

Artists in Resi/stance

Protest, Memory, and Reconciliation

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Artists have been responding to their lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) and the signs of the times and their works have been used as a means of representation and propaganda early on in history. A prominent example of art as a conscious socio-economic and political protest movement is the graphic work of German expressionism of the early twentieth century, especially Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945), which has become a style model worldwide.¹ I want to look here into twentieth-century contextual art from an intercultural perspective. Some of the artists introduced deliberately understand themselves as Christian artists, others are located in the secular artworld. In any case I am going to dialogue with their work as a Christian theologian without pocketing it for my own ends. The journey goes from South Africa, via South Korea and Indonesia, to Russia, and finally Germany. How did artists articulate themselves in conflict and post-conflict situations? What similarities and differences are there between the different contexts and what can we

This essay is a revised version of the lecture given by the author on the occasion of him being awarded an honorary doctorate by the Faculty of Theology at Lund University in May 2022.

1. See Albert Jungmann & Burglind Jungmann, “Der Minjung-Holzschnitt: Versuch einer Annäherung vor dem Hintergrund westlicher und östlicher Traditionen”, in Lim Chung-Hee & Andreas Jung (eds.), *Malttugi: Texte und Bilder aus der Minjung-Kulturbewegung in Südkorea*, Heidelberg 1986, 133–141.

learn from each other, not least theologically when it comes to dealing with suffering under oppression, trauma, and reconciliation?

South Africa – Between Apartheid and Rainbow Nation

Pictures tell stories to the extent that they can depict several scenes rolled into one. Black South African artist Azaria Mbatha (1941–2018) regularly makes use of this narrative practice.² Educated in mission schools, including Roke's Drift Art and Craft Center, he was encouraged in his artistic engagement with Biblical themes by his father. After receiving public recognition he was able to continue his studies with a scholarship in Sweden between 1965 and 1967. In 1970, after a short but productive period in South Africa, he returned with his Swedish wife and family to Sweden for good.

In *Nativity* (c. 1970; Figure 1), Mbatha depicts the Holy Family and the three kings as black. In the left corner, Mary sits with the child on her lap on a resting place. Behind them stands Joseph. The angel speaks to him with his right arm raised, with the left one he seems about to embrace mother and child. A cross leans diagonally in the corner. At the moment of birth, Jesus' life is already endangered by the powers that be. This scene is staged in front of a long township house. In the light of the open doors, hands are raised for help. The three kings exit in a row to the right. Above them the Holy Family flees to the left into Egypt. Mary with the child is sitting on a donkey, led by Joseph with a stick over his right shoulder. Meanwhile from the upper left corner and the background King Herod's soldiers are marching towards the centre of the picture in two rows with raised spears, commanded by an officer upfront. They are represented as white. The colour contrasts and the movements into different directions produce a certain dynamic in the picture.

With his *Crucifixion/Reconciliation* (1967–1968; Figure 2), Mbatha pleads for reconciliation of black and white in the middle of the anti-apartheid struggle, commemorated to this day by major incidents like the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and the Soweto uprising in 1976. The picture consists of three related scenes under a kind of wooden doorway. In the upper left, black and white are separated by a black line. On the opposite side, they are mixed chessboard-like under the cross. The left half of Christ's face is depicted in white with a black tear running over his cheek, the right half is black. The two scenes are separated by a kind of ancestor pole that is supporting the wooden arch. It carries alternately black and white masks, the last one also has a face that is half black and half white, but inverted from

2. See Azaria Mbatha, *Retrospective Exhibition*, Durban Art Gallery, 14 October–30 November 1998; Theo Sundermeier, *Südafrikanische Passion: Linolschnitte von Azariah Mbatha*, Bielefeld 1977.



Figure 1. Azaria Mbatha, Nativity, c. 1970.



Figure 2. Azaria Mbatha, Crucifixion/Reconciliation, 1967–1968.

