

# arts

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2012

ARTS IN RELIGIOUS AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

SPECIAL *feature*  
IN THE  
SANCTUARY

Amy Levin Weiss

*Breaking Boundaries: Louise Nevelson  
and the Erol Beker Chapel of the  
Good Shepherd* p.38

## features

IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

**Krista Stevens**

*The Beauty of Abu Ghraib:  
Art Transforming Violence* p.4

IN THE STUDY

**Wilson Yates**

**Kimberly Vrudny**

**Ted A. Smith**

**Cecilia Gonzalez-  
Andrieu**

**Deborah Sokolove**

**William Dyrness**

**Deborah J. Haynes**

*A Symposium  
of Issues in Theology  
and the Arts* p.11

ON THE SHELF

**Clyde Steckel** p.49



Louise Nevelson, (left to right) *Three Columns*, *Sanctuary Lamp*, and *Cross of the Good Shepherd*,  
Erol Beker Chapel of the Good Shepherd, Saint Peter's Church, New York City, 1977.

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# arts

ARTS IN RELIGIOUS AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

A lively international conversation  
among those interested  
in the intersections of theology,  
spirituality, and the arts

## *Reflections from the Editor*

Welcome to the spring issue of **arts**! We have a breadth of subjects for you to enjoy, with two articles and a symposium of six essays exploring issues related to theology and the arts.

The first article is by **Amy Levin Weiss**, a writer and art museum registrar, who treats the amazing story of the Erol Beker Chapel of the Good Shepherd in St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Manhattan—a small sanctuary space often called the “Nevelson chapel.” Dedicated in 1977, the space and its art early became an iconic architectural structure and artistic achievement. The story is filled with a host of actors at a time when the Manhattan art scene of the 1970s was at its most provocative and dynamic. Two figures are central: Ralph Peterson, the senior minister of the church, and Louise Nevelson, the internationally known sculptor and artist. Of all of the histories of modern church relationships to major artists in the building of sanctuaries, the Nevelson story is one of the most important and complex. Weiss gives the work the attention it needs in her rich and critical analysis, “Breaking Boundaries: Louise Nevelson and the Erol Beker Chapel of the Good Shepherd.”

**Krista Stevens**, in her article “The Beauty of Abu Ghraib: Art Transforming Violence,” offers us a theological critique of one of the most powerful series of artworks of our time: Fernando Botero's *Abu Ghraib*. The Colombian artist, after being shaken by the newspaper images that revealed the brutality of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, sketched, drew, and painted sixty-four images of the events. These works became an international exhibition with canvases that portrayed the prisoners and their tormentors. His oversized bodies in small cells are wrenching to view. If the hands of evil can be painted, Botero does so, and we are left, as was he, shaken beyond understanding. Stevens, working with concepts from theological aesthetics and liberation theology, probes the religious questions and judgments that Botero's works elicit. She invites us to understand not only the possibilities of encountering the prophetic condemnations of Abu Ghraib but also the opportunities the works offer us to see beyond the destruction.

In this issue of **arts** we are delighted to bring you a symposium: “Issues in Theology and the Arts.” Six essays explore selected issues that we should take seriously in our effort to deepen and enhance the work of theology and the arts:

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More than a decade ago, Frank Burch Brown, in his work *Good Taste, Bad Taste and Christian Taste*, addressed many of these concerns in his bracing call for an ecumenical taste that is plural and multifaceted even as it remains critical. His encouragement and my own subsequent research lead me to suggest that we develop what might better be termed a *vernacular aesthetic*. This would be sensitive not only to the canons of taste that critics and historians suggest but also to the way in which objects are received and, yes, used. One could not ask for a better illustration of the way such an aesthetic works than the response to (and appreciation of) the March 2012 journey of *Levitated Mass*, by artist Michael Heizer, to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. A 340-ton rock cut from a quarry in Riverside, California, was transported 105 miles to the museum on the west side of Los Angeles by a 176-wheeled truck built especially for this purpose. Following the nocturnal journey on Twitter,

crowds gathered along the route to watch the huge rock wind its way around bridges and roadways. People sat in beach chairs, drank coffee, and watched the contraption crawl by like a giant centipede. They had their pictures taken in front of the rock when it stopped during the day. Perhaps the best art always functions in such a rich interplay of compelling interests.

