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A Curious Accord

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ROUTLEDGE

20

PERFORMATIVITY AND THE FLESH

The Economy of the Icon in Lia Chavez's *Light Body*

Julie M. Hamilton

Midway through Paolo Sorrentino's visually sumptuous and Felliniesque film *The Great Beauty* (2013), a grand soirée is held at a Roman estate.[1] There, a young artist is forced by her parents to perform and paint before a live audience. The guests are among Italy's most esteemed patrons. Through her tears, she paints for greedy eyes, becoming a marketable commodity exploited by her wealthy parents. The decadent fete is a painful tableau, inviting the gaze of the guests to ogle the uncomfortable spectacle. Critiquing the bacchanal, the protagonist Jep Gambardella perceives the frantic desperation beneath the glittering surfaces of high society – the "blah, blah, blah," as he calls it – and exits the noisy affair. In this scene, Sorrentino shows us performance art's perpetual threat of devolving into spectacle – a beauty that is deeply damaged and objectified – while concurrently illustrating its powerful potential to serve as icon.

This essay considers the performance *Light Body* by the artist Lia Chavez, a practitioner of contemporary performance and embodied art.[2] Chavez employs ascetic disciplines, meditation techniques, and habituated neurological training in hyperconsciousness alongside religious practices culled from Tibetan Buddhism and Christian mysticism. Her ascetic commitments, I suggest, place her in the historical lineage of monastics and saints, whose lives might be read as early forms of performance art.

Actress and activist Isabella Rossellini commissioned Lia Chavez's *Light Body* as the inaugural performance on her farm in Brookhaven, New York.[3] On an unusually warm July evening, she opened her grounds to host the performance, offering the invited guests garden fare and glasses of rosé, of which I am happily obliged. The attendees were adorned in summer finery – maxi length florals and crisp, white linens. Each spectator was presented with a handsome catalogue featuring art critic Andrea Codrington Lippke's thoughtful essay on *Light Body*, "Foolish Fire, Holy Fools and Thoughtful Paths" superimposed on top of

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Chavez's *Ascent* ink-transfer prints.[4] At sunset, Rossellini gathered the guests at a semicircle of blankets in a clearing near the edge of the woods. Directing us to sit facing a dirt path, Rossellini invited us to participate in a guided meditation to clear our minds – a practice that she had learned from filmmaker David Lynch, her former partner. As twilight faded into dusk, Rossellini asked us to open our eyes, which needed to adjust to the darkening horizon. Far off in the distance, I spotted several faint flickers of light, like multicolored fireflies.

As I squinted to better observe the beginning of the performance, I found myself frustrated: I could not see the choreographed dance steps, the exquisite costumes, the vibrant makeup. Enshrouded by the forest, the carefully curated performance was hardly perceptible to my naked eyes. Why go to such lengths to create something intricate that simply could not be seen? Slowly, I began to discern three fluid bands of variegated colors swirling in tandem beyond the trees. Barefoot, I got up from my place on the blanket and walked to the edge of the path, trying to see more of this *Light Body*. Gradually, the soft light moved closer toward me, the sounds of cicadas and crickets wafting through the humid summer air. Three silhouetted figures progressed from right to left, toe-heel, toe-heel, on the unlit path. These three graces moved together in synchronistic unity, as if a single organism, exhibiting the poise of ballerinas. In their lithe arms, LED track lights became effervescent light sculptures, morphing into geometric shapes and genetic helixes.

As I strained to catch sight of the exquisite couture designed by Mary Katrantzou, I began to understand that the limited visibility of the performance was not an oversight.[5] In initially struggling to grasp the vision of light and make sense of what I was seeing, I found myself witnessing a phenomenon yet nonetheless unable to apprehend the thing seen. As my eyes adjusted, however, I began to see each dancer separately: Lia Chavez, Troy Ogilvie, and Djassi daCosta Johnson, each appareled differently.[6] Their heavy breathing increased as they moved toward me – spinning, reeling, twirling, sculpting the night air with kaleidoscopic lassoes, their bands imprinting afterimages of light in the night sky. Finally, the trio of sweaty dancers paused and faced us in a staggered line. Synchronizing their rainbow bands in 360-degree spirals, their motions resembled a thurifer, as if they were swinging incense in around-the-world clockwork circles; a sumptuous *mise-en-scène* (Figure 20.1).