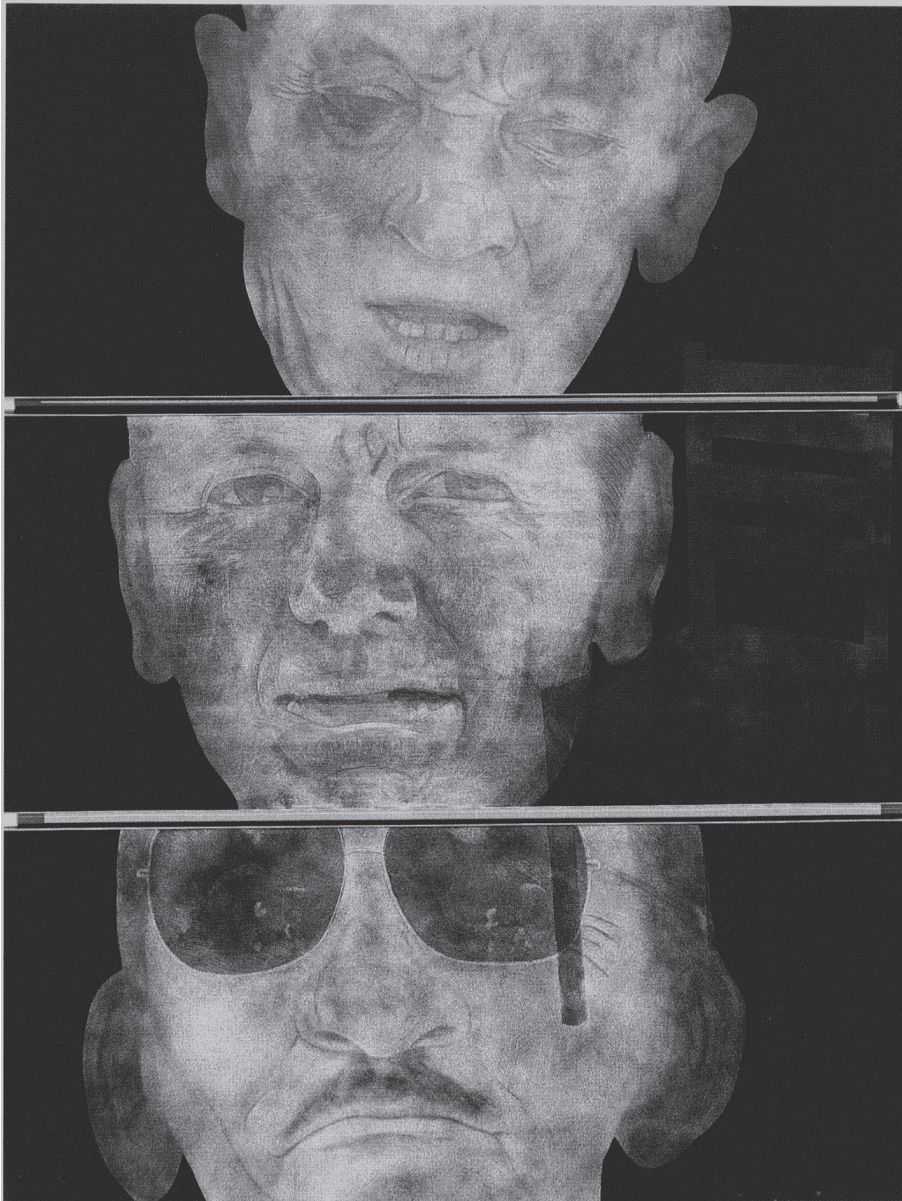


Figure 3. Paul Stopforth, The Interrogators, 1979.

the face of the crucified Christ. In African traditional religion the world of the ancestors is an inverted version of this world. The risen Christ – in African theology some years later addressed as our ancestor³ – is present, where two or three are gathered in his name (Matt 18:20), in this case among the busts of the white and black men in front. The bald-headed black man seems to be listening suspiciously to his bearded white counterpart. The scars of apartheid are deep and the road of dialogue towards reconciliation will be thorny.

Paul Stopforth (b. 1945), a secular artist and anti-apartheid activist, portrayed *The Interrogators* (1979; Figure 3) of his friend Steve Biko (1946–1977).⁴ A triptych of the three men who tortured him to death. The X-ray-like portraits seem to unmask their wickedness. They are connected by a shadowy depiction of the torture chair. The paintings were hanging in the National Gallery in Cape Town even under apartheid. Only when Stopforth in 1981 got an invitation to the Valparaiso Biennale in Chile to show parts of his *Biko Series*, the government intervened. The series shows the body of Biko on a stretcher and details of his body parts based on actual autopsy photos. The hand and foot are reminiscent of the extremities of the crucified Christ (1980; Figures 4 and 5). Even though Stopforth's *Freedom Dancer* (1993; Figure 6) seems to celebrate the dawn of the new South Africa, still the memory of the past is haunting the artist. His artworks are also a way of coping with the trauma.

In 1996, President Nelson Mandela (1918–2013) officially installed a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as an alternative third way between general amnesty and a tribunal to reveal the cruelties of the past and relieve the trauma. The chair of the TRC, Bishop Desmond Tutu (1931–2021), nominated by the President, deplors that the white South Africa is only marginally interested in coping with the past and does not show repentance.⁵ Liberation theologian Alan Boesak, himself of coloured background, points out the inequality in numbers of testimonies of victims and perpetrators as well as in their treatment by the TRC,⁶ when he talks about “an almost calculated kind of emotional blackmail”:

3. See Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology*, rev. ed., Maryknoll, NY 2023, 59–82.

4. Stopforth's artwork is available on his website, <https://paulstopforth.com/>, accessed 2024-03-21.

5. Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, New York 1999, 58, 138, 184–189, 220.

6. See Allan A. Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience: African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics*, Stellenbosch 2005, 173, 175, 185, 195–200.



*Figure 4 (left). Paul Stopforth, Biko Series (left hand), 1980.
Figure 5 (right). Paul Stopforth, Biko Series (detail), 1980.*



Figure 6. Paul Stopforth, Freedom Dancer, 1993.

If you did not forgive your torturer, you were made to feel as if there was something wrong with you. [...] There is a place for rightful anger. [...] So far, only forgiveness by the victims has been truly realized. All the other elements without which reconciliation cannot be genuine – restitution, reparation, restoration, justice – are left to languish on the ash heap of the stories, told, listened to, not acted upon, and forgotten.⁷

Tutu on his part states: “If the victim could forgive only when the culprit confessed, then the victim would be locked into the culprit’s whim, locked into victimhood, whatever her own attitude or intention.”⁸ This is affirmed by testimonies of the victims. I speak about self-acceptance, or more theologically self-reconciliation, in this respect, as it is paradigmatically expressed in the slogan “Black is beautiful”.⁹

South Korea – Between Dictatorship and Self-Reconciliation

The Crucifixion scene from Hong Song-Dam’s *Kwangju* cycle is the icon of Minjung theology (1980s; Figure 7).¹⁰ The denominating word consists of two syllables *Min* (people) and *jung* (mass), but has been declared untranslatable by Minjung theologians as particularly Korean. The woodcut shows in the centre three bodies hurled on the loading platform of a truck. In the lower part of the picture the crucified Christ is depicted, the extremities protrude beyond the picture. In the background, three lines signify the mountains around the city where the dead bodies were buried in secret. On closer inspection, the persons on the truck bear the signs of the cross. Christ is present in the suffering of the people. The artist was an eyewitness of the 1980 Kwangju massacre, when the Korean army was deployed in the interior against its own fellow citizens. The drugged soldiers raped and killed the demonstrators against the military dictatorship. The American supreme command must have agreed to moving troops from the 38th parallel to Kwangju. This massacre remains a trauma for the people of Kwangju to this day.