The journey of this “rock star”<sup>2</sup> recalls another journey almost exactly seven hundred years ago, on June 9, 1311, when the *Maestà* of Duccio was taken from the artist’s studio and paraded through of Siena en route to its setting in the city’s cathedral.

On the day on which it was carried to the Duomo and the Bishop ordered a great and devoted company of the priests and friars with a solemn procession, accompanied by the Signori of the Nine and all the officials of the commune, and all the populace.

All the most worthy were hand in hand next the panel with lights lit in their hands and then behind were the women and children with much devotion and they accompanied it right to the Duomo and making procession all around the Campo as was the custom sounding all the bells in glory out of devotion for such a noble panel as this.<sup>3</sup>

Even though major artworks may have lost their earlier religious focus, they still spark rituals of enjoyment and celebration. They still carve out poetic spaces where people can find it in themselves to play. *Levitated Mass* was not yet installed in the museum! The piece was a happening—public theater, a performance. And so it has always been: the best art is that which enriches the interplay of these relationships and cultivates the deepest human longings for joy and discovery.

## THE USES OF THEORY

Deborah J. Haynes

In her last book of essays, *Opening Our Moral Eye*, M. C. Richards recounted a formative dream.<sup>1</sup> Standing in her vegetable garden, she saw a being with a strange smile and three eyes about 50 feet away on the compost pile. The right eye was the sun, the middle eye a diamond, and the left a huge human eye. Its front teeth were crooked, and it had a large benign countenance. In her dream she struggled to find words for her questions: “when will I . . . when will my time . . . what is my destiny?” The Dream Angel answered her simply: “I wouldn’t worry about that if I were you.” She went immediately into the

studio and made this figure, a literal form of her nocturnal image. I see this act as an expression of Richards’s commitment to holding the ultimate questions in tension with aesthetic creation. Like the best religious art, M. C. Richards’s *Dream Angel* calls each of us to reflect about our own destinies, about whether we are caught in fantasies of the future and replaying our mistakes of the past. Or, are we present in the world, fully awake?

Since the 1995 publication of my *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts*,<sup>2</sup> a number of books and articles have been published about Mikhail Bakhtin and religion. No one, however, has

tackled the ongoing relevance of Bakhtin’s unique vocabulary and concepts for the study of religion, theology, and the arts. I continue to find this gap curious, and therefore want to use the occasion of this symposium for *arts* to explore three major interrelated ideas in his oeuvre that exemplify the usefulness of theory. Although they are not explicitly theological, I believe that they have broadly religious implications.

First, Bakhtin’s articulation of the importance of “art for life’s sake” invites Richards’s assertions about the inseparability of art and life. In Richards’s work, which I

2. Christopher Knight, “Review: LACMA’s New Hunk ‘Levitated Mass’ Has Some Substance,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 2012, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-knight-heizer-rock-20120623,0,3962065.story>. 3. Quoted in Keith Christiansen, *Duccio and the Origins of Western Painting* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 16–17.





M. C. Richards, *Dream Angel*, 1960(?).  
Fired clay. Collection of Deborah J. Haynes.  
Used with permission.

encountered in the late 1960s, I first heard this vision articulated. “Life is an art,” she wrote in her book *Centering*. “All the arts we practice are apprenticeship. The big art is our life.” Art, she insisted, is a moral eye that opens and closes, helping us to see truly what matters around us.<sup>3</sup> At the center of her vision there was no product to sell, no specific object such as minimalist artists touted in the 1960s, no appropriation of other artists’ work.

