

## Art as sacrament

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### Abstract

Inspired by Johan Cilliers' roots in the silence and emptiness of the Karoo, Marcel Barnard explores in this article to what extent Christian Boltanski's modern art exposition *AFTER/NA* in the Oude Kerk (Amsterdam) can be viewed as "sacramental art". To do this, Barnard makes use of Louis-Marie Chauvet's sacramental theology, in which the power of language to call beings – including human symbols – "into presence" has a central place. It is shown that Boltanski's interventions in the Oude Kerk call the unseen, the absence, into presence – by remembering the thousands of dead buried beneath the floor, by making wilting life visible and by raising the question of what absence means. By doing this, Boltanski makes the visitor aware of the scandalous, ambivalent and vulnerable character of the sacrament. Barnard concludes that Boltanski's installations may be called sacramental works of art.

### Keywords

*Sacramental art; Christian Boltanski; Louis-Marie Chauvet; AFTER/NA*

Aesthetics offers a fundamental structure for an imaginative liturgy.<sup>1</sup>

Johan Cilliers

## 1. From the Karoo to Amsterdam and back

During a northern summer a few years ago, Johan and Elna Cilliers stayed in our house in Leiden, the Netherlands, while we were on vacation. They stopped on one of their journeys throughout European cities. Johan made my little studio his home. Coming home, I found three canvases he had

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1 Johan Cilliers, *Dancing with Deity. Re-Imagining the Beauty of Worship* (Wellington: Bible Media, 2012), 238.

painted and left to dry: images of the Karoo – a silent, dry, rocky half-desert, a landscape of countless nuances of yellow and red ochre; a dusty universe of small farms and wind pumps standing like beacons of hope for water in an otherwise inhospitable landscape; eternal spaces where time is a stranger. Johan is rooted in that landscape, and his theology is rooted in that emptiness and silence; it is born from silence, and the nuances that colour it emerge from that void.

In a beautiful article, Johan reflects on silence as a theological and anthropological value.<sup>2</sup> I cannot keep from thinking that the article is also a self-reflection. Silence, he states, is a phenomenon that lies within itself; it is a world of its own that reaches to the farthest regions and that is, at the same time, intangible but close to our bodies. Language is always related to silence. Words that carry weight are born from silence. For agreement, he quotes Picard: “real speech is in fact nothing but the resonance of silence”.<sup>3</sup> I want to understand the sentence as John Caputo understands silence in Heidegger’s philosophy of language: silence “can occur only within the framework and boundaries of language”.<sup>4</sup> Authentic language includes silence, is poetry and, as such, is opposed to functional, technical language. There is no absolute silence, no complete replacement of language by silence, as with the great mystics. For Johan, silence unexpectedly vibrates, and bursts open to grant passage to being and eventually to the Advent of the divine. Analogously, we can say that colours are born from the void. The artist stares at the white canvas that slowly fills itself with colour until the rhythm of the nuances of colour – in its own law that transcends the abilities of the painter – gives way to a being that itself remains forever elusive. Again, the void is no absolute void. The modest presence of a small farm building and wind pumps creates the void.

Searching for a topic to write about in this *festschrift* for Johan and his love for emptiness and silence of the Karoo, as well as bustling European cities,

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2 Johan Cilliers, “Silence is golden. Liturgy beyond the edge of language,” *Praktiese Teologie in Suid-Afrika* 23(2008):62–76; compare Marcel Barnard, Johan Cilliers, Cas Wepener, *Worship in the Nework Culture. Fields and Methods, Concepts and Metaphors*, Liturgia Condenda 28 (Louvain/Paris/Walpole MA: Peeters, 2014), 160–163.

3 M. Picard, *The World of Silence*, Humanist Library (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1952), 15.

4 John D. Caputo, *The mystical element in Heidegger’s thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 224.

I came across the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam, which is interwoven with my own life. This 15<sup>th</sup> century church in the Dutch capital is the perfect symbol of emptiness and silence, art and religion. It is a forgotten void in a crazy city, an overlooked corner in the middle of the tumultuous red-light district. In the famous book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera describes this church: “Inside the Old Church, all that is left of the Gothic style is the high, bare, white walls, the columns, the vaulting and the windows. There is not a single image on the walls, not a single piece of statuary anywhere. The church is as empty as a gymnasium. ... Centuries ago, the Calvinist faith turned the cathedral into a hangar, its only function being to keep the prayers of the faithful safe from rain and snow”.<sup>5</sup> That might be so, but in recent years, the church has also become a museum for high-profile modern art projects while remaining a place of worship. This development raises the question of how religion and art are interconnected or, more precisely, how Christian faith and modern art are related. Formulated a bit more vigorously, can the Word also become flesh in art? Does art have sacramental value? In this article, I focus on one art project in the church.