Hong Song-Dam (b. 1955) himself was incarcerated only after the official end of the dictatorship under the National Security Act, which was still law of the land, because he had sent slides of a huge banner to a youth festival

7. Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience*, 195–198.

8. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 220.

9. See Volker Küster, *God/Terror: Ethics and Aesthetics in Contexts of Conflict and Reconciliation*, Sheffield 2021, 68–73.

10. See Volker Küster, *A Protestant Theology of Passion: Korean Minjung Theology Revisited*, Leiden 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004175235.i-203>.



Figure 7. Hong Song-Dam, Kwangju, 1980s.

in North Korea, where it was reproduced by 200 local artists. He later tried to overcome his trauma from the water torture during his prison term in the series of mixed media paintings “Twenty Days in Water” (1999). In the first image (Figure 8), the artist is drowning upside down in the sea, tied to his torture chair. Fish are swimming around his head. A rice bowl is floating on the water. In the background, the artist’s birthplace, the island Haido, is visible. The flowers that grow from the chair’s legs are reminiscent of his youth when he saw these flowers sticking out from the fog as if they were floating on the sea. Through slowly transforming himself into a fish who cannot live without water in the subsequent pictures, the artist, who was tortured by water, tries to overcome his trauma and reconcile with his fate. In the seventh and last painting (Figure 9), which has the shape of a mandala, two fish swim around a white rice bowl. Contrary to his dissident friend Kim Chi-Ha (1941–2022), who wrote the poem “Rice Is Heaven”, Hong’s view of rice, the daily food in Asia, is more ambivalent. Before being tortured, he was fed well, so that he would not pass out too soon. One of his torturers, retrieved by an investigative television programme, said: “Obviously we have not tortured him enough”, because he is still active as a political artist today. Similar to the South African case, self-reconciliation may be the only way for Hong to overcome his trauma.

The title of the more recent banner *Sewol Owol* (2014; Figure 10), draws a link between the *Sewol* ferry incident and the Kwangju massacre of May (*owol*) 1980.¹¹ The loss of the ferry between Incheon and Cheju Island caused 307 casualties, among which approximately 250 were school children. This was the result of corruption of the ship owner in regard to the conversion of the ship and its current overload, human error and cowardice of the crew, as well as total failure of the bailout due to political outage. President Park Geun-Hye was absent in public on the day of the disaster. Had the children been sons and daughters of rich parents, rather than of common people, the pressure to rescue them would certainly have been more comprehensive. In other words, this can be interpreted as a *Minjung* event. Hong sees the same filthy political and economic forces operating behind the scenes as was the case during the Kwangju massacre. In the picture, Park Geun-Hye is portrayed as the puppet of her father, General Park Chung-Hee (1917–1979). The huge banner turns out to be a picture puzzle, which not only refers to the *Sewol* event on the upper left side, but also to the Kwangju uprising in

11. “Sung-Dam Hong”, *Verbotene Bilder*, <http://www.verbotenebilder.net/data/pages/pages-de/artists/Sung-damHONG.php>, accessed 2024-03-21; Choe Sang-Hun, “An Artist Is Rebuked for Casting South Korea’s Leader in an Unflattering Light”, *The New York Times*, 30 August 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/world/asia/an-artist-is-rebuked-for-casting-south-koreas-leader-in-an-unflattering-light.html>.



Figure 8.
Hong Song-Dam, Twenty Days in Water I,
1999.



Figure 9.
Hong Song-Dam, Twenty Days in Water 7,
1999.



Figure 10. *Hong Song-Dam, Sewol Owl, 2014.*

the middle, the controversial Four Major Rivers Project of President Lee Myung-Bak on the right side, Japanese ultra-nationalism and the Yasukuni Shrine in the right upper corner, and the anti-communism against North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un on the lower left side. That the painting was banned from the Kwangju Biennale is a scandal in itself, given the suffering and trauma of the city and the artist alike. Yet it also gives testimony to the continuing political impact of the artist. Theologically, the presence of the suffering Christ among the poor and oppressed *Minjung* and the self-reconciliation of the artist with his trauma are two sides of the same coin.

Indonesia – Between Fundamentalism and Pancasila

Nyoman Darsane (1939–2024) has for a long time been known as the artist of the beautiful gospel.¹² He celebrates the beauty of Balinese dancers in Mary, Mary and Martha, and the Ten Virgins. Jesus is a dancing Christ too. In *Sermon by the Seaside* (1988; Figure 11), Jesus is dancing on the Balinese shore. His right hand, belonging to the upper world in Balinese tradition, is pointing towards heaven, the left to the earth. In traditional Balinese dance, this *mudra* of the left hand pointing towards the left foot is symbolizing redemption. Dance is the ideal form of worship in Bali and at the same time God is present in the dance. Women and men dance in groups of two or three towards Jesus. God and man in Jesus Christ, male and female, Mary and Martha, the Ten Virgins – the harmony of the differences that is so important in Balinese culture has been balanced in Darsane's work in a sophisticated manner.

Yet after the 2004 tsunami and the Bali bombings in 2002 and 2005, this very harmony has been enduringly disturbed. Darsane's style and colours have changed under this impression. In *Rain of Blood* (2004; Figure 12), the crucified Jesus is dancing in front of an imaginary cross. Red colour is running over the canvas. Behind this blood rain, the impenitent and penitent thieves are visible to the left and right of Jesus as shadowy *wayang* figures. In the Gethsemane painting *Empty Stare* (2004; Figure 13), Jesus seems to be troubled by the suffering of the two children in front of him rather than his own. They have empty rice bowls standing in front of them. The little boy forms dancing *mudras* with his fingers and is about to get up and dance his grief. In the background, fragments of semi-abstract Balinese temple architecture and fishing boats are visible, reminiscent of Darsane's earlier paintings.¹³ Interesting is a side

12. See Volker Küster, *Zwischen Pancasila und Fundamentalismus: Christliche Kunst in Indonesien*, Leipzig 2016, 93–106.

13. Indian artist of Dalit background Solomon Raj (1921–2019) has in his woodcuts in a similar way combined issues of liberation and religion and created a form of cultural-



Figure 11 (above).
 Nyoman Darsane,
 Sermon by the
 Seaside, 1988.