Second, Bakhtin’s critique of what he called “theoretism” points us in new methodological directions. In his language, theoretism means that ideas or works of art remain unconnected to our lives and therefore cannot provide orientation for action in the

world. To speak of art and the creative process as radical presence, as Richards did, is an example of precisely the opposite of theoretism.

Third, Bakhtin’s and Richards’s appreciation for the “prosaic” deserves further consideration. Richards had a multifarious career as a poet, potter, essayist, translator, and painter. Born in 1916, she taught at Black Mountain College in the late 1940s, and thereafter became an impassioned advocate of community. For fifteen years before her death in 1999, she lived at Camphill Village, an agricultural community in Pennsylvania based on the work of anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner. Though she published other books, including poetry, and exhibited her art, *Centering* became an underground classic. Here she pulled together ideas about art and craft, education and creativity, religion and spirituality, arguing for the interconnection of art and life and the creative potential of every person. Her writing and her art demonstrate how these values might take form in daily life. Bakhtin’s work demonstrates a similar attention to this prosaic quality.

More than twenty-five years ago, I was drawn to Bakhtin’s writing when I read “Art and Answerability” in Russian, an essay he wrote in 1919.<sup>4</sup> Laboring over the translation of various words, my curiosity was piqued. I had been interested in the religious and moral overtones of the nineteenth-century debate about art for art’s sake versus art for life’s sake. In his short two-page essay, written at the young age of twenty-four, Bakhtin clearly located himself in the art-for-life’s-sake camp, and I recognized him immediately as a kindred spirit. Art and life, he said, should answer for each other. Without rec-

ognition of life, art would be mere artifice; without the energy of art, life would be impoverished. And one of the most significant points of connection between art and life is the human act or deed. The work of art is a particular example of the artist’s action in the world.

Philosophically based in the writings of Kant, Schiller, Goethe, Schelling, and Friedrich Schlegel, the idea of art for art’s sake had adherents in France, England, and Germany, especially during the nineteenth century. These ideas were expressed in literature and the visual arts in a variety of ways, but for Bakhtin art for art’s sake constituted a fundamental crisis, an attempt by writers and artists simply to try to surpass art of the past without considering their moral responsibility in the present. Bakhtin followed nineteenth-century aestheticians, such as Jean-Marie Guyau, who were convinced that art must be deeply connected to life.

Three major elements of Bakhtin’s thought are important for us to consider here. First, at its foundation, Bakhtinian aesthetics is profoundly moral and religious. In fact, as Graham Pechey has observed, “theology is the pre-modern forerunner of philosophy from which Bakhtin’s early aesthetics derives many of its terms.”<sup>5</sup> A few further comments will help to substantiate my claim. In notes taken by L. V. Pumpiansky during Bakhtin’s lectures of 1924–25, Bakhtin reputedly said that aesthetics is similar to religion, inasmuch as both help to transfigure life. He discussed how “grounded peace” is foundational for both religious experience and aesthetic activity.<sup>6</sup> *Grounded peace* is an odd term, but it is used here to mean a state of rest, tranquility, and peace of mind. This interpenetration of the reli-

1. M. C. Richards, *Opening Our Moral Eye: Essays, Talks, and Poems Embracing Creativity and Community*, ed. Deborah J. Haynes (Hudson, N.Y.: Lindisfarne Press, 1996). 2. Deborah J. Haynes, *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). 3. M. C. Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), 40–41, 46. 4. That essay was later translated and published in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: The Early Essays of M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Vadim Liapunov and Kenneth Brostrom (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). 5. Graham Pechey, “Philosophy and Theology in ‘Aesthetic Activity,’” in *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*, ed. Susan M. Felch and Paul Contino (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 47. 6. L. V. Pumpiansky, “Appendix,” in *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*, ed. Susan M. Felch and Paul Contino, 207–8.