Lia Chavez is always performing. Whether she is meditating in a gallery for eight hours on end, not speaking for forty days, collaborating with neuroscientists in a London laboratory, or meeting me for cocktails at the Mercer Hotel, she knowingly conducts her dancer-like form on the stage of the world and is perfectly herself.[7] Indeed, she seems to inhabit a mythic and fantastical realm – adorned in caftans and headdresses, dramatic eye makeup swathed on her alabaster complexion. Far from pretentious, her effervescence and warmth are disarming, her sincerity and hospitality lush. I am continually surprised by the unforeseen excess of her radiant presence, exuding a beauty that nurtures me.

Photo documentation by Ira Lippke. © Lia Chavez Studio

FIGURE 20.1 Lia Chavez, *Light Body*, July 23, 2016, performance. Featuring performers Lia Chavez, Djassi deCosta Johnson, and Troy Ogilvie. A commission by Isabella Rossellini. Presented at Mama Farm in Brookhaven Hamlet, NY. Curated by Tali Wertheimer. Produced by Nur El Shami and Beverly Allan. Costuming by Mary Katrantzou. Beauty by Virginia Linzee. Styled by Richard Ives.

Even her home adds to this sense of theatrical cohesiveness. The newly renovated house and studio on Long Island functions like a James Turrell light sculpture. A floor-to-ceiling vision in soft white, the minimalist architecture features glass skylights between the first and second floors that flood her domestic monastery with Zen-style lighting. The structure acts as a kind of sundial, featuring light more or less prominently at particular stages of the day. That Chavez should transform her dwelling into an installation comes as no surprise: light is her

primary medium, other than her own body. Her father studied under the astrophysicist and cosmologist Carl Sagan, inculcating her with a love for the celestial heavens and the intersections of science and art. As a result, her knowledge of astronomy and fascination with the cosmos are grounded in serious aesthetic questions about the human body.[8]

Preparation for this commission led Chavez to India to study contemplative walking, the foundation for all other iterations of yoga practice, from the Himalayan yoga and raja-yoga traditions as taught by Swami Rama and Swami Veda Bharati.[9] By reducing yoga to body and breath, this practice unites mindful contemplation and diaphragmatic breathing. Chavez's method incorporates slow walking, toe-to-heel, in equal pace, while simultaneously inhaling one count, exhaling two counts. Mantras, or sacred utterances, are paired with each breath to maintain focus and concentration. Often just a word or sound, these mantras are said in repetition, calming the mind and opening the heart. Together, these religious prayer patterns form the underlying structure of Chavez's *Light Body* performance.

Returning from her training in India, Chavez took a vow of silence for forty days. These ascetic parameters proved difficult when planning and rehearsing without the aid of verbal communication between Chavez and her production team. Nonetheless, it invited them to engage in creative methods using their bodies as primary vehicles for translation and interpretation. Drawing upon the yogic template, Chavez developed her six-part choreographic method specifically for *Light Body*. First, steps 1 and 2 establish the breath and the walk, followed by step 3, which meters and synchronizes inhalation and exhalation; step 4 incorporates the mantra "love" with the breath inhalation and the mantras "light" and "surrender" with the exhalation. These mantra-laden breath cycles continue until the dancer is able to advance to step 5, what Chavez describes as philosophical contemplation, in which the mind asks the self a question or query and is able to encounter mental and physical release. Ultimately, metaphysical contemplation is possible in step 6 if the mind and body simultaneously unite as a "moving mantra," wherein, Chavez says, "exertion becomes cathartic and medicinal." Each of these steps gradually builds on the other and is exponentially self-emptying. The overall goal is transfiguration, or enlightenment – the stage associated with "light bodies."[10]

A light body in Tibetan Buddhism describes the electromagnetic fields or "auras" emitted from the body (otherwise described by scientists as neural networks) (Crow). This rainbow body is a phenomenon ascribed to Buddhist saints and sages in which the body of a holy figure posthumously transforms into rainbows of color, testifying to the saint's transcendence. In Christianity, we might think of the rosary's luminous mysteries, where we encounter the narrative depictions of both the transfiguration and resurrection of Christ. For Chavez, this phenomenological concept of a rainbow body is concretely captured in the prism, a mirror that receives white light and refracts colored light. She has explored iterations of the prism through many mediums prior to *Light Body*,

ranging from photographs in *A Thousand Rainbows* to her meditative nightclub installation *The Octave of Visible Light*, all attempting to represent her light visions through artistic forms.