## 2. Question and aim

That religion and art are connected in some way or another is evident. After all, religiosity manifests itself in all sorts of artistic forms of expression: poetry, smells, music, dance and images. Religiously affected human persons have no other potential means to mediate their religiosity than symbolic language, symbolic actions and symbols. And, vice versa, their religiosity is not accessible to themselves or others except through symbolic language, symbolic actions and symbols. We must keep in mind that language is *always* symbolic because as Lacan has shown, it mediates not only the self to the self but also the other in its/his/her strangeness and familiarity. The deepest layers of language are poetic; that is, they evoke a reality and invite it to come into being and present itself.

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5 Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1984), 62.

We can next deepen the proposition that religion and art are interrelated in one way or another by *theologically* asking whether art can also be a *visible sign of divine grace* – in other words, by questioning whether art can also be *sacramental*. Both philosophical and theological perspectives suggest that this is indeed possible. We thus enter a Christian religious and dogmatic discourse. I, however, join this discourse from the concrete example of the intersection of art and religion or, rather, art and Christian faith. To clarify this relationship, I, as stated, chose the example of this monumental church in the centre of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, which has the formal status of a museum and is owned by a foundation but is also the site where a Christian congregation meets on a weekly basis. The church is a space of exhibitions of both modern art and Christian worship. The aim of this article is to clarify the possible sacramental value of modern art.

In this church in Amsterdam, there is good cooperation between the Christian congregation and the art professionals. The French newspaper *Le Monde*, in an article about the exhibition and Jacqueline Grandjean, the director of the foundation that owns and maintains the church, writes: “Over time, the pastor who officiates there has become ... her co-curator. He convinced the hesitating and the believers that contemporary art was not an “intruder” and that it was even possible to reconcile exhibitions and worship”.<sup>6</sup> It has yet to be seen whether reconciliation is the right notion here, but we can at least state that the works of art and the worshipping community in the Oude Kerk have entered a fascinating dialogue.

### 3. Arts and sacrament – Louis-Marie Chauvet

Modernity and, in a radicalised form, postmodernity have formed a clear idea that symbolising actions are places where God may be mediated and come into being in the world while at the same time hiding him/herself. Thus, the concrete human existence is imagined as the location of God. We will discuss that idea with reference to Louis-Marie Chauvet, a Roman Catholic sacramental theologian.

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6 Philippe Dagen, “La marche funèbre de Christian Boltanski,” *Le Monde*, January 19, 2018, 18 (translation mine, MB).

I chose this approach to be able to reconstruct the continuities and discontinuities between the modern art installations in the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam and the sacramental worship celebrated there. That the Christian congregation is located within a specific Christian discourse is self-evident. The art installations in the church move on the border between the sacred and the secular, not only because the church currently has the status of a museum but also because the building was built for worship and at the same time represents the medieval society with its guilds and administrators, the Burgundian era, the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands and its colonial activities through the United East Indian Company and its sea heroes in the various wars – in short, because the building itself is located in the never-ending dynamic of the sacred and the secular.<sup>7</sup> All the artists invited to present in the church are asked to respond to the building. Consequently, the installations they construct, in one way or another, reflect the secular and the sacred aspects of the building.

#### 4. Louis-Marie Chauvet, symbol and sacrament

In sacramental theology, I call on Louis-Marie Chauvet as a witness. His *opus magnum* entitled *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (1987), dominates today's discourses of sacramental theology, particularly about the Eucharist.<sup>8</sup> Chauvet bases his sacramental theology on Heidegger's language philosophy. Unlike in classical metaphysics and onto-theology,

it is the word alone that permits the coming into presence, that is, being in which, something can make its appearance as an entity. ... Language is "vocation", an invitation addressed to entities to come into presence while remaining in their absence.<sup>9</sup>

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7 For a detailed description of the church and its history, see: H. Janse, *De Oude Kerk te Amsterdam. Bouwgeschiedenis en restauratie*, Cultuurhistorische Studies (Zeist/Zwolle: Rijksdienst voor de Monumentenzorg/Waanders Uitgevers, 2004).

8 Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament. A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, *Symbole et Sacrement. Un relecture sacramentelle de l'existence chrétienne* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1987), (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995).