gious, theological, and aesthetic is further expressed throughout Bakhtin's writing, with themes such as love, grace, the urge toward confession, responsive conscience, reverence, silence, freedom from fear, and a sense of plenitude. Yet, even if Bakhtin's political and cultural context had allowed it, he would not have been inclined to "preach a religious platform," as Caryl Emerson so astutely observed. He was, by temperament, neither didactic nor proselytizing.<sup>7</sup>

Second, a key element of Bakhtin's aesthetic philosophy is an extended critique of

life and experience. Immersion in the theoretical too often takes place at the expense of the everyday, the practical. On the other hand, our specific acts or deeds do provide a basis for assessing what is most meaningful, and for creating an adequate orientation in life. Nevertheless, his resistance to all forms of theoretism did not preclude writing theoretical texts that are difficult to unpack.

Bakhtin's view of theoretism may be best understood as a multistep process and way of thinking. First, it abstracts what may be generalized from specific human actions.

Bakhtin avoided systematic and practical analyses of individual texts and authors, which might have demonstrated clearly what the implications of this analysis actually are in practice. He was ultimately more concerned with poetics or what Morson and Emerson have named "prosaics," the messiness of everyday life.<sup>10</sup>

Third, as these two scholars define it, *prosaics* refers, first, to the comprehensive theory of literature that Bakhtin developed that privileges prose and the novel. But second, and more pertinent here, *prosaics* is a way of thinking that foregrounds the everyday and ordinary. Bakhtin shared this latter sense with other writers and philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Leo Tolstoy, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gregory Bateson, and Fernand Braudel. What interests me here is Bakhtin's conviction that wholeness and integrity of the self are not given, but are always a matter of work, a project to be undertaken in everyday life.

In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin mused about this repeatedly. "Every thought of mine . . . is an act or deed that I perform—my own individually answerable act or deed. It is one of all those acts which make up my . . . life as an uninterrupted performing of acts. For my entire life as a whole can be considered as a single complex act or deed that I perform." Here he affirms that through our acts we are answerable and responsible. We have no alibi. Our uniqueness and particularity constitute our "non-alibi in Being." As one of Bakhtin's translators described this term, we cannot be relieved of our responsibility for an act by an alibi, that is, "by claiming to have been elsewhere than at the place of commission."<sup>11</sup> To speak of *prosaics*, therefore, is a way to acknowledge that creating an integrated life takes a life-

*At its foundation, Bakhtinian aesthetics is profoundly moral and religious. In fact, as Graham Pechey has observed, "theology is the pre-modern forerunner of philosophy from which Bakhtin's early aesthetics derives many of its terms."*

theoretism. "Any kind of practical orientation of my life within the theoretical world is impossible. . . . [I]t is impossible to live in it, impossible to perform answerable deeds. In that world I am unnecessary; I am essentially and fundamentally non-existent in it. The theoretical world is obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being."<sup>8</sup> In this statement Bakhtin made two interrelated assertions. On the one hand, he was convinced that theory cannot provide the basis for responsible action in the world, because it does not translate directly into everyday

Second, it considers that abstraction as whole and complete; then, third, develops a set of rules from the abstraction. And fourth, norms are then derived from this set of rules. As Caryl Emerson and Gary Saul Morson summarized Bakhtin's view, "faith in rules, norms, theories, and systems blinds us to the particular person and situation, which is where morality resides."<sup>9</sup> By abstracting rules, norms, or theories from actual human actions and mistaking those theories for the truth, a philosopher or artist loses the connection to the unique human being and to real moral engagement.

7. Emerson, "Afterword: Plenitude as a Form of Hope," in *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*, ed. Susan M. Felch and Paul Contino, 177.

