



BRILL

RELIGION AND THE ARTS 18 (2014) 269–289

RELIGION
and the ARTS

brill.com/rart

Contingency and Faithfulness: Francis Alÿs and the (Re)Presentation of St. Fabiola

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Abstract

As a European emigrant to (and now longtime resident of) Mexico City, contemporary artist Francis Alÿs is deeply sensitive to the ways that cultural systems shape and organize human lives. Over two decades, his work has become deftly efficient at instigating subtle social interferences that highlight and reconsider these organizing systems. Although much has been written about the social and political force of these interferences, the literature on Alÿs's work has generally ignored the significant *religious* content and allusions recurring throughout his artistic practice. This essay is a critical meditation on the religious implications of his *Fabiola* project, a collection of more than 370 handmade copies of a lost nineteenth-century painting of a fourth-century Christian saint named Fabiola. By paying special attention to the ways that these “handmade readymades” ennoble the voices of others and revise the possible meanings of visual repetition (particularly in the context of mechanical mass-reproduction), this essay argues that Alÿs's *Fabiola* is not only a profound study of cultural transmission but one that is particularly resonant with the Christianity that formed St. Fabiola's own life and the forms by which she has been remembered.

Keywords

Francis Alÿs – Fabiola – religion – Christianity

I Disruptions

Though Belgian by birth and upbringing, contemporary artist Francis Alÿs (1959–) has become more strongly associated with Mexico City, where he has lived and worked since 1986. This cultural transplantation—and his conse-

quent position as an immigrant, a foreigner—has produced what Alÿs has called “a kind of permanent disjunction” between his lived experience and the social norms and heritages of both the European and Mexican cultures in which he traffics.¹ Despite whatever negative or debilitating effects this might have had, it is precisely this disjunction that has become the conceptual engine of Alÿs’s work, intensifying his sensitivities to the ways that cultural systems profoundly shape and organize human lives. His work seems to insist that any given set of mundane details or activities is always more fundamental to larger cultural structures than we generally suppose—a point which is most readily demonstrated when we see a “stranger” attending to them in unfamiliar, unenculturated ways.

Many of his artworks are generated by or take the form of “walks” that trace the contours of the spaces and routines of the city, while also subtly disrupting them. Each generally consists of a simple activity that can be concisely described: a man pushing a large block of ice through the streets of Mexico City all day until it has melted entirely (*The Paradox of Praxis 1*, 1997), dripping paint from a punctured can as he walks (*The Leak*, 1995; *The Green Line*, 2004), dragging a drumstick along the iron fences that separate public space from private space (*Railings*, 2004), and so on. This ease of description is strategic on his part: “I always try to keep the plot of a project as simple as possible so that it can be told as a story, an anecdote ... If the scenario is clear, if it is coherent and relevant, its basic storyline will hold along the process of oral propagation and the story can travel on its own, like a rumor” (Godfrey, Biesenbach, and Greenberg 40). And given how conspicuously unpragmatic and unfamiliar his

1 Ferguson 8. It might be argued that the “disjunction” that Alÿs describes—which he vaguely identifies as situated “between myself and my being ... between the experience of living and the consciousness of existence” (Ferguson 8)—is not particular to immigrants but is intrinsic to urban modernity itself. Some might want to subsume Alÿs’s comments under Marx’s broader concept of “alienation” or “estrangement,” which is ultimately a condition of life and labor in a capitalist economy, not one of relocation. Or, perhaps along another line of thought, some might argue that global travel and information technology has progressed to the point where cultural “disjunctions” are a regular state of being in any modern city. I think Alÿs would probably allow both of these suggestions into consideration. The point remains, however, that immigration and cross-cultural relocation forces a distinct kind of “disjunction” in that one’s prior enculturation is experienced as suddenly out of alignment with the local culture one steps into. Alÿs poignantly discusses his move to Mexico City as marked by great difficulty and disorientation: “The immensity of it, also the culture shock, I suppose, and how dysfunctional the whole thing seemed. I could not decipher the city’s codes. I had no entry point. In short, I could not understand how the whole society functioned” (Ferguson 8).

activities appear in the contexts in which they unfold, his walks do indeed tend to spread as rumors.

We might refer to Alÿs's artistic practice as instigating subtle social "perturbations"—a term used in quantum mechanics to refer to strategic methods for introducing weak disturbances into a system in order to highlight the operative components of that system. And this is why Alÿs cannot simply be situated in the modernist tradition of the detached, anonymous, voyeuristic *flâneur*—the gentleman who attentively "strolls" city streets for the sake of experiencing them.² Alÿs understands himself to be always already involved, immersed, located in, and affecting the life of the social body. It is thus appropriate that he should measure the effectiveness of his work by the extent to which it enters into local discourse in the form of rumor, precisely because rumors reverberate through the very social fabric that his work attempts to make manifest. Rumors signal some disruption of norms subtle enough to be intelligible but significant enough to feel like something is at stake: "It circulates if it hits a nerve" (Godfrey, Biesenbach, and Greenberg 40).