9 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 89.

Being “comes into presence”, without ever being able to be grasped or fixed. Moreover, the substantive “word” in this quotation should not be interpreted as exclusively verbal but also as encompassing multiple “mediations”: rituals, traditions, architectural spaces, art works, images, sounds, smells and colours, among others. In short, language refers to the symbolising activities of humankind. Chauvet wants to break out of the classical ontological scheme that controls theology and the doctrine of sacraments, in particular. He ultimately understands coming into presence of God within the philosophical framework of Heidegger’s language philosophy. Consequently, human symbolic acting is part of the gift of divine grace. Gift and return gift are inextricably linked. “Do this” in Jesus’ command to “do this in remembrance of me” is an inseparable part of sacramental grace.

In the context of Chauvet’s discourse on human symbolising action that evokes being to come into presence, he pays attention to Heidegger’s well-known interpretation of Vincent van Gogh’s farmer’s shoes, now in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Chauvet calls for the assistance of the arts to explain what a sacrament is. According to Heidegger, the work of art gives passage to being itself; “the fullness of an essential being” comes into presence in the painting of Van Gogh. The art work shows what the shoes are “in truth”<sup>11</sup>

From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes, the toil of the worker’s tread stares forth. In the crudely solid heaviness of the shoes accumulates the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lies the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its silent gift of the ripening grain, its unexplained self-refusal in

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10 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 116–117. Compare Marcel Barnard, “Aesthetics and Religion,” in *International Handbook of Practical Theology*, “Aesthetics and Religion,” eds. Birgit Weyel, Wilhelm Gräß, Emmanuel Y. Lartey, Cas Wepener (accepted), where I treat the same passage in the context of the relation between religion – rather than sacramentality – and art.

11 Martin Heidegger, *Off the beaten track*, Holzwege (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14–15.

the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, wordless joy at having once more withstood want, trembling before the impending birth and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs *to the earth* and finds protection in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging, the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself.<sup>12</sup>

As stated, Chauvet understands the gift of sacramental grace within the framework of Heidegger's language philosophy. The rite of the Holy Supper gives passage to being itself, now interpreted as divine grace. The Eucharistic bread reveals its trueness (John 6:32) in the Eucharistic rite and mediates *anew, time and again* the word that became flesh in Jesus Christ:

The bread which nourishes human beings in the most human dimension of their humanity is the bread of the *word*, and this word where bread comes-to-presence in communicating itself to others is itself, according to the faith, a mediation *where the Word delivered by God in Jesus Christ* to humanity unto death *takes on flesh*.<sup>13</sup>

The Eucharistic bread is not only bread that nourishes (John 6:5–12); it also reveals itself as the true bread that is shared and fosters fellowship (John 6:8–13). At the same time, the bread presents the bread of heaven, the bread of life; in the Eucharistic bread, the word Jesus Christ is coming anew into presence (John 6:47–51), that is, into our empirical reality.

Mind you, in Chauvet's epistemology of symbolising and language, there is no "truth" behind the mediations of bread and wine, the water of baptism, the letter of holy Scripture, the instituted church. Trapped as we are in classical ontological thinking and its dualism of *signum et res*, spirit and matter, body and mind, divine and human, the Pauline "scandal" of the Christian faith threatens to escape us.

One stumbles, then, on the sacrament, as one stumbles on the body, as one stumbles on the institution, as one stumbles on the letter of the Scriptures – if at least one respects it in its historical and empirical materiality. One

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12 Heidegger, *Off the beaten track*, 14.

13 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 400.

stumbles against these because one harbours a nostalgia for an ideal and immediate presence to one-self, to others and to God.<sup>14</sup>

The Eucharist is God's complete self-emptying. With Chauvet, the church as the physical and vulnerable body of Christ – that is, church members, as well as officials – demonstrates and proves this self-emptying of God in its ethics, its self-sacrificing life of service to others, “the alien, the fatherless and the widow” (Deut 24:20). We would like to state that the church can also underline God's self-emptying in her aesthetic actions.

Now, we first extensively sketch our case.

