturgy is to enact (whether consciously or not) certain ideas about the way things are: that we are created beings, made by a holy and loving God; that God condescends to hear our prayers; that God calls us to offer not only thanksgiving but our selves; and so on. Liturgy gives us language, gestures, and patterns for enacting these things.⁹¹ Thus, Sunday morning becomes, as Christopher Ellis puts it, “an occasion when what should be true *all* the time becomes true for a short time.”⁹² Ellis is describing what is true (or ought to be) about the congregation, but there is also a degree to which liturgy tells us something about what *all* of humanity is (not just Christian congregations), about who God is, and about how we ought to be oriented in relation to God within the

87. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 40.

88. Danneels, “Liturgy Forty Years after the Vatican Council,” 10 (quoted in Kubicki, *Presence of Christ*, 21). Note how many of these things reflect the statements concerning Jesus given by the Father at the transfiguration of Christ. We turn toward him, we listen to him, we adore him.

89. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 6–8, 219. Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 178.

90. Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 39.

91. Gschwandtner (*Welcoming Finitude*, 195) writes, “The postures, gestures, and affects of liturgy open us out beyond ourselves; they invite us to exposure and disclosure of ourselves.”

92. Ellis, *Gathering*, 3.

world.⁹³ Accordingly, it should be remembered that we believe that these things are true about our position in relation to God all the time—whether or not we are currently involved in some liturgical act. Liturgy is thus revelatory of the way things truly are between us and God, and also of how they could be—not unlike the way that the transfiguration of Jesus revealed who he truly is, always has been, and will be at the parousia. Liturgy suggests something about who we are before God, who we were made to be, and who we are becoming.

This revelation is communicated in part via the transfigurative aesthetic that I have been describing here. Mundane (e.g., bread and wine, a cross, silence) are transfigured into holy, significant things. Once these and other things are brought into the context of the worship service and used in a liturgical way, they are no longer ordinary things, they are themselves liturgical, in much the same way that ordinary things used in an artistic way become art. Seeing the way that things are transfigured in liturgy allows us to understand the transfigurative effect of liturgy with regard to people.

Here is a simple example: Alexamenos was ridiculed for worshipping a crucified God. Two millennia later, many Christians would consider Alexamenos to be a brother and someone to be admired for persevering in the face of some form of persecution. Thus, Alexamenos's social standing and religious credibility has been transfigured (albeit out of time). This points more generally toward how Christian worship tends to reorient people away from the values of the surrounding culture and toward the values of God's people. Christians (in theory) learn to value humility over power, fellowship over status, and generosity over wealth, in large part because these kinds of kingdom values are liturgically transfigured as being greater than the cultural values they replace.⁹⁴ In other words, our participation in worship has the effect of teaching

93. Lacoste (*Experience and the Absolute*, 44) writes, "Liturgy acts as the negation and the adoption of a position: it denies that the [immanentist, Heideggerian] logic of inherence unveils all that we are, and it affirms our desire to exist before God."

94. Lathrop (*Four Gospels on Sunday*, 15) notes that the New Testament liturgical practice of offering as depicted in Paul's letters is associated not with the libations and sacrifices offered to pagan gods but rather with the gift of God to us, and our response of humility and service to others.

us to live more like Jesus even outside of the liturgical context.⁹⁵ It is in the course of offering ourselves in worship that we are de-conformed to the pattern of this world and are transformed (*μεταμορφοῦσθη*) by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:1–2).⁹⁶

Here is a more complex example: Silence teaches us to hear and speak. Earlier, I noted how “hearing” the non-sound of “4’33”” taught me to listen to music differently. The many uses of silence in a worship service do the same thing. Silence teaches us in some cases to shut up the racket of the world around (recalling Lacoste’s idea that to identify as a being-before-God is to do violence to any other idea of human identity).⁹⁷ Silence also gives us space to speak—even in an inward whisper—our hopes, secrets, and failings to God.⁹⁸ But silence also becomes both a statement of faith that God *can* speak to us and the space in which God *does* speak to us.⁹⁹ To keep silence is an act of trust, a lived expression of the hope that God will speak, much as the practice of Sabbath keeping is a lived expression of the hope that God will provide, will act, etc. A person who experiences silence in the relatively safe context of liturgy may subsequently become able to attend to silence in the wider world, trusting that God is there even in what sounds like emptiness.