So what is at stake in Alÿs's work? Which "nerves" is he trying to hit? For Alÿs, the nervous system of the social body is certainly political, and much has been written about the political implications of the ways that his works poetically "intervene in the social and symbolic imaginary" (Medina 74). He instigates smart allegories and interferences that "assume an Aesopian role as social and political satire," in which his conspicuous walking, for instance, can be interpreted as a means of asserting "a social space devised for human beings, not for their machinery, traffic, and policing systems" (74). And his immigrant status in the culturally and politically charged context of Mexico City heightens this reading. For Alÿs, Mexico is particularly significant for its complex relationship to Western modernization: "Somehow it's a society that wants to stay in an indeterminate sphere of action as a way of defining itself against the imposition of modernity. It's this capacity of flirting with modernity without giving in that fascinates me" (Ferguson 21).

2 Despite Alÿs's superficial similarities with the figure of the *flâneur* (as most famously theorized by Baudelaire and Benjamin), Cuauhtémoc Medina and others have clarified the extent to which Alÿs's work is actually a rather adamant critique of the *flâneur* (see Medina 74–78). Instead, Alÿs's walks are better understood in the genealogy of the *dérive*, as theorized by the Situationists (e.g. Guy Debord 62–66). For a history of the *flâneur* in critical theory, see Keith Tester, *The Flâneur*. For a helpful study on the significance of walking in contemporary art (including in Alÿs's work), see Lori Waxman, "A Few Steps in a Revolution of Everyday Life: Walking with the Surrealists, the Situationist International, and Fluxus."

The many critical assessments of the social and political force of Alÿs's perturbations have been valuable. Relatively little, however, has been written about the *religious* implications of his artistic practice.³ Throughout Alÿs's oeuvre, the visual traditions of Christianity make regular appearances, which should be expected if his cultural interventions do indeed presuppose a complex and comprehensive understanding of "culture." The religious horizons of both Belgian and Mexican societies—those most formative to Alÿs's own visual-cultural imagination—have historically shared and internalized a deep Catholicism, which one would thus expect to be in view in his social investigations. He makes direct religious references in the titling of several works—*When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002), *The Modern Procession* (2002), *The Prophet and the Fly* (2003)—and religious allusions and associations unfold more subtly throughout many other works: e.g. *The Paradox of Praxis 1* (1997),⁴ *Looking Up* (2001),⁵ *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River* (2008),⁶ *Tornado*

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- 3 The most extensive effort to place Alÿs's work within some kind of religious frame is an evocative exhibition catalogue, *Francis Alÿs: The Prophet and the Fly*, with text by Catherine Lampert.
 - 4 This work consists of Alÿs pushing a large block of ice through the streets of Mexico City for more than nine hours until the block completely melted into a small puddle, signaling the end of the artist's task. In addition to its comments on minimalism and/or modern labor, this work could well be interpreted in reference to the biblical Ecclesiastes and the Dutch Calvinist tradition of *vanitas* painting.
 - 5 The video documentation of *Looking Up* opens with the text of Alÿs's self-direction for the performance: "Standing in the middle of Plaza Santo Domingo I look up wide-eyed as if observing something. Once a group of passers-by intrigued by my gazing has gathered around me, I leave the scene." With this as its conceptual structure, *Looking Up* was conceived as a counterpart to *The Paradox of Praxis 1*: whereas that work took as its axiom (and subtitle) "sometimes doing something leads to nothing," this work demonstrates that by contrast "sometimes doing nothing leads to something." However, given the proximity of this performance to the Church of Santo Domingo (the site of the first Christian monastery established in "New Spain" in the late 1520s) and the common association of the sky/heavens with divine visions, this performance is also inevitably situated (and might be interpreted) within religious frames of reference.
 - 6 This was a spin-off of his earlier *Bridge/Puente* (2006), consisting of one single-file line of children walking into the Strait of Gibraltar from Tarifa, Spain, while a second single-file line of children entered from Tangier, Morocco. Each of the children entered the water with a small handmade sailboat made out of a shoe and moved toward the opposite shore, playfully suggesting or invoking a miraculous bridging of the continental (as well as cultural and economic) gap between Europe and Africa. Mark Godfrey identifies allusions to the Children of Israel crossing the Red Sea, as well as Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee in this work. And further, though perhaps more trivially: "it was only after he made the shoe-boats that

(2000–2010),⁷ and the numerous parable-like, ex voto-sized paintings comprising *Le Temps du Sommeil* (1996-present),⁸ to mention a few.

The role of religious allusions in these works is consistently complex, elusive, and difficult to work through—never straightforward or didactic—but such allusions are regularly present and demand interpretive account. Alÿs does not ever take a clearly critical or affirmative stance toward either Christian belief or its institutions, and the poetic irony in his work (and the “rumors” that emanate as a result) cuts in multiple directions at once, which perpetually unsettles comfortable conclusions. And this is all perfectly fitting: central to Alÿs’s work is the conviction that all cultural phenomena are exceedingly “thick” with meanings and ambiguities, and religious content and allusions are, rightly, included in this conviction and handled as such.

Alÿs realized that there was an almost identical construction in Hieronymous Bosch’s *Last Judgment*” (Godfrey 26).