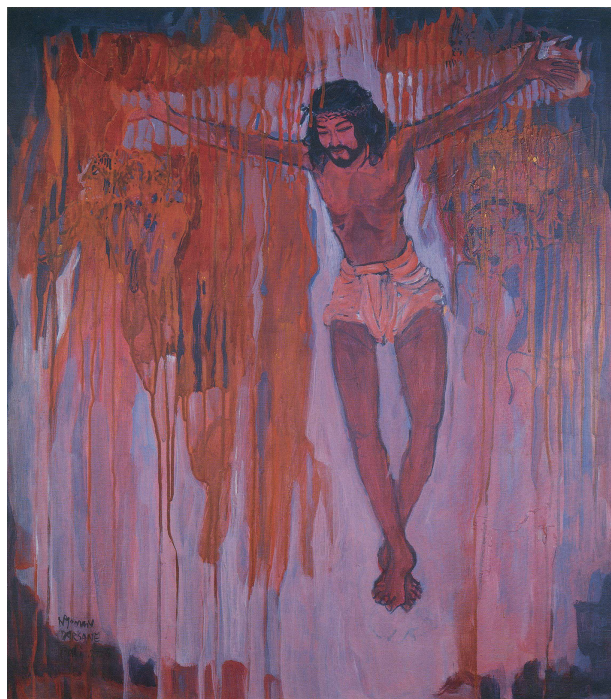


Figure 12 (left).
 Nyoman Darsane,
 Rain of Blood, 2004.



Figure 13. Nyoman Darsane, *Empty Stare*, 2004.



Figure 14. Nyoman Darsane, *Five Minutes before the Fall*, 1980s.



Figure 15. Donatus Moiwend, Cathedral of Jayapura.



Figure 16. Donatus Moiwend, Hawaii-Chapel.

glance at Darsane's creation scene *Five Minutes before the Fall* (1980s; Figure 14). Adam and Eve are dancing naked under the tree of knowledge. The animals are fleeing in all directions. The two dragons that hold the turtle on which the island of Bali rests have loosened their grip and the ground is shaken. This ancient Balinese creation myth is blended here with the biblical narrative. When the tsunami hit Thailand, the animals flew into the hinterland while the tourists went towards the sea to take pictures and drowned. There is a hidden wisdom in this painting already long before the catastrophe happened.

The paintings and murals by Donatus Moiwend (1947–2018), a self-taught artist, are an expression of the resistance of the Papuans against the colonization by a third-world country with the complicity of the American empire. At first sight, the murals above the entrance doors inside the cathedral of Jayapura looked like Western orientalist depictions of the biblical stories. The good shepherd appears as a Palestinian Arab dressed with *khu-fiya* and *caftan* (Figure 15).¹⁴ For the artist, however, the discovery that Jesus was not white opens the door to imagining a Papuan Jesus. In his studio at the Roman Catholic orphanage Panti Asnan in Hawaii, outside of Jayapura, Moiwend designed the interior and the iconographic programme of the chapel. On one of the door panels, Jesus is depicted as a Papuan with white body paintings (Figure 16), an expression of Papuan Pride in line with the slogan “Black is beautiful”.¹⁵ The identificatory imperative of intercultural theology leads to the discovery of the presence of Christ among the people suffering from natural disasters, terror, or neo-colonialism and gives them new hope.

Russia – Between the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow once described the election of Vladimir Putin as president of Russia as a “miracle of God” for the Russian Orthodox Church. Putin has repaid him with wholehearted support, including state censorship

religious resistance. In both cases the identificatory imperative is opening up an interreligious dimension. See Volker Küster, “Renunciation of Inculturation as Aesthetic Resistance: The Indian Artist Solomon Raj Seen in a New Light”, *Exchange* 30 (2001), 359–371, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157254301X00237>; Volker Küster, “The Arts of Buddhist-Christian-Encounter”, in Carola Roloff, Wolfram Weisse & Michael Zimmermann (eds.), *Buddhism in Dialogue with Contemporary Societies*, Münster 2021, 63–83.

14. The cathedral has in the meantime been demolished and replaced by a new building.

15. In the multi-channel video-installation *The Lighting Testimonies* (2007), Amar Kanwar tackles the raping of Naga women by the Indian army, giving them a voice. Similar to the Papuan case, the military of a third-world country is here oppressing an ethnic group that is predominantly Christian. See Bendangjungshi, *Confessing Christ in the Naga Context: Towards a Liberating Ecclesiology*, Münster 2011.

of the arts.¹⁶ The close link between church, territory, and nation, which goes back to the time of the tsars through the founding of the Moscow Patriarchate by Joseph Stalin (1878–1953) in 1943, is also reflected in the unconditional support for the military invasion of Ukraine. Patriarch Kirill even declared in sermons that it has “metaphysical significance” and that dying in this “Holy War” “washes away all the sins”.¹⁷

The artistic intervention of the punk band Pussy Riot in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, the central place of worship of the Russian Orthodox Church, in 2012 must be seen in this context. The performance of their “Punk Prayer” in the altar area reserved for priests lasted only forty seconds before they were overpowered by security forces.¹⁸ The three founders of this artist collective – Nadya Tolokonnikova, Yekaterina Samutsevich, and Maria Alyokhina – were then put on trial and sentenced to two years of hard labour for “hooliganism out of religious hatred”.¹⁹ The sentence against Samutsevich was revised in the second instance, and as part of an amnesty in the run-up to the Olympic Games, the other two were also released three months before serving their prison sentences.