The richest and most challenging example from the instances above is that of bread and wine. *Homo liturgicus* is a eucharistic being. This is an identity that unfolds in many layers over the ex-

95. Fagerberg (*Consecrating the World*, 105) writes, “We do not go into liturgy in order to escape the world. We go there to learn how to do it the correct way, so that we can come out inspired with righteousness.”

96. “Christian worship functions as a counter-formation to the mis-formation of secular liturgies into which we are ‘thrown’ from an early age” (Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 88).

97. Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 39.

98. This is one of the ways in which liturgy functions as an apparatus that “both protects our vulnerability or finitude and encourages us to deal with our failures” (Gschwandtner, *Welcoming Finitude*, 185).

99. Liturgy “should keep silence before the silence of God, not being able to fillip the silence with our explanations, knowing rather only the words we are given, for example, ‘this is my beloved one’ and ‘I have heard these cries’ and ‘put off your shoes.’ Liturgical silence resonates with these and other words, being full of the presence and mystery of the God of these words” (Lathrop, *Holy Ground*, 162).

panse of time because it takes time to live into the incarnational and spiritual realities of the new covenant in Christ's blood that we remember and proclaim in the Eucharist. Schmemmann describes the sacraments as "passages" and "transformations" from the old into the new: We pass "Into the Kingdom of God, the world to come, into the very reality of this world and its life as redeemed and restored by Christ . . . [it is] the manifestation of the ultimate Truth about the world and life, man and nature, the Truth which is Christ."¹⁰⁰ The way in which bread and wine are seen as something significant in liturgy teaches us something about how to live liturgically in the material world. We eat and drink the gifts of God for the people of God, and we give thanks. But this teaches us to give thanks for *everything* we eat and drink, and even for the material world itself.¹⁰¹ These are all gifts of God, all things for which to give thanks. Eating, drinking, and giving thanks on Sunday morning teach us to do the most basic creaturely things the way they ought to be done: to be fully oriented toward God, ready to receive and to give thanks for existence itself. David Fagerberg puts it this way: "Liturgy is a rehearsal on a sacred stage for our performance of the mystery in the profane world."¹⁰² We are learning to perform the mystery of Christ's presence in the midst of what seems at first to be ordinary life. The Lord's Supper reminds us first of the deep, joyful meaning of the Incarnation and death of Christ, but our participation in this meal, our taking of these things into our own bodies, suggests a deep, joyful meaning to be found in our own lives as they have been redeemed by Christ.

At this point, it is worth drawing attention to a basic theological feature of liturgy: Liturgy is not only a human act but also a divine act. Liturgical transfigurations depend upon and illustrate an ongoing interplay between God and his people. The deep spiritual significance of the *meal* (and any other aspect of liturgy) depends upon the reality of God's presence and action in our world. What

100. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 123–24.

101. "All matter, all time, all natural being and all human artifacts are now available for symbolic/sacramental purpose. The material world can once again mediate the dialogue between God and man because we have been given ears to hear it, and so the material world is finally at peace. It can be used the way it was meant to be used" (Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 41).

102. Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 56.

makes liturgy transfigurative is not a particular configuration of human actions but that the Spirit of God is also involved in these same actions. The Eucharist remembers Jesus' institution of this meal, presumes and depends upon the Spirit of God within the congregation during the meal, and anticipates eschatologically the day when we will eat and drink anew in the fullness of the kingdom of God (Luke 22:18). Soon enough, it is not only bread and wine that come to be seen as transfigured by the mystery of Christ's presence, but the whole world also comes to be seen as a "*hierophony*, an epiphany of the sacred," not because we become pantheists but because we are learning to view the world as liturgical beings.¹⁰³ The significance of this is not just in the idea that *all* things consist in Christ (Col 1:17) but also in the idea that we are learning to look for and find his active, redeeming presence here and now, in the particularities of our lives. Judith Kubicki writes about how engagement with Christian sacraments tends to result in a sacramental worldview that transfigures personal experience: "Belief in the sacramentality of existence is nurtured by a posture of contemplative openness or receptivity to transcendence that is glimpsed in human experience that is local because it is inherently bodily."¹⁰⁴ Kubicki is not only making a theological claim but also making a phenomenological observation. The person who has been shaped as a byproduct of worshipping God in a sacramental way (i.e., participating in things like the Eucharist and baptism) may tend to have the experience of becoming open to the presence and glory of God in tangible, embodied, personal experiences—like eating a meal with friends or enjoying a day at the lake. Thus:

The world of the liturgical person is completely different from the world of the idolater. If . . . holiness and love emanate from our eye to seize everything for the Kingdom of God, then the liturgical person sees a dawn instead of a twilight, a pathway to life instead of a dead end, his neighbor as Christ knocking, and his daily life filled with mo-

103. Evdomikov, *Art of the Icon*, 117 (quoted in Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 127).

104. Kubicki, *Presence of Christ*, 31.

ments of providence to be obeyed instead of strikes of fate to be endured.¹⁰⁵

In this way, everything about life in the created world can be seen sacramentally, making visible the grace of God as it was always meant to be—but only for those whose vision has been trained and corrected by engagement with the more specific sacraments given by Jesus.¹⁰⁶ *Homo liturgicus* is that species of person who has been so shaped by participation in the life of the worshipping church that they begin to see the world in liturgical ways just as the artistically-engaged person sees the world as a work of art.

Transfigurations in Low Liturgy

Liturgical transfiguration can be found abundantly in any kind of liturgical style, ranging from the historic, textually-and-aesthetically conscious liturgical scripts of the Orthodox and Catholic traditions, all the way to the informal (though still aesthetically conscious) norms of free church worship. Any liturgy (high or low) can be transfigurative, though the aesthetics of transfiguration can be very different in a *high* liturgy from the aesthetics of a *low* liturgy. One way to think of the aesthetic difference between the two is in relation to *when* certain transfigurations might occur. A high liturgy might be seen as a tradition that has encoded certain past transfigurations within a range of highly developed aesthetic traditions. The transfigurations that are most aesthetically prominent are those that have already occurred and have become fixed in their transfigured state; some examples might include a beautifully decorated altarpiece, a carefully worded eucharistic script, or meticulously embroidered clerical vestments. Each of these things takes something common (a table, a meal, clothing) and depicts it as something glorious, reflecting aesthetically a previously completed transfiguration of these things.¹⁰⁷

105. Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 75.

106. Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*, 91.

107. Kavanagh writes, “Creeds, theories, texts, and prayers all emerged from that dialectical process of change and adjustment to change triggered by the assembly’s regular baptismal and eucharistic encounters with the living God in its own faithful life” (*On Liturgical Theology*, 92–93). Thus, the routine aspects

By contrast, a low liturgy is one in which these transfigurations are not yet aesthetically fixed—low liturgy is temporally closer to (or even preceding) the transfiguration of the mundane into the spiritually significant. A low liturgy may involve many instances in which aesthetically common or mundane things are intentionally brought into the context of the worship service, meaning that these transfigurations are ongoing, or may be yet to occur. Prior to a developed eucharistic liturgy, there may be a shared meal—the practice precedes the understanding. Rather than a beautiful altarpiece, there may be a regular table that comes to be used liturgically. Similarly, prayers in a low liturgy may be largely extemporaneous expressions using common language, rather than the lofty, poetic, scripted prayers that can be found in other traditions.¹⁰⁸ Instead of symbolically rich liturgical vestments, ministers in low liturgies might wear ordinary street clothes, signifying that they are ordinary people. The status of all of these things will change in the course of the worship service. An ordinary table will be the setting for the meal in which the body of Christ is to be discerned at communion, ordinary speech will become holy speech as it is directed to God in prayer, and an ordinary person will function as the mouthpiece of God in reading and preaching. Liturgical transfiguration is being worked out in real time.