- 7 *Tornado* consists of video documentation of Alÿs running into the middle of several tornados while holding a video camera, striving to enter the eye of each whirlwind. This work has been interpreted in political terms, as an allegory of social chaos and catastrophe (see, for instance, Godfrey 28–31), but there are also strong biblical overtones here that have not been discussed. Powerful winds are often images of chaotic political strife/war in the Old Testament (e.g. Jer. 25: 32), but they are also repeatedly associated with the active presence of God: God speaks to Job from out of a whirlwind (Job 38: 1, 40: 6); Elijah is taken “up to heaven” by a chariot of fire traveling in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2: 11); the “four beings” appeared to Ezekiel in a whirlwind (Ezek. 1: 4), and so on. More generally, the Spirit of God is strongly associated with powerful wind, both in creative presence (Gen. 1: 2; Ps. 77: 18; Acts 2: 1) and in judgment (Ps. 11: 6; Isa. 29: 6, 66: 15; Jer. 23: 19, 30: 23; Nah. 1: 3; Zech. 9: 14; Hos. 4: 19). As such, Alÿs’s repeated attempt to enter the purportedly peaceful eye of the tornado has not only socio-political but also religious inflections: it could well be read as a poetic attempt to encounter the sacred or sublime in the midst of what appears chaotic and uncontrollable.
- 8 This ongoing series of paintings, whose title translates “time of sleep” or “sleep time,” presents small dream-like parables or vignettes: simple scenes that seem to present elusive visions, lessons, riddles, and apothegms as they might come to one in a liminal sleep-state. Not only are these paintings formally suggestive of religious painting traditions, but the subject matter seems to make several religious references. Some seem quite overt: one depicts a pelican piercing its own breast (a common traditional image for Christ’s self-sacrificial love); one depicts a man bearing the weight of a large brown right-angle ruler in a gesture strongly suggestive of Christ carrying the cross to Calvary (cf. Breughel’s famous painting of the scene from 1564); another portrays what appears to be a nude Adam and Eve wringing out a wet white garment in a manner simultaneously implying cooperation and competition. Other images in this series are more ambiguous but seem to have religious inflections among their open-ended associations: a serpent slithering along the ground, a ladder connecting two realms, and so on. For some of these images, see Godfrey, Biesenbach, and Greenberg 78–79.

It seems that Alÿs is aware of the (perhaps conflicted) proximity of his work to Christian belief and tradition. In one of his writings, entitled “10 Predicaments,” he lists “read the bible” as number nine, which is then followed by a provocatively blank number ten.⁹ The relation of Alÿs’s work to biblical content might indeed be a predicament, but it is a dynamic, generative predicament—one that offers fertile ground for critical reflection about his work. In what follows, I will critically meditate on one of his works with special attention to the ways it operates (and the questions it generates) within a religious framework. My claim is neither that Alÿs is a religious artist nor that his work advocates for a religious point of view, but I do contend that interpreting this work within a religious frame of reference provides for thicker understandings and accounts of the work.

II Re-Presenting *Fabiola*

The body of work in which Alÿs’s appropriation of Christian imagery is most overtly (and, I think, profoundly) present is his *Fabiola* project, an ongoing collection of now more than 370 versions of the same image of a Christian saint named Fabiola. The image is a left-facing profile portrait of a woman wearing a vibrant red veil that covers all but her face. And this image is evocatively subtle: the face of the saint is uncovered but averted, depicted in profile such that the viewer’s eye-contact with the saint is perpetually refused. We gaze at her and she gazes elsewhere: toward the past or the future, or perhaps toward a somewhere else or someone else who transcends the pictorial space entirely.

9 This document is recreated in Medina, Ferguson, and Fisher 135, and in Lampert and Alÿs 22. The full list of “10 Predicaments” is as follows (all entries appear typed unless otherwise noted):

- 1 – walk the painting
- 2 – memorize the Odyssey
- 3 – buy milk
- 4 – steal the dog
- 5 – water the peacock
- 6 – lose the sculpture
- 7 – break step
- 8 – shoot at random [handwritten in pencil]
- 9 – read the bible [handwritten in pencil]
- 10 –



FIGURE 1 *Francis Alÿs. Fabiola, 2008. Installation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles CA, USA. Digital Image © 2014 Museum Associates / LACMA. Licensed by Art Resource, NY.*

And when Alÿs exhibits them all together in the crowded conventions of the French Salon these images become a thronging procession, each face directing its attention toward the next in a kind of endless deferral.

Initially, this type of repetition might launch us into a fairly routine critique of mechanical reproduction and mass visual culture. There are, for instance, immediate associations with Warhol's paintings of Marilyn Monroe—a similar amassing of repetitious iconic female portraits. However, it quickly becomes obvious that Alÿs's images do not evidence any mechanical "sameness": they are all (sometimes very tediously) handmade. They bear the same likeness, but each is noticeably constructed by a different set of hands. As such, each is quite distinct in the ways it reproduces that likeness.

Alÿs did not make any of these images himself but collected them over the last two decades from numerous places on both sides of the Atlantic: Mexico, Argentina, the United States, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Austria, England, Spain, Italy, and Sweden. He scoured flea markets, antique shops, garage sales, thrift stores, and personal collections for handmade iterations of this particular image. In this respect, this work is intimately connected with his "walks"; these images are gathered and culled from the peripheral veins of urban life. And the implications of this collection strategy are most potently felt when the images are presented as a group: despite

their diverse geographic origins and their striking formal variations, there is clearly a common source from which all of these objects have been derived and to which they thus refer. Is the original here somewhere, lost in a crowd of copies? Do any of these images exercise precedential authority over the others?