The artists wore colourful knitted masks during their actions, by their own admission, so as not to market their female faces. The rest of their clothing is equally colourful. Maria Alyokhina states: “We purposefully

16. Partly translated and revised from Volker Küster, “Konfessionskunde im Kontext Interkultureller Theologie”, in Mareile Lasogga & Michael Roth (eds.), *Konfessionskunde im 21. Jahrhundert: Bestandsaufnahmen, Herausforderungen, Perspektiven*, Leipzig 2021, 166–180. See also Michail Ryklin, *Mit dem Recht des Stärkeren: Russische Kultur in Zeiten der ‘gelenkten Demokratie’*, Frankfurt 2006; Sandra Frimmel, *Kunsturteile: Gerichtsprozesse gegen Kunst in Russland nach der Perestroika*, Vienna 2015. In 1998, still under Boris Yeltsin (1931–2007), the artist Avdey Ter-Oganjan was indicted for anti-nationalist and religious machinations. In his performance “The Young Godless One”, he offered to desecrate icons for payment at a Moscow art fair.

17. Grayson Quay, “War in Ukraine Is a ‘Metaphysical’ Battle against a Civilization Built on ‘Gay Parades’, Russian Orthodox Leader Says”, *The Week*, 7 March 2022, <https://theweek.com/russo-ukrainian-war/1011020/war-in-ukraine-is-a-metaphysical-battle-against-a-civilization-built-on>; Jan Leonid Bornstein, “Moscow Patriarch Kirill: War Has a Metaphysical Significance against Gay Parade”, *The European Times*, 6 March 2022, <https://europeantimes.news/2022/03/moscow-patriarch-kirill-war-has-a-metaphysical-significance-against-gay-parade/>; “Opferbereitschaft wäscht Sünden ab?”, *Domradio*, 26 September 2022, <https://www.domradio.de/artikel/kyrill-verspricht-gefallenen-soldaten-suendenvergebung>; “Patriarch Kyrill: Gefallenen Soldaten werden die Sünden erlassen”, *katolisch.de*, 26 September 2022, <https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/41188-patriarch-kyrill-gefallenen-soldaten-werden-die-suenden-erlassen>; Brendan Cole, “Ukraine Is Now ‘Holy War’, Russian Church Declares”, *Newsweek*, 28 March 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-war-holy-1884577>.

18. Pussy Riot, “Punk Prayer – [Mother of God, Putin Put!]”, YouTube video, 1:55, 19 August 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1s-ZN2yZzWw>. See also Laurie Penny, *Pussy Riot! Ein Punk-Gebet für Freiheit*, Hamburg 2012; Joachim Willems, *Pussy Riots Punk-Gebet: Religion, Recht und Politik in Russland*, Berlin 2013.

19. Penny, *Pussy Riot*, 10.

chose the day for our performance. It was Maslenitsa, Butter Week, with the traditional costuming and dancing.”²⁰ The thrust of their protest is clearly Putin, but the location of their performance was equally carefully chosen. Putin uses the Orthodox Church as part of his post-Soviet national-chauvinist state ideology, and church leaders enthusiastically orchestrate this. It was this abuse of the Orthodox faith that Pussy Riot wanted to denounce. This is also expressed in the lyrics of the song:

Virgin Mary, Mother of God, banish Putin
Banish Putin, banish Putin!

Congregations genuflect
Black robes brag, golden epaulettes
Freedom’s phantom’s gone to heaven
Gay Pride’s chained and in detention

The head of the KGB, their chief saint
Leads protesters to prison under escort
Don’t upset His Saintship, ladies
Stick to making love and babies

Crap, crap, this godliness crap!
Crap, crap, this holiness crap!
Virgin Mary, Mother of God
Become a feminist, we pray thee
Become a feminist, we pray thee

Bless our festering bastard-boss
Let black cars parade the Cross
The Missionary’s in class for cash
Meet him there, and pay his stash

Patriarch Gundyaev believes in Putin
Better believe in God, you vermin!
Fight for rights, forget the rite²¹ –

20. Penny, *Pussy Riot*, 43.

21. In November 2011, the Russian Orthodox Church organized an exhibition of one of its most important relics, the Holy Belt of Mary from the Vatopedi Monastery in the monastic republic of Athos and people lined up to kiss it. The reference to “rite” implies that the coverage of the crowds in Moscow distracted attention from the protests against Putin in the run-up to the Duma elections. See Penny, *Pussy Riot*, 19; Alfred Kueppers, “Virgin Mary’s Belt Arrives in Moscow before Election”, *Reuters*, 19 November 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/>

Join our protest, Holy Virgin

Virgin Mary, Mother of God, banish Putin, banish Putin
Virgin Mary, Mother of God, we pray thee, banish him!²²

The song is a prayer to Mary, that she may expel Putin and become a feminist.²³ This is done out of the conviction that she is already on the side of the protesters. At the same time, the artists bitterly denounce corruption among Orthodox clergy and the patriarch's *mésalliance* with Putin. His polemics against women who want to have abortions are also exposed, as is the discrimination and persecution of homosexuals by the state and the church. Christian reactions in Europe were often in favour of the Russian Orthodox Church and Putin.²⁴ The sentence was felt to be too harsh, but the charge of hurting religious feelings seemed quite justified. The idea of interpreting the performance as a reenactment of the cleansing of the Temple (Mark 11:15–19) obviously did not cross the mind of church leaders.