Thus, high liturgy helps us to see liturgical transfigurations that have happened as they have been acknowledged and codified in the history of the church while low liturgy looks for these same transfigurations to happen today. In some sense, this allows both high and low liturgies to speak to one another in meaningful, mutually beneficial ways, a benefit that can become especially evi-

of liturgy encode the community's response to its own encounters with God. This is true not only in texts but also in aesthetics.

108. This is not a value judgment on either scripted or extemporaneous prayers. Each may be seen to contribute something meaningful to the praying life of the church. On the subject of extemporaneous prayer as a potential moment for transfiguration, consider Ellis's assertion that extemporaneous prayer in Baptist worship is not only an expression of sincerity but also an act of faith in the possibility of *inspiration*. Thus, the extemporaneous prayer is a moment in which the Spirit prays through the pray-er, allowing the humble words of the person who prays to be elevated and enlivened by the Spirit of God (see Ellis, *Gathering*, 119).

dent in certain cases where a typically high-liturgy person experiences low liturgy and vice versa.¹⁰⁹ Such experiences can be illustrative of something within the value of one's own tradition, not unlike the way that a work of abstract art may enable a new perspective on some aspect of classical, representative art. This also means that both kinds of liturgy are worth studying as instances of the *theologia prima* that is embedded in the practice of any kind of Christian worship.¹¹⁰

Concluding Thoughts

I have argued here that liturgy involves transfiguration and that this can be seen in a consideration of certain aesthetically oriented elements of liturgy in which something common is presented as something of great spiritual significance. I have given examples of an instrument of torture (the cross), food (the Lord's Supper), and silence. The liturgical significance of these things is illustrated in their powerful liturgical associations, much as a work of art is seen to be significant in its associations with the artist, the gallery, and the audience. Recognizing liturgical transfiguration is not an end to itself but a means by which to consider the theology that arises out of liturgical practice. In the fictive case study above, I imagined some of the ways that a very-low liturgical practice might enact a theology. For worshippers in low-liturgical settings, the kinds of transfigurations that occur in their gathering are theologically significant even if they might lack a heuristic and vocab-

109. The phenomenon in Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, is a well-known instance involving typically low-liturgy people experiencing the depth of meaning in some higher liturgies. An example of the opposite move is Schmemmann's recounting of the experience of Orthodox Christians who fled the USSR only to find themselves worshipping in converted garages and other mundane spaces; rather than finding that such spaces obstructed their worship, "for many people these wretched garage churches will remain forever connected with the fulness of liturgical experience, something which becomes impossible in churches of magnificent and grandiose design." The reason for this change is that the forced austerity of the garage-church allowed for sincerity to become more evident as a central quality of liturgy (Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 92–93).

110. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 75.

ulary for recognizing and describing things in this way. The kinds of change and revelation that occur in this study enable belief, prayer, adoration, and many of the other things that Christian theology aims to develop. This is only a small introduction to a line of thought that might be continued on to consider the aesthetics of other elements of liturgy, particularly as they might suggest something about how a human being is transfigured from an ordinary person into one of God's people, or a liturgical being. For example, baptism is an aesthetically saturated event, both for the baptized and for the congregation. What does it mean that something like this happens liturgically, and how is this different from an ordinary bath at home? Further still, who exactly is the audience for the aesthetics of baptism, and what part does this audience play? And what of weddings and funerals, not to mention basic practices like passing the peace or singing together? There is surely more work to be done on this topic, and so these pages will have to serve for now as an introduction to an idea that has yet to be fully explored.

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