It is here that the viewer encounters some of the problems central to this exhibition. David Morgan articulates it well:

Examining them, one is struck by the visual fact that there is no original, no single image that emerges as authoritative, as the genesis and model of all, the grandparent from which the rest have descended. Yet, one senses that there is a referent, albeit elusive, never fully present in any single image, but there nonetheless ... [V]ariations only make the recognition stronger: we see the same face through the veil of each image's peculiarities.

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The source, the “grandparent” from which all these images are in fact descendants, is a painting by nineteenth-century French academic painter, Jean-Jacques Henner (1829–1905). First exhibited in the 1885 Paris Salon, this painting subsequently disappeared without trace after going to auction in 1889.¹⁰ As Alÿs’s collection attests, however, the original gave way to (and has been carried forward by) numerous copies: some presumably from the original, some from a possible black and white photograph of the painting taken by Gaston Braun, and many more from other engravings and painted copies (some of which were falsely attributed to Henner and reproduced in postcards, which falsely located the painting in the Louvre). By 1913, copies had evidently become so numerous that François Castre went so far as to describe Henner’s *Fabiola* as “that superb virgin profile ... which the engraver’s art has spread throughout the world in the form of millions of reprints, until its renown is universal” (68). This is overstated, but it provides some explanation of the wide geographical distribution of copies that Alÿs’s collection has revealed. As it stands, Alÿs’s *Fabiola* is a convoluted cloud of witnesses: multiple generations of handmade copies of copies, all thoroughly haunted by (and testifying to) an original that remains stubbornly absent.

Yet this cloud of witnesses does not simply refer us to Henner’s lost painting; it also refers us to the historical person pictured throughout all the iterations of his painting—the show title, after all, simply bears the singular name

¹⁰ For a detailed history of Henner’s painting, see Bann 31–40.

“Fabiola.”¹¹ And the many artists responsible for making these works would probably have considered this saint to be the primary focus and *raison d’être* of their artistic labor. Fabiola was a fourth-century Roman Christian, whose penitent life of virtue and generosity was eulogized by St. Jerome around 400 CE.¹² She was a woman of great status and wealth who divorced an abusive husband and subsequently remarried, resulting in her estrangement from the Church. Eventually widowed from her second marriage, she then made public penance and devoted the remainder of her life to Christian asceticism and service of the poor, sick, and disabled, using her resources to open what was perhaps the first Western hospital. Though canonized as a saint in 547 CE, Fabiola largely slipped out of popular memory until 1854 when English cardinal Nicholas Wiseman published an historical novel entitled *Fabiola, or the Church of the Catacombs*, which re-ennobled her as a patron saint of abused women, widows, and nurses. This prompted much renewed interest in her life but without any visual form: no images of Fabiola had been passed down through Christian art history. Painted in 1885 (thirty-one years after Wiseman’s novel), Henner’s iconic profile portrait of Fabiola provided the image that would become canonical.¹³

However, when Alÿs presents the many generations of handmade copies of Henner’s icon in the crowded synchronic format of the Salon, the subject of the work sharply shifts from Fabiola as an historical person to the historical-cultural systems through which she has been carried. This amassing of Fabiolas into a gallery space emphasizes their condition *as cultural artifacts*: objects constructed by many different people for diverse purposes and contexts, each bearing particular histories. And this effect is consistently amplified by the locations in which they have been exhibited: first at the Hispanic Society of America in New York City (2007–2008); then at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2008–2009); the National Portrait Gallery in London (2009); Reina Sofía’s Abadía de Santo Domingo de Silos in Burgos, Spain (2009–2010);

11 The title of the project could well have been pluralized as “Fabiolas” but with strikingly different implications. The fact that the title refers to the singular Fabiola—whether we take this to be the historical person or Henner’s original portrait (or, poetically, both)—amplifies the question and problem of the elusive referent.

12 See St. Jerome, “Letter 77: To Oceanus on the Death of Fabiola,” reprinted in Cooke and Kelly 81–90.

13 The only known earlier depiction of Fabiola is an obscure painting by Austrian artist, Eduard Jakob von Steinle, painted in 1855, the year immediately following the publication of Wiseman’s novel. In this absence of a visual representation of Fabiola, Henner provided an otherwise missing common language, such that subsequent artists have regarded his image as the standard for Fabiola’s image—i.e. his image became the canon.

the Haus Zum Kirschgarten in Basel (2011); the Museo de Arte Italiano in Lima, Peru (2011–2012); the Museo Amparo in Puebla, Mexico (2012); the Fundação Joaquim Nabuco in Recife, Brazil (2012–2013); and so on—each site chosen for the strongly historicizing pressures that it would exert on the images. When exhibited in Los Angeles (where I first encountered the work) *Fabiola* was not exhibited in the modern and contemporary buildings of the museum, as one might expect; rather, it occupied (by the artist's request) a room in a third-floor gallery devoted to the permanent collection of fourteenth through nineteenth-century European master works—thus distinctly framing the images as historical artifacts and connecting them to their lineage from nineteenth-century painting.