Pussy Riot also have come to the fore with subversive statements against the male bonding of Putin and Trump and stormed the Trump Tower in New York in 2017. A play and video, "Make America Great Again", castigates the nationalism and chauvinism of the two.²⁵ In the video, Nadya Tolokonnikova poses as the anchor woman of a CNN-trimmed news broadcast about Trump's election success, then as Trump himself in the Oval Office, cowboy boots laid on the presidential desk with her legs spread wide. Finally, in a sadomasochistic scene, her scantily clad body is checked by two Trump clones in police uniforms for what Trump believes are ideal body measurements for women. As the embodiment of various persecuted

article/idUSTRE7AIoSY/.

22. Carol Rumens, "Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer Is Pure Protest Poetry", *The Guardian*, 20 August 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/20/pussy-riot-punk-prayer-lyrics>. See also Jeffrey Tayler, "What Pussy Riot's 'Punk Prayer' Really Said", *The Atlantic*, 8 November 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/what-pussy-riots-punk-prayer-really-said/264562/>; Moddi, "Punk Prayer", *Unsongs*, <https://www.moddi.no/lyrics/#punkprayer>, accessed 2024-03-22.

23. Willems, *Pussy Riots Punk-Gebet*, 32, points out that the Russian *pank-moleben* might be better translated as "punk devotion".

24. Matthias Drobinski, "Opfersein ist kein Verdienst", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 10 November 2012, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/luther-preis-kandidat-pussy-riot-opfersein-ist-kein-verdienst-1.1519665>; Julia Jüttner, "Jesus wäre an der Seite von Pussy Riot", *Der Spiegel*, 24 October 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/wittenberg-lutherpreis-fuer-pussy-riot-nominierung-wankt-a-862972.html>; Bernhard Honnigfort, "Triumph einer perversen Theologie", *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 18 January 2019, <https://www.fr.de/politik/triumph-einer-perversen-theologie-11293578.html>.

25. Pussy Riot, "Make America Great Again (Official Music Video)", YouTube video, 4:56, 27 October 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-bKF030o2o>.

minorities, she is branded accordingly in several successive scenes. One of the latest videos, “Mama Don’t Watch TV” (2022), a response to the war on Ukraine, castigates Putin and his entourage as well as the war propaganda and calls for international sanctions and a tribunal.²⁶

Pussy Riot stage a new dimension of political theology in the public space. Their theological interventions are directed against the *mésalliance* of the Russian Orthodox Church and the state; Patriarch Kirill and Putin are equally targeted by their criticism. Not only the text of the “Punk Prayer” but also their statements around the trial make it clear that they draw from Christian faith.²⁷ Moreover, after the performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, they explicitly apologized if they had hurt the religious feelings of the faithful, but not for their attempt to remind the church of its actual mission. From a feminist theological perspective, Mary, the mother of God, enters centre stage.

Germany – Between Anti-Judaism and Racism

The *documenta fifteen*,²⁸ part of what is probably the biggest contemporary art show series in the world that is staged every five years in the German provincial city Kassel and lasts 100 days, became a catalyst for the smoldering conflict around issues of antisemitism and racism in German history and culture.²⁹ Already in the run-up, since January 2022, there was suspicion about the extent to which *documenta fifteen* might be propagating anti-Judaism or antisemitism, without the responsible parties reacting adequately. The list of sympathizers of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement among the *documenta* management and artists was long. As the first names of artist collectives circulated, the invitation of the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah, named after the Arab reform pedagogue and Hitler-admirer Khalil Sakakini (1878–1953), caused a stir. It is part of the collective “The Question of Funding”, which in turn invited the Eltiqa Group of Contemporary Art from Gaza.

26. Laura Snapes, “Pussy Riot Song Protests against War in Ukraine and Calls for Putin to Be Prosecuted”, *The Guardian*, 24 December 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/24/pussy-riot-song-protests-against-war-in-ukraine-and-calls-for-putin-to-be-prosecuted>.

27. See, for example, letter to Patriarch Kirill in Penny, *Pussy Riot*, 29–32; Nadya Tolokonnikova quotes from the Gospel of Luke in Penny, *Pussy Riot*, 23. Maria Alyokhina was a volunteer in Orthodox youth work. Willems, *Pussy Riots Punk-Gebet*, 50.

28. “Lumbung Members and Artists”, *documenta fifteen*, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung-members-artists/>, accessed 2024-03-22; *documenta fifteen: Handbook*, Berlin 2022.

29. Partly translated and revised from Volker Küster, “Der Kunst das Wort zurück: Wege aus der Misere der documenta 15”, *Zeitzeichen*, <https://zeitzeichen.net/node/9980>, accessed 2024-03-22. See also Andreas Mertin, “Documenta 15: Die Großausstellung als Problem”, *Deutschlandfunk Nova*, 18 November 2022, <https://www.deutschlandfunknova.de/beitrag/documenta-fifteen-von-antisemitismus-terrorpropaganda-und-missmanagement>.

With “Guernica Gaza”, Mohammed Al-Hawajri, one of Eltiqa’s representatives, contributed one of the most controversial propaganda works to *documenta fifteen*. The narrative implemented here portrays Gaza as an occupied country, colonized by Israel. An agrarian Palestinian society is harassed by the Israeli military. Under the motto “Masters of Art – Masters of War”, Al-Hawajri has taken classics of modernity, such as Vincent van Gogh’s (1853–1890) *Potato Eaters*, or works the choice of which is particularly perfidious in his colonization of Jewish stories and imagery as in the case of Marc Chagall’s (1887–1985) *Over the City* and Jean-François Millet’s (1814–1875) *Harvesters at Rest (Ruth and Boaz)*. He deconstructed them in Photoshop, rearranged them, and collaged them with photographs of the Israeli army or, in Chagall’s image, the Israeli West Bank barrier. This narrative was also floated elsewhere at *documenta fifteen* in flickering documentaries from the 1970s, the “Tokyo Reels Film Festival”. The film reels were allegedly given to the Subversive Film Collective in Tokyo by Red Army activist Masao Adachi. A brochure from the *Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie* with drawings by the Syrian artist Burhan Karkoutly takes the same line and plays with the antisemitic topos of Jews as child murderers.