## **5. Christian Boltanski, NA (AFTER), Oude Kerk Amsterdam, 2017/2018<sup>15</sup>**

In the middle of the oldest part of Amsterdam, in the so-called red-light district, is the Oude Kerk, the city's oldest building. Never been destroyed by fire or war, it shows its uninterrupted history from the Middle Ages to the present day. The history of the city, the country and even Europe – as Amsterdam traditionally was a port city connected to other ports in Europe, and the country once was part of the Burgundian empire – can be read in the coats of arms, stained-glass windows, burial tombs and epitaphs, gravestones, ceiling paintings and inscriptions. In the 1950s, the church, which belonged to the Netherlands Reformed Church, was transferred to a foundation, while the ecclesiastical congregation retained the right to use the church for worship. The church has officially been a museum for a number of years. Director Jacqueline Grandjean organises high-profile and much-discussed exhibitions of contemporary art. The artists are always invited to carry out interventions in the historic building.

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14 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 154.

15 See note 10: I used the same example, abbreviated, in: Marcel Barnard, “Aesthetics and Religion.” For information on the exhibition, see Oude Kerk, *Christian Boltanski*, 24 nov 2017–29 apr 2018 (information leaflet, distributed at the entrance).





In 2017, French artist Christian Boltanski (Paris, 1944) realised the exposition *NA* (Dutch for *AFTER*). In all the installations that made up the exhibition, notions and experiences such as death/life, disappearance/appearance, departure/return and forgetting/remembering played a role. The installations fit into the theme of Boltanski's broader work:

A central theme in Boltanski's work is that every moment of our lives is transformed into a past that is as definitive as death. ... He is interested in the universal transience of the individual and the role of memory to conserve lived experience. ... His perception is shaped by his Jewish ancestry and his experiences of fear and persecution in the tragic events of European history during World War II. Boltanski says, "For me, corpses and photographs and old clothes are all symbols of absence": he feels that by displaying relics of past

times and remembrances, he can reawaken memories in those who view his work.<sup>16</sup>

More concretely, Boltanski designed site-specific installations in the church building that referred to the many names memorialised in the church, particularly on the tomb slabs. The most obvious installations the artist constructed were enormous towers, *Appareils*, huge tombs of agricultural plastic that were higher the more people had been buried beneath the slab. The towers broke the lines of sight in the church and invited visitors to find a way between the tombs as in a labyrinth. When walking among the towers, visitors encountered coats hanging on wooden skeletons, which asked very personal questions when approached: “Are you lonely?” “Tell me, have you suffered?” Visitors were invited to answer: *Prende la Parole*. In the empty nave, local residents’ jackets – *Les Manteaux* – were spread out on the floor. While telling personal stories, they recalled what human beings leave behind, especially after death. In the choir of the church, jackets hung on a number of chairs, as if awaiting – *Attente* – their owners’ return. At the entrance of the church, visitors were handed a book listing the names of the 8,000 people buried in the Oude Kerk between 1396 and 1865. In this way, attention was immediately drawn to the least visible aspect of the enormous space: the names on the grey tombstones forming the church floor and the people buried beneath it.<sup>17</sup> Visitors could read aloud the names, which were sound recorded, and afterwards, the recordings were played in the church choir during the exhibition. In a contrast to the installation title, the names of those who had disappeared forever – *Disparus* – were called up again or, better, commemorated.

This article focuses on art and sacrament, so I pay extra attention to the four installations realised at the places in the church reserved for the two traditional core sacraments of the Christian church: baptism and the Eucharist or Holy Supper. In the small baptistery in the northwest corner of the church, next to the tower entrance, were 158 lights on the floor, as many as the number of days the exhibition lasted. Every day at noon, when

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16 La Biennale di Venezia, *56th International Art Exhibition. All the World's Futures* (Venice: Marsilio Editori s.p.a., 2015), 560.

17 Christian Boltanski, *Names of those who were buried in the oude kerk 1396–1865* (Amsterdam: Oude Kerk, 2017).

the sun was the highest in the sky, one of the lamps went out until finally all were extinguished. *Crépuscule*, the installation was called: (evening) twilight, decay or even ruination.

Running from the tower entrance to the end of the sightline, the high choir once housed the high altar destroyed in 1578 during the Reformation. Now, it holds the table of the Protestant congregation that meets in the building on Sunday and celebrates the Lord's Supper weekly. It is the place where traditionally the coming of Christ in the elements of bread and wine has been celebrated, and consequently, where in the materiality of the church building, the sacred has ultimately and profoundly condensed.