And within this historicizing framework the objecthood of the images is strongly foregrounded. Whereas the medium of any singular image might be functionally “invisible” (i.e. we ignore its materiality for the sake of what is pictured), when presented in a crowd of handmade *Fabiolas* each seems to revel in its own material particularities. They exist not only as oil on canvas (the materials of Henner's original) but also as encaustic, acrylic, pastel on paper, watercolor, needlepoint, painted plaster relief, painted porcelain, painted velvet, wood veneer marquetry, legume mosaic, etc. Some take the shape of ovals, circles, triangles; others are set in necklaces, jewelry boxes, pendants, brooches, clip-on earrings. Some are framed, many are not; and many bear markings of previous framing. They show signs of aging and wear, even damage: gouges, stains, scuffs, punctures, wrinkles, cracks, mold, deformations of the stretcher bars. These objects have been lived with, stored, forgotten, discarded, and reclaimed; they have been altered by weather, devotional usage, accidents, attempts at restoration, even attempts to artificially age them—presumably to pass them off as “original.”

In short, Henner's *Fabiola* has over the course of more than a century not simply been copied but remade and reiterated, pulled through the thoroughly human processes of perceiving, interpreting, and reconstructing the image of a woman through common configurations of shapes and colors. And these remaking processes, oriented by diverse artistic motivations and temperaments, and constrained by varying degrees of patience and technical competence, create subtle though significant variances in the way we encounter *Fabiola*. She alternatively appears younger, older, stern, surprised, resolute, confused, caring, vacant, dour, hunched, stiff, frail, chubby, blond, brunette. Some *Fabiolas* gaze heaven-ward while others let their eyes drop introspectively. Some are pale in complexion, others tanned by the sun. Her facial features, eyebrow ridge, and chin are sometimes prominent, sometimes understated. In some instances she wears heavy make-up; in others her face appears bruised.

Indeed, David Morgan rightly asks, “Who are we looking at when we gaze upon any one of her many portraits?” (11).

The answer to this question is complex. The handmade quality of each of these works foregrounds the human interpretive processes inherent in their construction. Henner’s painting, itself an imaginative interpretation of someone for whom no visual form had existed for nearly 1500 years,¹⁴ has been carried forward by individuals attempting to bear witness to the original by way of remaking and “re-speaking” it in the best ways they knew how—and inevitably doing so through the framework of their own skill sets, understandings, interests, motivations, and dispositions. And this is precisely how we humans carry forward even the most meaningful and sacred of our ideas: through reiterated configurations of shapes, noises, gestures, marks on paper—through *language*, more generally conceived. As Lynn Cooke therefore observes, Alÿs’s *Fabiola* ultimately embodies “an ethnographic scrutiny” of the ways we transmit beliefs through such forms (68).

III The Handmade Readymade (in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction)

Martha Buskirk helpfully (and somewhat humorously) attempts to locate *Fabiola* in the Duchampian trajectory of twentieth-century conceptual art:

It’s not typical to refer to used paintings, in the way one speaks of secondhand merchandise, but it may be appropriate here, given how, in the almost century-long interval since Duchamp’s provocative claim regarding the mass-produced, we have somehow come full circle, to handmade paintings as readymades.

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Fabiola might in some sense bring Duchamp’s legacy “full circle,”¹⁵ but Alÿs’s deployment of handmade readymades revise Duchamp’s project in at least two

14 This does not, however, mean that Henner worked without historical references. For an account of Henner’s possible visual source materials, see Morgan 12–13.

15 Alÿs is not the first to treat handmade paintings as readymades: Jim Shaw’s exhibition of *Thrift Store Paintings* from 1990 is a noteworthy precedent. However, it seems that Alÿs’s organizing of readymade paintings around a particular subject (specifically with socially-loaded religious content) that is derived from a particular visual genealogy carries with it a stronger revision to Duchamp.

significant ways: (1) he maintains and foregrounds a relationship between the objects and those who made them, and (2) he reconceives visual repetition as potentially deepening the particularity of an image rather than diminishing it.

1. *Voices of Others*

Duchamp's readymades provided a clear (and provocative) demonstration that the meanings of art objects are always held in social relationships (culturally and historically-conditioned human interactions), not primarily in the objects themselves. He strategically chose fairly banal mass-produced objects, which proved to be extremely malleable to conceptual re-positioning and re-activation. Because the readymade objects were items not fabricated for visual exhibition and critical reflection—and chosen on the basis of “visual indifference” and “the total absence of good or bad taste” (Cabanne 48)—they were each easily dislocated from whatever authorial voice or intention might vie for interpretive authority, such that he could easily create “a new thought for that object” simply by placing it “under the new title and point of view.”¹⁶ By placing on exhibition what was not made to bear the hermeneutical weight of exhibition, Duchamp begs—and thus makes manifest—the complex webs of intention, social context, and management of presentation that grants meaning to art objects.

Similarly, *Fabiola* re-presents objects that Alÿs has not himself made (receiving them entirely “readymade” from others) that are resituated in a new context and thus repositioned and reframed with regard to what and how they “mean.” In multiple ways, however, Alÿs is doing something quite different than Duchamp. Even if he radically resituates these objects by placing them in a museum context that they would not otherwise be admitted into, Alÿs seems to do so for the sake of amplifying the voices and concerns of the people who have made these objects.

Over against the “visual indifference” of Duchamp, Alÿs chooses objects on the basis of (1) their subject matter (which is inevitably charged with religious affections and implications) and (2) their status as genuine efforts to remake Henner's painting by hand (the fact that Alÿs removed images that he later learned were fabricated for the purpose of being contributed to his collection indicates that the human intentions that generate these objects are important

16 Duchamp famously wrote in “The Richard Mutt Case” (1917): “Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object” (reprinted in Harrison and Wood 252).

to him). These readymades are not only quite visibly the products of personal investment and handcraft, with surfaces bearing histories and personalities unique to each, but they are gathered around a shared concern for—even devotion to—a religious subject that has had real bearing on the lives of those who made, lived with, and passed forward these images.