The biggest scandal, however, was caused by the banner *People’s Justice* by the Indonesian artist collective Taring Padi, who were invited by the curator collective Ruangrupa. Strangely enough, the huge banner was installed clandestine on Friedrichsplatz only after the days of the press preview. Attentive viewers discovered a pig figure – the proverbial Jew sow – with Mossad signet and a Jew with temple curls, raff teeth, and SS runes on his hat as the mastermind of the violence depicted in the picture.

Completely missing from this politicized *documenta fifteen*, however, was criticism of the violence of Hamas and the PLO, which it ousted, as well as the instrumentalization of the Palestinians by the Arab states against the right of the state of Israel to exist and the 2,000-year history of anti-Judaism and antisemitism. The fact that the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are illegal under international law, that the Israeli army is cracking down on protesters and civilians alike, and that the Mossad is interfering in the internal affairs of other states must be open to criticism, as German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier also conceded in his opening speech. But this does not justify a completely one-sided portrayal of an extremely complicated conflict that ultimately aims to eradicate the state of Israel and the Jewish people. Tarik Padi’s lukewarm apology that they did not take into account the particular sensitivities of the German context with the presentation of the banner ignores that their depiction of

the Jews is also antisemitic in Indonesia or Adelaide, where the banner was exhibited already back in 2002.

The Executive Vice President of the International Auschwitz Committee, Christoph Heubner, has spoken out on this matter with great clarity: “It is high time to start a conversation within the framework of this documenta, to hear the artists from which worldview these images were created in this way, and on the part of documenta to explain publicly why these images meet with resistance and rejection here [in the German context].”³⁰ However, there seemed to be no willingness to talk about either.

A way out of the misery and appropriate to the *documenta* spirit would have been a dialogue of the images themselves. The works inspired by the spirit of liberation to be discovered at this *documenta* would then have entered into a dialogue with the propagandistic representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and questioned them as to whose suffering and persecution is being concealed here and of whose paramilitary as well as state violence against Jews and Palestinians alike we hear nothing about. In this respect, the work of the Mexican-Spanish artist Erick Beltrán, *Manifold* (2022) at the Museum for Sepulchral Culture, could have pointed the way. Three banners in English and German, highlighted in colour and by their taciturnity in the otherwise word-heavy presentation across several floors and rooms, give food for thought: “Myth allows us to return to the body beyond”, “The contract promised to escape time, power to escape history”, “The past is so terrible, it can’t be forgotten. The present is the past”.

The cultural memory that racism is a construct of the “Christian West” to exterminate its Jewish minority that originated at the time of the Re/conquista, the reconquest of Spain from the Moors, and found its way into the “New World” to be conquered, seems to be shrouded in history. However, the modern-day consequences can still be explored in the Caribbean. During *documenta fifteen* the artist collective Atis Rezistans presented a “Ghetto Biennale” in the former industrial and workers’ suburb of Bettenhausen in Kassel, itself plagued by structural change. The collective comes from the inferno of Haiti, a “failed state” that was forced to pay reparations by the former colonial power France after the successful slave revolution in 1804 and today is left to its own devices as an agricultural country without any raw materials worth mentioning by the world community. In and around St. Kunigundis, a Roman Catholic church that is no longer used but not yet profaned, the ghetto artists staged Afro-Haitian voodoo, with a pandemonium of figures with human skulls, prominently in the altar space also

30. “Auschwitz Komitee zu documenta: ‘Total verfahren Situation’”, *Zeit Online*, 21 June 2022, <https://www.zeit.de/news/2022-06/21/auschwitz-komitee-zu-documenta-total-verfahren-situation>.

depicting Mary and Jesus. This initially inspires the intercultural theologian to think about syncretistic aesthetics: what happens in this “in-between space”? Would this be possible in a Catholic church in Haiti, or does it require distance and alienation? How do the local Catholic faithful react to this? Looking over the fence of the church garden, however, another question arises: To what extent could liberation theology lead to a dialogue about social marginalization processes? Even if, of course, here again a distance opens up between the absolute chaos of the Haitian ghetto and the Hartz IV biographies in Bettenhausen. Haiti is what the “discovery” by Columbus (1451–1506) made of the island he called Hispaniola. Genocide of the native Taino population and consequently the abduction of African slaves as cheap labour, is the story behind the Ghetto Biennale. If the pictures would speak and enter into a dialogue, then art would finally have the word back. “The present is the past”, as Beltrán put it.

The decision to appoint for the first time a curatorial collective from the Global South, Ruangrupa from Jakarta, Indonesia, as artistic directors of *documenta fifteen* was based on the idea of challenging the still Western-dominated art and exhibition business. However, *Documenta II* (2002), curated by the Nigerian Okwui Enwezor (1963–2019), already provided a brilliant example of how postcolonialism can be productively fed into the art discourse. Enwezor succeeded in orchestrating an intercultural dialogue on a grand stage at the highest level.

Ruangrupa has clearly taken a different path. The collective working method has been elevated to a structural principle of the *documenta*. In this way, the curators wanted to create a network structure. Invited collectives were in turn allowed to invite other collectives and occasionally individual artists to cooperate. The Indonesian rice storehouse *lumbung* became a metaphor for this approach. Here, the harvest surplus is stored for collective supply. Another important concept is *nonkrong*, “to hang out”. Ultimately, the exhibition organizers must adhere to their own curatorial principles on an intercultural basis. Whoever rejects the Western art establishment must not, conversely, take refuge behind artistic freedom and autonomous art for his openly displayed political propaganda. Those who propagate *lumbung* and *nonkrong* must ask themselves why not even critical Israeli artists have been invited. In the end, *documenta fifteen* has done a disservice to the cause of the “third world”, in order to use this strategic term in contrast to the trendy term “Global South”, and is also damaging its artists, who have brought great works with them. This last example again broadens the scope interreligiously to the Abrahamic faiths; still memory of the victims, Christology, and Mariology keep playing a role.