Boltanski designed three installations on or around this spot. Against the wooden screen surrounding the high choir, *Le Manteau* again showed a coat surrounded by burning light bulbs. Illuminated in this location, this coat stood out among all the other in the installations in the church. Behind the wooden screen, in the ambulatory, the film *Animatas Blanc* was projected onto a white wall. The film showed long, wind-stirred rods with small, tinkling Japanese cast-iron bells. The sticks were planted in a white, snowy landscape, which made the film more or less visible on the white wall depending on the amount of daylight. The explanation read: "the name of this movie *Animatas* refers to the altars the original inhabitants of America built on the side of the road to honour their dead. The soft ringing of the bells describes the artist as the sound of the soul".<sup>18</sup> Another installation was positioned on the liturgical table the Protestants use for celebration of Holy Supper. It was called *Autel*, or *Altar*, a clear reference to the vanished altar that once stood on the spot. On the table, a thick layer of flowers slowly wilted throughout the exhibition. To "preserve" the flowers, they were wrapped in plastic foil.

## 6. Worshipping in between the interventions of Boltanski

On one of the last Sundays before Advent, at the end of the liturgical year, when traditional themes such as death and resurrection, destruction

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18 Oude Kerk, *Christian Boltanski*, 4. A similar work from 2014 shows 230 Japanese cast-iron bells attached to long rods that were installed in the Atacama Desert in Chile. The artist attributes them "a mythical value" – La Biennale di Venezia, *56th International Art Exhibition*, 560.

and purification, restoration and return (of Jesus) were at hand, the ecclesiastical congregation designed a service in which the churchgoers passed singing between the towers of agricultural plastic. I was one of the presiders of the service and composed the prayers from excerpts of Jesus's sermon about the last things, as prescribed for that Sunday.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the artwork was emphatically brought into the Christian liturgical narrative, and the artwork allowed it. Conversely, the art installations interrupted the liturgical narrative. In the liturgical composition the sentence from the Sunday's biblical narrative "After the horrors, the sign that heralds the Son of Man will appear in heaven" was highlighted. The title of the exhibition, *NA (AFTER)*, thus received a new interpretation. Conversely, the installations deepened the understanding of *NA/AFTER* in the gospel text: death is a massive force and power, and the voluminous presence of the plastic towers emphasised the non-obviousness of an "after". Or, framed in the language of the liturgical discourse, the revelation of the Son of Man is a radical rupture, a break with the familiar and with what lies within human power.

The service opened with a procession led by the choir and choirmaster through the black, towering tombs. People lost sight of each other and the usually open space, disappeared between the graves and eventually found themselves standing in a large circle in the open space before the choir screen separating the nave from the high choir. There, the opening verses were said, a psalm was sung, and the Kyrie lity was said, each time acclaimed by a sung verse.

### **The Kyrie lity:**

**Minister:** Holy places are being desecrated,

temples will all be thrown down,

not one stone will be left upon the other (Matthew 24:1).

**All (sung):** The end is still to come (Matthew 24:6).

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<sup>19</sup> The Lectionary according to "Gemeenschappelijk Leesrooster" (matching with the Common Lectionary, A-year) prescribed Psalm 50, Matthew 24, 14–35, Psalm 97. As lesson from the gospel we read Matthew 24, 1–2, 3–14 and 27,50–53. Other verses from the chapter were included in the Kyrie-lity and in the Eucharistic prayer.

AFTER the horrors, the sign that heralds the Son of Man will appear in heaven (Matthew 24:30).

**Minister:** Refugees – they flee into the mountains, leave behind their homes and possessions,

their coats on the land,

– coats, jackets, everywhere,

who were wearing them? Where are they?

Fled, disappeared, killed, drowned (Matthew 24:16, 18, 20).

**All:** The end is still to come.

AFTER the horrors, the sign that heralds the Son of Man will appear in heaven.

**Minister:** They flee, pregnant women with a child at the breast; they flee in the cutting wind

through an ice-cold winter (Matthew 24:19).

**All:** The end is still to come.

AFTER the horrors, the sign that heralds the Son of Man will appear in heaven.

**Minster:** Wars and rumours of wars,

nation goes to war against nation,

kingdom against kingdom (Matthew 24:6a–7).

**All:** The end is still to come.

AFTER the horrors, the sign that heralds the Son of Man will appear in heaven.

**Minister:** Famines in many places (Matthew 24:7).

**All:** AFTER the horrors, the sign that heralds the Son of Man will appear in heaven.

The end is still to come.

**Minister:** The earth trembles (Matthew 24:7).

**All:** AFTER the horrors, the sign that heralds the Son of Man will appear in heaven.

The end is still to come.

**Minister:** False messiahs and false prophets produce great signs and wonders, mislead God's chosen ones (Matthew 24:24).