In other words, contra Duchamp, Alÿs's readymades are still full of the voices of those who are responsible for the histories of these objects. What is on display, in Alÿs's case, is not solely the art institution or even the contemporary artist's prerogative for reframing meanings but the very human processes of cultural transmission that have carried forward a particular religious image. And *Fabiola* seems to assert that these objects cannot ever be wholly recontextualized without doing some violence to those from whom they were appropriated.

There is a political edge to all of this: Alÿs's handmade readymades make space for the voices of others. Mark Godfrey's essay on Alÿs points to Jacques Rancière's contention that politics "consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible"; or, as Godfrey explains, "politics takes place whenever there is a contestation over the matter of who has a voice or a visibility [and] over how something is visible" (24–25). Alÿs's *Fabiola* is, in this sense, a political action in that it grants voice and visibility to the historical lineages of people who have concerned themselves with this particular image (and the beliefs associated with it). As Lynne Cooke argues, *Fabiola* discloses "an alternative economy but with distinct if unfamiliar circuits of aesthetic appreciation (as well as spiritual faith)" (70). These "unfamiliar circuits of aesthetic appreciation" are generally invisible (and thus socially mute) both in high art institutions, on the one hand, and mass-media popular culture, on the other. And in this Cooke sees Alÿs's re-presentation of these works as an act of resistance:

The shards of a resilient, but nonetheless threatened, cultural practice, Alÿs's flea-market finds exemplify resistance to the substantial losses spawned by a rapidly changing world; hence, a trace of melancholy permeates viewers' initial impressions of wonder. In requiring a historicizing venue, he makes an interpretive maneuver designed, above all, to center attention back on the *image* of *Fabiola*, that is, on the elusive prototype somehow ever present among the myriad searching approximations.

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2. *Repetition that Thickens Meaning*

The issue most central to the meaning of Alÿs's *Fabiola* is the question of how we interpret the visual repetition that constitutes this work. In the context of a contemporary visual culture extensively structured by the mass

production and distribution of images, how does the handmade repetition of this exhibition function and carry meaning? Does this amassing of Fabiolas inevitably generate a kind of “anaesthetizing repetition,” to borrow a phrase from Jonathan Fineberg’s description of Warhol’s visual program (255), or are there other means of understanding the way these images function as a group?

The twentieth-century discourse about image reproduction has been deeply influenced by Walter Benjamin’s famous theory about the withering of “aura” in an age of mechanical reproduction, and Alÿs’s gathering of hundreds of copies without an extant original certainly invokes associations with this account.¹⁷ According to Benjamin, the machinery of technological reproducibility “detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence” (22). Whereas a singular visual object might remain firmly planted within a particular spatial, historical, and cultural context (i.e. “the sphere of tradition”), technological reproduction enables us to dislocate an image from its context for the sake of conveniently consuming and repurposing it into an unlimited number of disconnected and incongruous contexts. He identifies two consumptive impulses as driving this activity: (1) “the desire of the present-day masses to ‘get closer’ to things,” and (2) “their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction.” In sum, “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range in an image, or, better, in a facsimile, a reproduction” (23).

There are numerous extraordinary benefits that result from technological reproduction, but for Benjamin the consequences of “getting hold” of objects in this way are ultimately corrosive to the ways that we regard both material and historical particularity:

Even in the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject. This history includes changes to the physical structure of the work over time, together with any changes in ownership.

21

17 Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) has been perhaps more precisely translated into English as “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (see Jennings, Doherty, and Levin).

To some extent Alÿs's numerous *Fabiolas* could be said to compromise the "unique existence" of Henner's *Fabiola* (which is, in fact, altogether absent); but for the most part these handmade images might simply be outside the purview of Benjamin's diagnosis, which is primarily focused on *technologically* reproducible media where no "original" ever really exists.¹⁸ While photographs of Henner's painting have played a role in the lineages of Alÿs's crowd of *Fabiolas*, the works themselves are all manual constructions, a fact that seems to make significant difference in the meaning of their relationship to each other and to the original. In the case of handmade "copies"—if that is what these *Fabiolas* are—each maintains its own "unique existence in a particular place" distinctly bearing the marks of "the history to which the work has been subject."

The fact that these are handmade images (mostly paintings) is significant here in at least two aspects. First, the hand-making of an image is generally tediously slow both in its production and its reception, which throws it out of step with the speed of film, television, and digital media. Alÿs seems to have precisely this potential perturbation in view in his considerations of painting: "There are billions of images around us, and they move fast and are extremely persuasive and efficient. Painting works against that speed effect. It is slow, very poor in a way, so if you can make that little contact, provoke that little spark in someone's head, it is a small miracle amid the speed of our digital age" (Ferguson 29). Although referring here to his own painting practice, generated in collaboration with professional sign-painters from Mexico City, it is plausible that the same logic of perturbation undergirds his relationship to the readymade paintings of *Fabiola*.