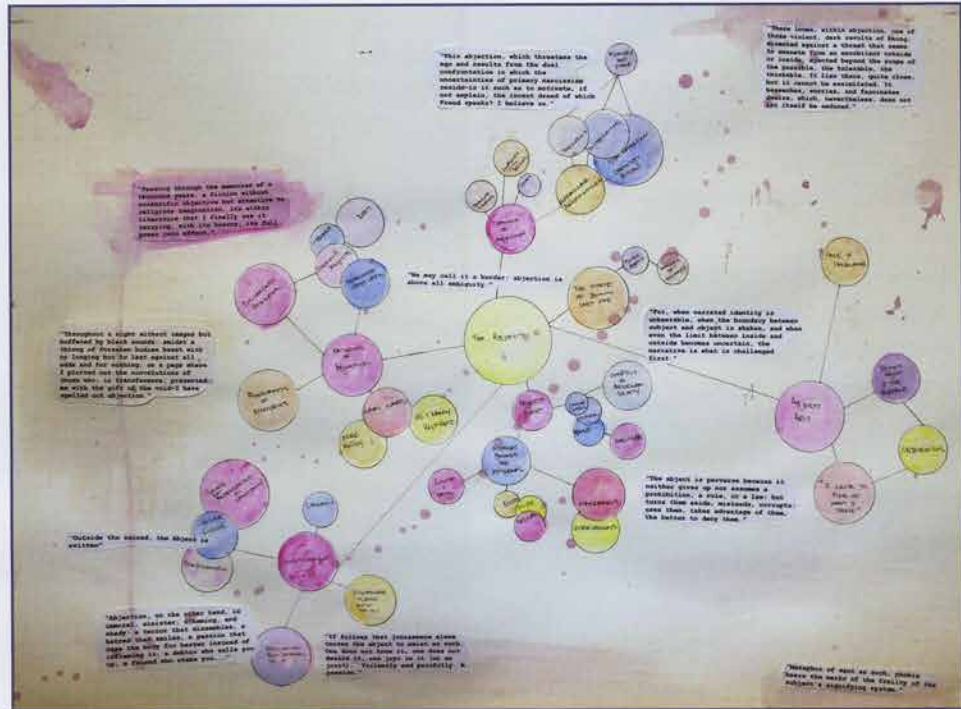
8. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, ed. Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 9. 9. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, eds. *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 9. 10. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). 11. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, 3, 40, 95.



time. This process may never be completed, but is nevertheless a moral responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

Given these three ideas in Bakhtin's work—art for life's sake, his critique of theoretism, and his emphasis on the prosaic—I want to raise the question, how is theory useful in the study of theology, religion, and the arts? I am convinced that theories can be utilized to understand systems (including the philosophical constructs) that affect our lives. In this sense theory is not a totalizing, but rather a partial and fragmentary process.<sup>13</sup> Theory can be an especially useful ally in political struggles because of its empowering effects. Theory and practice are inextricably linked: theories encounter walls, which practice helps one climb over. They are neither an expression nor translation of practice; theories can also be forms of practice. Theory may be likened to a box of tools from which we take what we need. This concept is especially congenial for artists, who use a wide variety of tools for creative work.

Theory, however, is never neutral. It is also an instrument of power most often wielded by those who have power. Most influential theories have been created by men; and the extensive debate about modernism and postmodernism of the late twentieth century is part of the "race for theory," to use the title of a feminist essay by Barbara Christian.<sup>14</sup> I am aware that all writers necessarily build on the ideas, theories, and images of others. This is certainly true of my own thinking and writing. What I would criticize are the particular pretenses and forms of much theorizing. I am not against theorizing as such, as should be evident from these reflections. However, theory and practice must interact and mutually transform each other. As Bakhtin cogently argued, an aesthetics that remains rooted in formal or material concerns is only theoretism. Aesthetics must be linked to the development of moral



Amber Dawn Cobb, *Cognitive Map 1*, 2011. Ink and watercolor on paper. Collection of the artist. Used with permission.



Amber Dawn Cobb, *Untitled (mattress drawing)*, 2011. Ink on mattress cover. Collection of Rebecca DiDomenico. Used with permission.

12. Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 31. 13. This view is also articulated in Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, "Intellectuals and Power," in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Bouchard, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 203–17. 14. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies* 14 (spring 1988): 67–80.