Over a period of years, Chavez has worked extensively with a team of neuroscientists at Goldsmiths, University of London, as the subject for its research associated with creativity in the brain.[11] By allowing neuroscientists to monitor her neural activity under varying states of meditation, Chavez has not only aided in pinpointing the cranial geography of imagination and artistic creativity but also in underlining the distinctive types of waves the brain transmits during meditation. By assessing Chavez's brain-wave correspondence to her spontaneous mental imageries, a team of researchers has been able to map how imagination is linked to creativity in the brain. Practicing two main types of meditation – stabilizing and analytic (as described above) – Chavez achieves gamma-wave states that generate visions akin to "psychedelic phosphine hallucinations" (Codrington Lippke, "Foolish Fire"). Chavez relates that she witnesses something analogous to the moment of conception – the neurological nexus of artistic creativity. These fractal patterns and "mental meteorologies," as Chavez describes them, echo other forms of conception in the universe: the birth and death of stars, biomorphic phenomena, the growth of organisms, and geometric patterns. From her meditative visions, the research team at Goldsmiths has been able to explore the potential of gamma waves, which scientists are now calling the "dark matter of consciousness" (Crow). So, we might ask, how do these meditative visions precisely situate Lia Chavez within the contemporary world of performance art? Not only is it through her ascetic practices that she is able to encounter her mental pictures, but her ascetic commitments place her in the historical lineage of monastics and saints, who I suggest might be read as early forms of performance art.

In her book *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (2004), art critic Eleanor Heartney discusses performance artists who borrow from specific religious practices, liturgies, prayers, and bodily disciplines in their work. These artists have been overwhelmingly female – think of Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, and Coco Fusco.[12] Each of these women invokes her body as an ephemeral mode of communication, a text and locus of meaning-making, reacting against patriarchal models of museum collecting, which are primarily object-based. Yet, the practices themselves participate in a historical lineage of ascetic disciplines, situated primarily among monastics and saints. By acknowledging performance art's codified evolution out of painting into actions, we might find it fitting to consider an older form of performance that predates the twentieth century, by examining the lives of mystics and holy fools.

Like performance artists, mystics and monastics from the Christian tradition often found themselves in tension with bureaucratic and ecclesial hierarchies, as they employed ascetic and often bizarre practices in efforts to reform the church. With many women occupying these roles, think Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, religious women have played significant roles

in challenging authoritative influences among their communities.[13] Mystics, monastics, and martyrs read the dramatic narrative of Christ's life as a play to be reenacted and performed, *imitatio Christi*, often quite literally through flagellation, self-mutilation, and excessive fasting.[14] We now see echoes of these actions in works by performance artists such as Marina Abramović, Hermann Nitsch, and Chris Burden (among others).[15] I draw attention to these artists not to claim any sort of value judgment on their actions but rather to acknowledge that *both* saints and performance artists have participated in strange, ritualistic, and often masochistic actions that test the body's endurance and limitations.

In considering this synthetic connection between contemporary performance art, especially in the context of Chavez and her *Light Body*, and the performativity of saints' lives, I am drawn to Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*, in which he provides a hagiographic account of his sister Macrina, a fourth-century monastic. Nyssen, a rhetorically trained bishop, reimagines and articulates the virtuous life of his sister as playing the role of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, who is the embodied voice of wisdom. Nyssen emphasizes that Macrina's beauty was unsurpassed – she could have married well and had an economically and socially secure life, yet she turns away suitors, devoting her life to her community, her family, the poor, and, above all, God.

At one point in the account, Macrina discovers a dangerous tumor near her heart, but rather than undergoing a life-threatening surgical procedure, she *performs* the scene from the Gospels in which Christ heals the blind man. Mixing "a mud salve of earth and tears," she applies it to her breast, and then asks her mother to make the sign of the cross over her breast (Carnes 242). She is miraculously healed, and the tumor is replaced with a small scar – a sign or stigma of her flesh witnessing to "wounded love." In depicting these events, Nyssen extols Macrina's faith, arguing that her virtues indicate sainthood.