**All:** AFTER the horrors, the sign that heralds the Son of Man will appear in heaven.

The end is still to come.

**Minister:** Death everywhere, dead everywhere, a labyrinth of tombs, a jungle of towering black tombs, as high as the number of deaths underneath.

**All:** The end is still to come.

In the context of this article, of course, the celebration of the Holy Supper was also important. As usual, the congregation went to the high choir, where they stood in a circle around the table for the weekly celebration of the Holy Supper. After the offertory, presentation of gifts, intercessions, Eucharistic prayer, Lord's Prayer and peace, the bread and the wine were distributed. When we celebrated the Eucharist, the cups and plates stood in the midst of the wilting flowers on the table, the foil was folded back, and the looks and smells gave a deep sensory meaning to the Eucharistic prayer, which included this passage:

**Minister:** O, Lord, come to our aid!

**All:** The configuration of this world will pass.

**Minister:** O, God, make us alive

**All:** and sanctify your name.

**Minister:** Thanks to the God of David

**All:** through Jesus his servant,

**Minister:** who in the same night that he was betrayed ...

## 7. Conclusion: Art as sacrament

Absence and the void become experienceable by tokens of presence; silence can only occur within the framework of language. Real language – that is, poetic, artistic and liturgical language – makes silence possible until the moment that silence vibrates, and bursts open to grant passage to being and, eventually, to God. A booklet with the names of 8 000 people buried in the Oude Kerk made their definitive absence visible. Mentioning their names made them present. Due to their intrusive presence, the plastic towers on tombstones raised awareness of the void that usually characterises the building. Jackets left behind on chairs and the ground demanded their wearers. A large, exposed coat on the choir screen behind the altar table unmistakably evoked the memory of him who was undressed and whose coat was raffled off while he died on a cross. Tinkling bells awoke the souls of the original inhabitants of the Americas driven out, murdered and almost written out of history. Withering flowers on the altar table again evoked the thought that this world is passing away. *NA/AFTER* raised the question: and then? In poetical and liturgical language, passage was being granted to a “dance of advance and retreat which being carries out, its movement of presence in absence”.<sup>20</sup> To quote Chauvet again, who, in turn, quotes Heidegger:

Rather, it is a true “coming-to-presence”, that is, a presence whose very essence is the “coming”, the advent, and which is *thus essentially marked by the stroke of absence*. In sum, a signifying presence, a “human” presence. A presence which does not erase “the dawn-like trace of the difference”, which “melts away as soon as presence is conceived as present-entity and finds its provenance in a supreme present-entity”. Presence-as-trace; trace of a passing always-already past; trace thus of something absent. But still trace, that is, the sign

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20 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 50.

of a happening which calls us to be attentive to something new still to come.<sup>21</sup>

In Christian sacramental worship, the absence and presence of the Lord are evoked through the command to “do this in remembrance of me”. Signifying his presence – “do this” – does not nullify his absence: his is a presence-in-absence or, better, a “coming-to-presence”. In church, every day is *always* Advent. We can conclude that Boltanski’s *NA/AFTER* made us deeply aware of the ambivalent and vulnerable character of the sacrament.

What then remains of the question as to whether art itself can be sacramental? I would like to answer that question affirmatively. Art can be sacramental in the sense that the Christian discourse speaks of it as a visible sign of God’s grace. Just as bread, the sacramental element par excellence, can ultimately become “the body of Christ” while maintaining all its layers of meaning, so can other elements in the physical world. The condition is that they must be brought into a context of silence and emptiness, into a poetic artistic discourse and, more specifically, into a Christian discourse as it is transferred in tradition, liturgy and Holy Scripture. After all, this discourse speaks about the concrete and institutional Church as “the body of Christ”. Similarly, the death and resurrection of Christ in the gospel are not isolated events but imply the resurrection of the dead: “Christ was raised to life – the first fruits of the harvest of the dead”.<sup>22</sup> The remembrance of that story does not yet become jubilant; the brokenness and the sadness, the imperfection and death are still towering. Yet “even so, I shall exult in the Lord and rejoice in the God who saves me”.<sup>23</sup> By remembering the thousands of dead in the site-specific artworks in the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam and elsewhere in the world, by making wilting life visible on the altar table, by leaving coats raising the question of what absence means and by recalling presence as a trace, Christian Boltanski made a sacramental work of art. Presence is born from absence; colours emerge from the void; a theology of the Word rises from silence.

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21 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 58.

22 1 Cor. 15:20.

23 Hab. 3:18.