Secondly, the process of manually remaking an image is inherently re-interpretative. In one sense, it is perhaps correct to refer to all of these *Fabiola* paintings as "copies" (they are all reconstructions of another single image), but at the same time these objects are each very much constructions in their own right in ways that a mechanically reproduced image generally is not. For better or worse, mechanical reproduction enables reiterations of an image (indefinitely) without interpretation necessary to the process: the reconstruction itself is mechanical. A handmade iteration of an image, by contrast, is at every step contingent on acts of human perception, interpretation, and decision. Every

18 Benjamin would probably acknowledge this. He opens part two of his famous essay by noting: "In principle, the work of art has always been reproducible. Objects made by humans could always be copied by humans ... But the technological reproduction of artworks is something new" (20). Bann points out that the media of reproduction that Benjamin's thesis is focused on are primarily *technologically* reproducible media like photography and film, where no "original" ever really exists (40).

component of the image is only “remade” through the available grids of one’s own understandings, concerns, and competencies. The makers of these images speak of Fabiola after the manner of Henner, but they do so with distinctly different human voices and inflections. In this sense, each of Alÿs’s Fabiolas is not a copy of Henner’s painting as much as it is a re-articulation of it.

The effect of this distinction is felt when these images are experienced en masse. The more we see mechanical repetitions of an image consecutively or at once, the more significance tends to drain from the image—it is a repetition without difference, which progressively dulls the need or possibility for further or revised interpretation. By contrast, manual repetitions of an image are repetitions with variation, introducing varying emphases into our encounter with the image and thus (for better or worse) multiplying interpretations and expanding potential significance. Over against the kind of photographic reproduction in which Benjamin detects a withering of material and historical particularity, Alÿs’s handmade reiterations of Henner’s *Fabiola* might in fact hold potential for ennobling that particularity in the very midst of multiples.

And it is here that the *religious* frame of reference becomes significant. In religious practice repetition can be a means of expanding meanings and more thickly inhabiting them—resisting interpretive collapse rather than contributing to it. Repeated activities, images, readings, and phrases can be a means of more slowly and carefully attending to, absorbing, and digesting their content and implications. The point of liturgical recitations of a prayer, for instance, is not to “detach” that prayer from tradition (cf. Benjamin) but to immerse oneself in it until one more fully inhabits its words and speaks them as one’s own—in chorus with all others who have inhabited the same tradition. We often glimpse this dynamic at work in religion, because repetition has this effect primarily when motivated and oriented by devotion (drawing oneself toward another) rather than consumption (taking for oneself).

Biblical scholars have long recognized that textual exegesis is cultivated through repetition and restatement of a text in multiple contexts, providing it the opportunity to speak with different tones, emphases, and concerns each time it is read. Varied “performances” of a text do not necessarily distance readers from the original; they are in fact our primary means for exegetically unpacking it into thicker, richer, more faithful readings. Indeed, the point of such rereading, restating, retranslating, and recontextualizing is to rigorously grant the text a voice of its own, allowing it to unfold its own broad range of inflections and resonances that are otherwise mute in a single hearing and in a single context.

And it is a similar kind of interpretive rereading that we see evidenced in Alÿs’s crowd of Fabiolas. In each case, Henner’s rendering of the saint has been

“performed” again, re-articulated with distinctive inflections and concerns. And given their subject matter, one might assume that there is more than the exact reproduction of a picture at stake: many of these images likely embody the prayers, lamentations, and resolutions of men and women who in one way or another feel sympathy and solidarity with Fabiola’s experiences of abuse, divorce, loss, estrangement, penitence, and service to the sick.

And in this manner, Henner’s *Fabiola* has been transmitted through the messy processes in which humans carry meanings forward. The handmade reiteration and proliferation of this image—presented by Alÿs in the absence of the original—has introduced extensive diversity into our encounter with, and considerations of, this image. Some of what has been introduced is clumsy and anachronistic; some is elegant and persuasive, but the net effect of all of these repetitions together is a “thickening” of the layers of meanings gathered around the image.

IV Historical Contingency and the Cultural Transmission of Christianity

All of this might be received with nervousness on the part of Christians. It is significant that the “ethnographic scrutiny” of Alÿs’s collection is focused specifically on the depiction of a generally-forgotten historical Christian saint. Alÿs’s *Fabiola* is a portrait of Fabiola, but it is also (more significantly) a portrait of the processes of cultural transmission that have made her visible in our own locale in space and history. These handmade images were made to (devotionally) remember a fourth-century Roman woman who devoted herself to remembering a first-century Palestinian Jewish man. And in this sense Alÿs’s strategy is doubled: on exhibition here are the cultural systems through which we encounter not only Saint Fabiola but also the Christianity to which she devoted herself. The artists of these paintings re-present her image but primarily (we might assume) for the purpose of calling to mind the ways that she re-presented the person of Jesus of Nazareth in the “image” of her life.

Such demonstrations, however, of the fallible processes by which cultures carry their histories forward have cast long shadows of doubt over Christianity’s historical claims since the Enlightenment. We have become keenly aware of the ways that human renderings of any given historical subject are inevitably constrained and formatted by the interests, worldviews, temperaments, and contexts of those doing the rendering—an awareness that is typically (though unnecessarily) taken to recommend a disqualification or invalidation of such renderings as hopelessly distorted. In this vein, David Morgan remarks that

“One might regard the innumerable iterations of Fabiola’s image as each painter’s tailoring of the saint to him or herself ... [Difference] corresponds to the many reasons people must have for painting Fabiola” (15). Within the contours of modernity, evidence of cultural contingency in the historical transmission of (particularly religious) belief tends to strike us as compromising the entire affair. We remain quite haunted by George Tyrrell’s widely-quoted quip that those nineteenth-century historians who presumed to definitively present “the historical Jesus” had merely peered down the well of history and seen the reflection of their own faces.¹⁹ And once this charge is leveled—and done so reciprocally—then devout belief becomes increasingly construed as an ambitious (or naïve) leap of faith.