Nyssen also writes of a dream he has before Macrina's passing: "I seemed to be carrying the relics of martyrs in my hand and a light seemed to come from them, as happens when the sun is reflected on a bright mirror so that the eye is dazzled by the brilliance of the beam" (*Life of Macrina*, 163–91). With this vision, he anticipates her passing, made acutely aware of her life as holy. At sunset before her death, Macrina ends her life with a meditation, offering hymns to God as she witnesses the "beauty of the Bridegroom." As Nyssen observes Macrina's body being prepared for her funeral, he places his mother's veil over her corpse with the help of his sister Vetiana, and observes a unique phenomenon: "In the dark, the body glowed, the divine power adding such grace to her body that as in the vision of my dream, rays seemed to be shining forth from her loveliness" (*Life of Macrina* 186). This description of Macrina's corpse is not unlike our discussion of a light body – in that like the virtuous Buddhist figures, her body posthumously glows. Here, Nyssen portrays the body as a medium for divine beauty, a "mirror" reflecting and radiating light.[16]

Natalie Carnes has noted in her book *Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa* that "[Nyssen's] text never lets the reader leave the beauty of

bodies. It continually returns to them, the final instance of a beautiful body the most compelling, pointing not to possibilities for worldly acclaim, but to divine power and grace. Macrina's body remains bodily but has been transfigured into a sign of divine presence" (66). Macrina's luminosity cannot be concealed but continues to reveal itself to the witnessing community. Carnes reminds us, however, that Macrina's beauty *is* represented in Nyssen's rhetoric. His textual narration celebrates her body as a kind of text, and as a relic and an icon.

Since late antiquity, the icon has served as the primary medium of a visual culture in which religion, art, and politics overlap. Whether they depict Christ, such as *Christ Pantocrator* at St. Catherine's Monastery at Sinai (6th century CE), or Byzantine emperors, like the Justinian and Theodora mosaics at the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna (547 CE), icons make figures present to the viewer. Debates in the eighth century over the legitimacy of representing God in matter raged between the iconoclasts and iconodules. Following theological defenses of the icon by both John Damascene (675–749 CE) and his protégé Theodore the Studite (759–826 CE), the church affirmed that icons are analogous to the incarnation and hypostatic union of Christ's divine and human natures. Thus, the icon's modality is a correspondence between the viewer and the viewed, allowing the gaze of the beholder to ascend to the prototype by means of material and relational representation. In essence, an icon makes present and, indeed, *performs* what is unseen.

Christian theologians have described the icon as elastic, such that it may be extended to other artistic forms, including the work of poets such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and Denise Levertov, composers such as J.S. Bach and James MacMillan, and film directors such as Andrei Tarkovsky and Ingmar Bergman.[17] But what about performance art? Theater, certainly, is engaged with aspects of incarnation, especially through mimesis, when an actress inhabits a character and performs that character to the degree that she no longer resembles herself. But *performativity* and *embodied art* get at something different entirely – the person performing is not concerned with verisimilitude but rather, and perhaps more importantly, with depicting dimensions of the self in a nonfictional, often unscripted manner, in the form of her own human flesh.

Paul Griffiths, who draws from the work of phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion, provides a helpful schema for understanding the correspondence between icons and flesh in his book *Intellectual Appetite: A* Theological Grammar (2009). An icon, Griffiths explains, represents the beauty of the created order and signifies something other than itself, pointing its viewers to something beyond itself. We might find such iconicity in the inexhaustibility of a human face. In this context, the face functions as a kind of mirror, both to the viewer's gaze and to that which it reflects. When the viewer gazes at this face as icon, what she sees is neither static nor arrested, but nourished – she is thereby seduced deeper into its beauty. For Griffiths, things are iconic in so far as they are close to Christ's body. Sometimes, this proximity is intimate, and other times, it is distant (Griffiths 190–92).