Towards a Liberating Hermeneutics of Art

At the end of our intercultural journey around the globe we have experienced different stages of democratization processes and the role of artistic activism and political engagement therein, as well as its theological implications. To sum up, we now look at similarities and differences between the contexts introduced here, as well as the function of art and theology in coping with the conflicts described.

Contextual Perspectives

South Africa and South Korea have undergone more recent changes from conflict to post-conflict societies, still their young democracies are fragile and overshadowed by the powers and atrocities of the past. In Indonesia and Russia, the conflicts are still acute. In Germany, the Nazi dictatorship and the short period of colonialism (c. 1880–1919) at first sight seem to be conflicts of the past in comparison to the other cases. Yet the monstrosity of the industrial extinction of six million Jews cannot be wiped out even by coming to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) but has to be kept alive in the cultural memory as a constant warning. While the Holocaust and the trauma of Nazi dictatorship have been at least addressed, even if under massive obstruction, the colonial atrocities have been minimized to a mere episode and buried deeply in our cultural memory.

The current delicate discursive constellation is that the colonial past is haunting Germany and at the same time right-wing populism is not only fostering racism but also trying to minimize or even deny the Nazi crimes. This is orchestrated on the left by relativizing the Holocaust by comparing it to the colonial mass murder and turning the former victims into perpetrators regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the prevailing identity wars Jews have all of a sudden become declared “white”. The playing out of antisemitism and racism against each other neglects the historical roots of racism in the Christian pogroms against the Jews. Most of the conflicts dealt with here are socio-economical and politically motivated, where racism and fundamentalism intersect, a cultural-religious dimension is added.

Artistic Perspectives

In modernity, artists have frequently used their skills as a means of resistance to protest social injustices and to support the struggle for human rights and democracy. The discussions whether art should be political or not are tireless. From an aesthetic point of view, it is the artistic quality of the work that is emphasized. Yet the relationship between ethics and aesthetics cannot be taken for granted any longer, but has to be reconstructed in the concrete

case. I have developed elsewhere three ethical criteria: *vision*, *distance*, and *unscathedness* as guiding principles that are aligned with the perspectives of the different players in the game.³¹ If the vision of the artist is bad, so is the work of art. This criterion I owe to Mary Devereaux and her reception of the work of Nazi-propaganda artist Leni Riefenstahl (1902–2003).³² The work of art therefore has to evoke a certain distance to its subject. Finally, if the observer is hurt physically or traumatized psychologically this is also a criterium of suspension. These three players – artist, artwork, and public – are also connected to the three classical hermeneutical perspectives:

The Artists – “behind” the picture: Artists are often at the forefront of protest movements; they use their talent for a just cause. Their aesthetic resistance is a powerful means to communicate the issues at stake among the people. In post-conflict situations, artists contribute with their works to coping with trauma and foster reconciliation. In the latter case it is frequently rather self-reconciliation that leads to resilience. Protest movements are regularly concurrently culture movements that are reconstructing identities or looking for alternative forms of expression. The dialogue of the artists sometimes leads to the establishing of artist collectives.

The Artworks – “in” the picture: The artworks disclose injustice and cruelties to the public. In post-conflict situations, they keep the memory of the victims awake. A dialogue of the pictures can reveal similarities and differences and pave the way to deep solidarity between different protest and emancipation movements.

The Public – “in front of” the picture: By being exposed to the artworks, the public gets conscientized, to refer to Paulo Freire’s (1921–1997) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.³³ They develop a habitus of empathy for the victims. In post-conflict situations, art becomes a means of empowerment. The dialogue of the audience can translate the artwork into practice.

Theological Perspectives

Artists in resi/stance have proven not to be only agents of protest but also of memory and reconciliation. Theologically, memory and hope, the remembrance of the victims in the light of the dangerous memory of the crucified,³⁴ and the hope in the presence of the risen Christ among the poor

31. Küster, *God/Terror*, 16–17.

32. See Mary Devereaux, “Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*”, in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, Cambridge 1998, 227–256, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511663888.009>.

33. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York 1970.

34. Johann Baptist Metz, *Memoria passionis: Ein provozierendes Gedächtnis in pluralistischer Gesellschaft*, Freiburg 2006.

and oppressed, have emerged as the overarching generative themes in coping with conflicts. Self-reconciliation, on the other hand, allows the victims' first steps towards Pantopia as an alternative vision to the "New Normal" in post-conflict situations,³⁵ where the perpetrators have no intention to repent. These generative themes can be frequently found not only in Christian but also in secular political art or even art inspired by other religions and be interpreted through a liberative intercultural hermeneutics. ▲

SUMMARY

Artists are often at the forefront of protest movements. Their aesthetic resistance is a powerful means to communicate the issues at stake among the people. In post-conflict situations, artists contribute with their works to coping with trauma and foster reconciliation. Yet the relationship between ethics and aesthetics cannot be taken for granted any longer but must be reconstructed in the concrete case. In this article, I investigate twentieth-century contextual art from an intercultural perspective. Theologically, memory and hope, the remembrance of the victims in the light of the dangerous memory of the crucified, and the hope in the presence of the risen Christ among the poor and oppressed, have emerged as the overarching generative themes in coping with conflicts. Self-reconciliation, on the other hand, allows the victims' first steps towards Pantopia in post-conflict situations, where the perpetrators have no intention to repent.

35. Volker Küster, "Pandemonium, Pandemethics, Pantopia: What's in a Word?", *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 47 (2023), 478–488, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393231182334>.