Further Christian discomfort might arise when general similarities are noted between Alÿs’s crowd of Fabiolas and the generations of surviving biblical manuscripts, which have been passed down through thousands of handmade copies with varying degrees of removal from the lost originals. Between the surviving handwritten New Testament manuscripts, for example, there are hundreds of thousands of textual variants, the vast majority of which are insignificant (variants in spelling or word order that make no interpretive difference) but some of which do have interpretive consequences. Over the centuries, some New Testament scribes demonstrated extreme care, while others did not; and the task of biblical textual criticism is to carefully track and re-construct—from the sheer multitude of surviving texts—the precise wording of the originals.²⁰ One could well approach the generations of Fabiolas with the same tools of textual criticism and engage a similarly tedious process of perfectly reconstructing Henner’s original just from the textual evidence contained in these “texts” themselves.

19 Tyrrell 44: “The Christ that [Adolf von] Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.”

20 Such textual criticism is necessary for the vast majority of ancient manuscripts (Homer, Plato, et al.) given that original ancient manuscripts have almost never survived. The challenges of biblical textual criticism, however, are compounded by (1) the unparalleled massive number of surviving copies and (2) the extraordinary consequences that accompany the precise wording of something so central to the worldviews of so many people. A good introduction to the issues and disagreements central to New Testament textual criticism and the reliability of the manuscripts is the ongoing debate between Bart Ehrman and Daniel B. Wallace. See, for example, Robert D. Stewart’s *The Reliability of the New Testament: Bart Ehrman and Daniel Wallace in Dialogue*; Bart D. Ehrman’s *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*; and Daniel B. Wallace’s *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic, and Apocryphal Evidence*.

Upon first encounter, one might wonder if the undercurrent of *Fabiola* is towards a deep historical uncertainty vis-à-vis this proliferation of religious “rumors” without a recoverable original. But there seems to be more going on here than that. As a collection, Alÿs’s *Fabiola* might in some ways demonstrate the distancing effects of historical transmission (obscuring the original), but when taken as a collective body this group of images also very much demonstrates its ability to preserve and disclose the source to which they refer. Henner’s painting is not nearly as lost as one might initially suppose. None of these iterations is autonomously authoritative, but when taken as a congregation of images (that implicitly critique and supplement each other) the face of the original emerges with unexpected though imperfect clarity. It is witnessed to through numerous human re-articulations without the reassurance of mechanical exactitude, but this is precisely their virtue.

In fact, this dynamic structure of a single form held in a crowd of diverse handmade images seems perfectly fitting to the Christianity that forms the background of this collection of images. Alÿs’s *Fabiola* is (probably quite unintentionally) a rather apt parable for the Christian Church: a multi-generational cloud of witnesses attempting to faithfully re-present their most sacred image precisely within all the contingencies of personality, history, and culture. Rather than receiving this work as critique, it seems that Christian theology would necessarily wholly affirm the contingency demonstrated in *Fabiola*’s proliferating images. Indeed, one might well argue that Christianity, pivoting as it does on the Incarnation—in which the Word is “tabernacled” in the very particularities of human flesh (John 1: 14)—is quite radical in the extent to which it locates and renders vulnerable what is most sacred precisely within the thickness and cultural-historical particularity of human creatureliness.

According to Christian missiologist Andrew Walls, the Incarnation might well be understood as “a divine act of translation” of God’s being “into the fullest reaches of [human] personality, experience, and social relationship” (26–27). And such a “translation” (as with any translation) could only ever exist in particularities: Jesus of Nazareth was “a person in a particular locality and in a particular ethnic group, at a particular place and time. The translation of God into humanity, whereby the sense and meaning of God was transferred, was effected under very culture-specific conditions” (27). And in Walls’s view, the “scandal of particularity” at the heart of the Incarnation necessarily implies the transmission of this gospel through those same contingent systems: through personal relationships and the multiple writings of those witnesses who passed their testimonies along through handmade copies, and copies of copies. Christian testimony was, and is, carried from one generation to the next through ongoing reiterations of polyphonic testimonies: multiple gospels, multiple epistles,

each hand-copied multiple times and translated into multiple languages. And as Walls asserts, this is intrinsic to the Christian confession: “Christian diversity is the necessary product of the Incarnation ... Following on the original act of translation in Jesus of Nazareth are countless re-translations into the thought forms and cultures of the different societies into which Christ is brought as conversion takes place” (28).

And perhaps this prolific transmission and re-translation of faith from person to person (and culture to culture) can be understood in much the same terms demonstrated by Alÿs’s crowd of handmade *Fabiolas*. While I certainly would not argue that Alÿs’s *Fabiola* offers an intentional apologetic for the Christian faith, nor do I think it is a critique of it. Rather, I want to argue that his *Fabiola* project is an inductive experiment in cultural transmission, and it is one that makes a great deal of sense within the very Christian heritage that it is mining. It strikes me as being deeply embedded in and resonant with the logic of Christianity.

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