Why should Christ's body have a special relationship to the icon? For the Christian, the fleshly body bears the image of God, and through that incarnation, God has made human flesh iconic, regardless of the damage it has incurred. This conviction that human flesh can never cease to be iconic follows from Augustine's Platonic logic: in so far as something exists, it participates in being and thereby participates in God. To not participate in God is to cease to exist, and one cannot irradiate one's iconicity without remainder. That is to say, one cannot be damaged beyond one's ability to be iconic (Griffiths 191).

For Griffiths, as for Marion, the flesh is a lived icon that is saturated and inexhaustible: that is to say, the body is a site of overwhelming givenness, a vehicle in time and space of the unforeseen. The face serves as the endless hermeneutic, the visible in excess. The face is not an abstraction or a concept; it is not beauty or idea. The face is envisaged in me. I know a face because I face it.[18] Consequently, the face, and therefore the flesh, is an icon par excellence.

While Chavez does not necessarily share Macrina's forms of *askesis* (i.e., her vow of poverty and virginity), their performative lives are shaped by shared religious practices. As a bearer of human flesh, the saint Macrina participates maximally in the archetype of the icon. Imagining Macrina's life as a performance, we can reconsider Nyssen's narrative in terms of her bodily practices and rituals. She performs her ascetic commitments to poverty, chastity, and obedience as a monastic way of life. These disciplines afford her a spiritual intimacy and supernatural wisdom that her brother notes as praiseworthy and desirable – in fact, Nyssen describes Macrina as his spiritual mother (Carnes 214). Her life is iconic because, through her body, it bears witness to something beyond itself. Her body is consecrated as a vessel that exhibits holiness and luminosity.

Chavez, too, participates in the modality of the icon, intuiting and perceiving mystical experiences, performing them through artistic mediums in the gallery, the forest, and the monastery. By probing the inner landscapes of her mind, she harnesses creative insights that inspire fresh connections between art and science, stemming from religious consciousness. Deploying this consciousness as an artistic material, she offers her flesh as a conduit or mirror, a prism refracting light.

In the final canto of Dante Alighieri's *Paradiso* (early 14th-century CE), the poet describes the experience of beholding a luminous substance, which appears to be three overlapping circles of differing colors in a singular dimension:

> In the deep and bright essence of that exalted Light, three circles appeared to me; they had three different colors, but all of them were of the same dimension; one circle seemed reflected by the second, as rainbow is by rainbow, and the third seemed fire breathed equally by those two circles (Hollander, 33:114–20).

The longer Dante looks into the light, the more his eyes begin to adjust, seeing more clearly. As his gaze intensifies, the light takes on nuance, difference, multivalence, and *color*. Chavez explained to me that "Dante's *Paradiso* has perhaps been

her *Light Body*, Chavez offers us the mystery of light – unharnessable, uncommodifiable, uniquely experienced light, a prism refracting a rainbow. Indeed, Ira Lippke's film documentation of the *Light Body* performance captures the three dancers as a trio of intersecting circles, a multicolored Venn diagram, precisely as Dante has described (Figure 20.2).

In a letter Gregory of Nyssa writes to Macrina's brother Peter, he discusses the natural phenomenon of the rainbow as an analogy to the Christian claim that God is triune. The prism, he writes, encounters white light, one indivisible substance, and refracts from it a spectrum of colored light: "there occurs a kind of bending and return of the light upon itself, for the radiance reflects back" (Letter 35 to Peter, 256). *Light Body*, then, not only pictorializes a bodily phenomenon from Tibetan Buddhism but also renders the logic of the icon in the very media it employs – fleshly bodies and colored light. In this way, Chavez not only mirrors the light from her internal visions into her collaborative dance performance, but