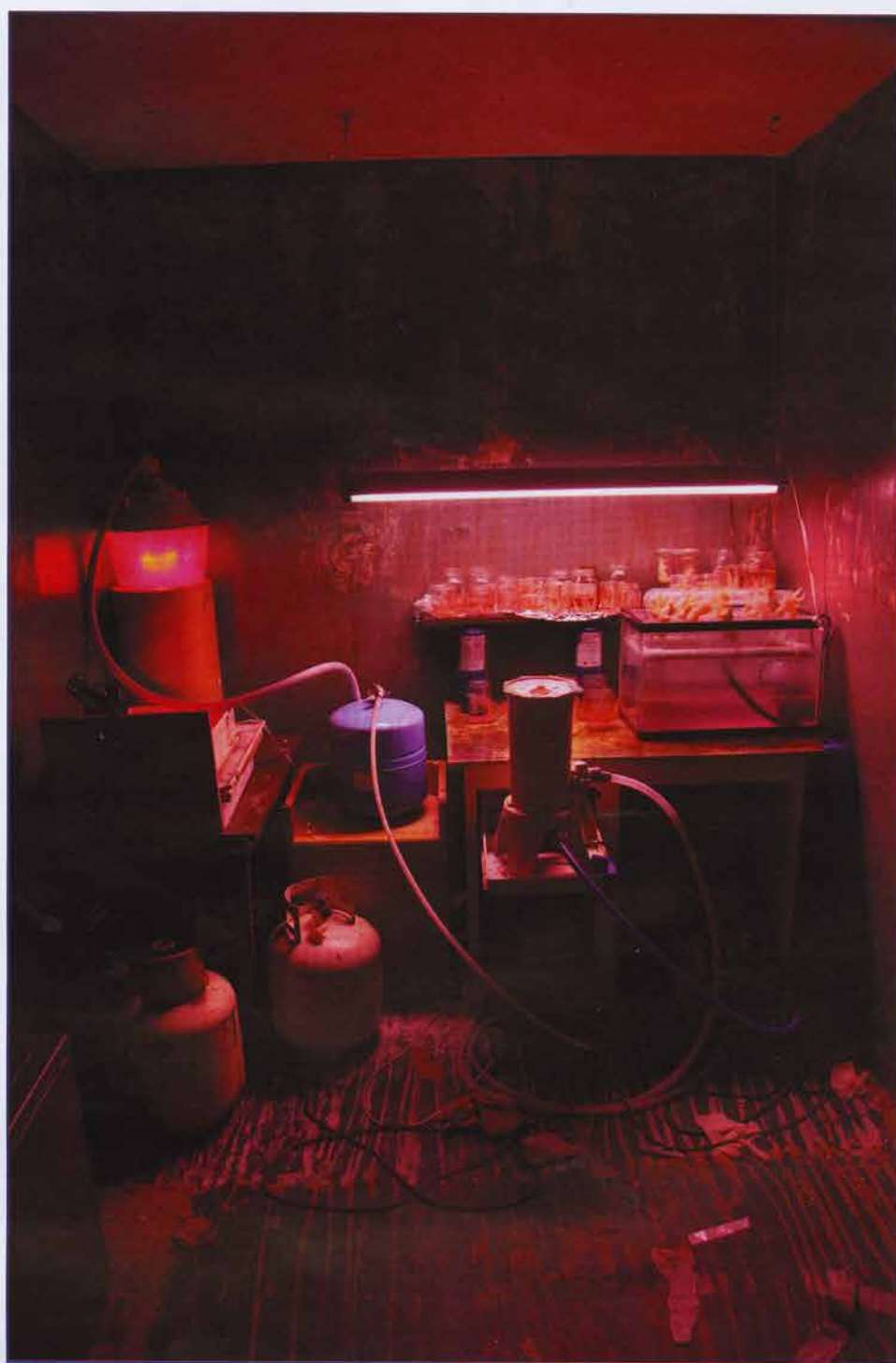


imagination and to ethical action in unique situations for particular goals.