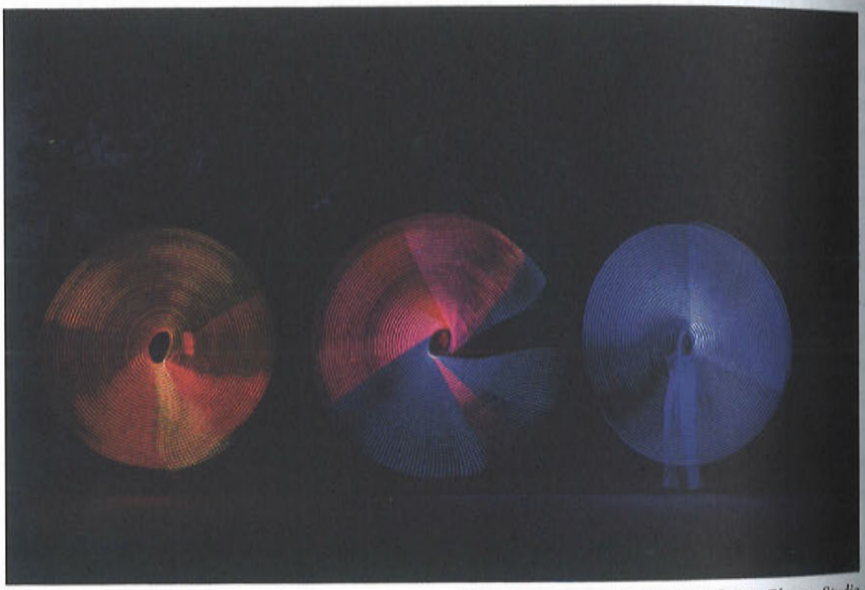

Photo documentation by Ira Lippke. © Lia Chavez Studio

FIGURE 20.2 Lia Chavez, *Light Body*, July 23, 2016, performance. Featuring performers Lia Chavez, Djassi deCosta Johnson, and Troy Ogilvie. A commission by Isabella Rossellini. Presented at Mama Farm in Brookhaven Hamlet, NY. Curated by Tali Wertheimer. Produced by Nur El Shami and Beverly Allan. Costuming by Mary Katrantzou. Beauty by Virginia Linzee. Styled by Richard Ives.

by doing so, she offers us an imaginative play on Dante's beatific vision. Consequentially, her triptych of intersecting rainbows in *Light Body* speaks not only to light's marvelous capacity for refraction but also to the body's iconic performativity in a triune God.

Notes

1 *La Grande Bellezza* ("*The Great Beauty*"), directed by Paolo Sorrentino (Indigo Film, 2013), DVD.

2 This chapter was adapted from a paper presented at the Association of Scholars of Christianity in the History of Art Symposium, the Union League Club, New York, NY, in February 2017. It was subsequently published under the same title "Performativity and the Flesh: The Economy of the Icon in Lia Chavez's Light Body," in *The Other Journal: Identity*, Volume 27(Wipf and Stock, 2017), pp. 52–61.

3 Lia Chavez, *Light Body*, July 23, 2016, performance. Featuring performers Lia Chavez, Djassi deCosta Johnson, and Troy Ogilvie. A commission by Isabella Rossellini. Presented at Mama Farm in Brookhaven Hamlet, NY. Curated by Tali Wertheimer. Produced by Nur El Shami and Beverly Allan. Costuming by Mary Katrantzou. Beauty by Virginia Linzee. Styled by Richard Ives. Photo documentation by Ira Lippke.

4 Chavez's *Ascent* (2016) ink transfer prints were made in conjunction with the *Light Body* performance. Chavez scribbled, shaded, and stepped onto white paper with black ink, creating minimalist, semi-abstract shapes for the backdrop and cover of the *Light Body* catalogue (my edition is 38/100).

5 Mary Katrantzou is a Greek fashion designer known as "the Queen of Prints" known for her use of patterns and explosive color. Her three differing garments commissioned for this performance echo the rainbow of light used by the dancers.

6 Troy Ogilvie is a New York-based dancer and choreographer, as well as founding collaborator, faculty member, and program manager of the Movement Invention Project. Djassi daCosta Johnson is a native New Yorker based in the US Virgin Islands as an assistant dance professor, choreographer, photographer, filmmaker, and doula.

7 The Mercer is a luxury boutique hotel in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan. A Romanesque revival structure from the 19th century, it is known for its chic guests and buzzy atmosphere, as well as Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's restaurant, Mercer Kitchen.

8 For more on Lia Chavez's use of bodily know-how, particularly in relation to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of *praktognosia* as the body's primary somatic epistemology in ascetic practices and performance art, see my article "Doing as Knowing: The Performance Art of Marina Abramović and Lia Chavez," *SEEN*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2015): 28–33.

9 Swami Veda Bharati is the founder of the Association of Himalayan Yoga Meditation Societies International. Swami Rama was his mentor and teacher of Himalayan Yoga and Meditation, who emphasized "when you walk it should look like dancing" ("Foolish Fire, Holy Fools and Thoughtful Paths").

10 *Light Body* choreographic method as told to me in personal correspondence with Lia Chavez, February 8, 2017.

11 Lia Chavez received her Masters in Photography at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2005, as well as a Masters of Philosophy in Visual Art in 2010.

12 These three female artists in particular were paramount to the history of feminist performance art. Several prominent pieces include the following: Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964) and *Interior Scroll* (1975); Yoko Ono's *Lighting Piece: Light a Match and Watch Till It Goes Out* (1955), and *Cut Piece* (1964); and Coco Fusco's *The Year of the*

White Bear and Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West, Performance (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1992–1994).

13 Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179 CE) was a German Benedictine Abbess during the High Middle Ages that studied herbology, philosophy, and composed music. Hildegard wrote numerous texts, among them *The Book of Divine Works, Physica,* and *Illuminations*. Julian of Norwich (1343–after 1416 CE) was an English anchoress, known for her texts *Revelations of Divine Love* and *The Showings*. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582 CE) was a Spanish Discalced Carmelite nun and doctor of the Catholic church, known for her *Interior Castles* and *The Way of Perfection*. All three women identified as mystics and are canonized as saints in the Catholic church. It is significant to note that Hildegard especially has inspired Chavez's artistic practice, as her newest project *Hildegaard Haute Botanical* is a luxury skincare creative house oriented around photosynthesis and light mysticism.

14 For the Middle Ages, participating in Christ's passion was interpreted as various forms of self-inflicted voluntary suffering, fasting, and abstinence. Flagellation was especially popular in the 13th century, encouraged as a form of self-mortification to atone for one's sins. Francis of Assisi (1181 or 1182–1226 CE) inherited Christ's stigmata, five marks resembling the visceral wounds in the hands, feet, and side of Jesus. Saints such as Catherine of Siena (1347–1380 CE) practiced anorexia mirabilis, understood by her contemporaries as "holy fasting," where one abstains from all food other than the consecrated host. These beliefs in a sacred masochism were in hope of suppressing the appetites of lust and other vices to bring one closer to God.

15 Balkan-born Marina Abramović (b. 1946) is considered the godmother of performance art. Drawing upon her Communist upbringing, Orthodox liturgy, and Tibetan Buddhist meditation practices, her works challenge the limitations of the body, particularly in *Rhythm 5* (1974) and *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005). Austrian multimedia artist Hermann Nitsch (1938–2022) was a Viennese Actionist, who combined performance and painting with flesh and blood in his bacchanalian *Orgies Mysteries Theatre* (mid-1950s), a form of mystical ritual, reminiscent of Greek Tragedy and the crucifixion of Jesus. Chris Burden (1946–2015) was pivotal to the 1970s performance art scene in Los Angeles, known for subjecting himself to risky and violent performances, such as *Shoot* (1971) and *Trans-fixed* (1974).

16 Nyssen uses the language of the *mirror* in his symbolic terminology for the body and the soul. See J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (Crossroad, 2004).

17 English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889 CE); British-American poet Denise Levertov (1923–1997); German composer J.S. Bach (1685–1750 CE); Scottish Composer James MacMillan (b. 1959); Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky (1932–1986); Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman (1918–2007).

18 See Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, translated by James K.A. Smith (Stanford University Press, 2004).

19 As told to me in personal correspondence with Lia Chavez on February 8, 2017.

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James on Democratic Individuality (2017). He is currently working on a project on religion, politics, art, and aesthetics.

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Religion and Contemporary Art sets the theoretical frameworks and interpretive strategies for exploring the re-emergence of religion in the making, exhibiting, and discussion of contemporary art. Featuring essays from both established and emerging scholars, critics, and artists, the book reflects on what might be termed an "accord" between contemporary art and religion.

It explores the common strategies contemporary artists employ in the interface between religion and contemporary art practice. It also includes case studies to provide more in-depth treatments of specific artists grappling with themes such as ritual, abstraction, mythology, the body, popular culture, science, liturgy, and social justice, among other themes.

It is a must-read resource for working artists, critics, and scholars in this field, and an invitation to new voices "curious" about its promises and possibilities.

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