I suggest that all of us who are engaged in religion, theology, and the arts, as well as artists whose work we interpret, will find it useful to study aesthetic theory and theories of art that have helped to define aesthetic categories. For example, I know an emerging artist, Amber Dawn Cobb, who devoted tremendous energy and time to studying Julia Kristeva's difficult concept of the *abject*. Over the course of a year, this study helped her to find both a verbal language and new ways of giving form in her art to powerful formative experiences of addiction and childhood abuse. She worked on many "cognitive maps" (see *Cognitive Map I*) and smaller artifacts, such as the mattress covered with a drawing (see *Untitled*), to develop room-sized installations (see *A Situation for Transformation*). The installations that emerged from this process were challenging to look at and, for some viewers, enigmatic and difficult to interpret. They were not based on religious ideologies, but on profound moral questions. For me, they were deeply moving.<sup>15</sup>

Such an example demonstrates this artist's constructive commitment to making theory relevant. For many, and I count myself here, theories must be especially attentive to individual and cultural difference, to the uniqueness, particularity, or specificity of both the theorist and that which is theorized. I believe that theory should be written and presented in ways that are accessible to all, including artists and those without privileged educations. There is certainly a place for theory that uses convoluted technical language, yet only if it is accessible can such theory become the groundwork for creative work and, in the future, for social change.

To conclude this excursus on the usefulness of theory, Bakhtin identified theorism, his name for all kinds of theories isolated from action, as the enemy. As I have emphasized, Bakhtin was adamant about



Amber Dawn Cobb, *A Situation for Transformation*, 2009. Mixed media installation. Collection of the artist. Used with permission.

the limitations of theory, because theories are often developed in the abstract, as if the unique individual in particular situations

did not exist. This abstract quality means that theories cannot provide criteria that would shape one's life of action and practice.

15. See [www.amberdawncobb.com](http://www.amberdawncobb.com) for more images of Cobb's work.



Nonetheless, Bakhtin did write theoretical texts. He may have avoided systematic and practical analyses of literary and artistic work, but he articulated the basis of his aesthetics and his notion of creativity from a profoundly moral and religious stance.

I believe that all of us who are developing and traversing the terrain of religion and the arts should be conversant with the history of philosophy and with contemporary theory more generally. These can provide part of a comprehensive framework for understand-

ing art of various historical eras and diverse cultural settings. By studying and engaging with aesthetics and other theoretical discourses, artists, and all of us, will be in a much stronger position from which to interpret their, and our, work. |||

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... Continued from p10

## The Beauty of Abu Ghraib

In so doing, Botero's work resists the cover-up desired by the government.<sup>26</sup> Botero's collection throws suffering and death to the forefront, forcing viewers to recognize the true reality of human life. These works compel viewers to come face-to-face with the reality of pain, suffering, and degradation, not just of the tortured prisoners, but of themselves as well. This realization is important if any reshaping of society is to be possible. Only by recognizing the reality of suffering will people be able to share in the suffering of others, take victims down from crosses, and experience the full, liberative beauty of resurrection hope.

### Conclusion

Fernando Botero's *Abu Ghraib* collection offers a unique medium for theological discourse. A combination of form, beauty, and gruesome content, Botero's vivid presentation of tortured prisoners offers an important challenge to those seeking to live a life of Christian discipleship as well as an imaginative, prophetic critique of the systems and structures of oppression that allow torture and brutality to occur. |||

26. It is important to note that from the beginning of the Iraq War, George W. Bush's "administration had carefully controlled images released to the public. . . . [T]he administration banned images of dying Iraqis and of returning coffins of U.S. soldiers who had perished in Iraq" (Ebony, *Botero: Abu Ghraib*, 26). Even more so did the administration hope to conceal the pictures from Abu Ghraib, as these pictures might raise a red flag about our culture of affluence and its subsequent effect on our national and international relationships.