Part 1

Animate Materialities from Icon to Cathedral

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Figure 3. Icon of Stephen Protomartyr, 26.5 × 23 cm, tempera and gold leaf on wood, Late Byzantine. The Menil Collection (85-057.03), with permission of The Menil Collection.

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Chapter 1

SHOWING BYZANTINE MATERIALITY

IF WE SUPPRESS too much abstract analysis in art history, then relational being and thinking can keep subjecthood in play for things long left for dead. They force understanding away from Cartesian absolutes of mind and body, subject and object, and open art history to experientialized historical human and nonhuman subjects—to full relations among all those subjects, as flesh of our own flesh, to borrow from the title of Kaja Silverman's book, which invokes Adam's words in Genesis to argue for similarity, rather than difference, as placing everything in relation.[1]

This chapter uses an icon and a box to venture beyond an art history of objects and to advocate for the subjecthood and agency for all Byzantine things. It attempts to demonstrate the materiality of a late Byzantine icon. It argues for sensitivity to the temporal rhythms and material experience that things reveal, and it offers possible strategies for showing in exhibition, where many of us encounter things from the past, how materialities can manifest themselves to us so long after the objects were made and first made active.

Stephen's Materiality

There is a small, late Byzantine icon of St. Stephen in the Menil Collection (Figure 3).[2] The icon's mereness might betray its active agency, but attendance to its sensual surfeit reveals its relational energy. Holding a swinging censer in one hand and a paten, the small plate that holds the Eucharist bread, and a gold box in his covered left, the figure of Stephen performs his transitive acts that span the inside and outside of the picture. The porousness of the picture plane is one thing, but more radically, with transitive senses, Stephen enacts the relational, transformative agency of his presence. Smell (incense that covers all devotional spaces), touch (paradoxically intensified by the cloth-covered hand), taste (the not-tasted alterations in the bread and wine of the Eucharist), sight (the fixed, lazy stare of the saint that betrays the motion, the moving air of the foreground)—Stephen's silence is the concession to the object state, but it only increases the intensities of the experientalized bodies within and beyond the icon.[3]

These points of contact permit the experience of an icon to be active beyond our received conception of "icons." In its terms, an icon is a representation, a theologically sanctioned safe bond between image and prototype. It allows a vertical, anagogic reading of the relations of the human, the icon, and divinity. But these examples give us a way into a horizontal reading wherein all the participants are working analogically, relationally. Silverman argues for an "ontological kinship," a foundational position for understanding that "everything derives from the same flesh." This position allows for

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1 Silverman 2009.

2 Carr 2011, 44–45.

3 See also Carr 2011, 22–3.

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identity and individuality, and it opens possibilities of relation and a "powerful sense of our emplacement within a larger Whole."[4] In that sense, the dividual is an appropriate replacement for the individual, and as an explanatory model, the notion that we—and they—are divisible, porous, open to the transformative flows of the world can help explain the strangeness of materiality's histories.[5]

Let me try to demonstrate these ideas through an analysis of form—"how it looks." The icon is small in scale, only measuring 26.5 × 23 cm, but the frame is filled with reflexive potential. The saint is shown as a young man, unbearded and with short hair, and he is dressed in the liturgical vestments of a deacon: he is wearing a white stole over a black surplice, and a thin scarf falls over his left shoulder. In keeping with the description of Stephen as a servant at table, he is a youth, an attendant (see Acts 6:1–7:60). Indeed, Acts states that he had the face of an angel—to be sure, a trope for sexless beauty, but it also works as an indication of his servitude to the word of God, his devotion to the point of self-sacrifice that comes at the end of his earthly life. His angelic appearance was picked up by later writers, but so was his militancy as an indomitable soldier of faith.[6] His gaze also betrays a strength and intensity that correspond to the arguments he so energetically raised against the elders. Here is the unbreaking stare that led to his execution through stoning by a mob of angry dissenters. The gaze takes in more, however, than stubborn servitude, for Stephen is protomartyr, a first witness to the faith that vision at the end of his life confirmed, "Behold, I see the heavens open and the Son of Man at God's right hand" (Acts 7:55–56). Gazing into heaven at that nearly last moment, Stephen saw God's glory. So taking some of the possibilities of Stephen's gaze, we might say he has seen everything important, and through it, he gained the wisdom to forgive, because his very last words attest to the absolution of his murderers.

He relates to us through that "thousand-yard stare," his look at and beyond us, but he looks fixedly at "me," too. The absence and presentness of his look pins me, and they make me look for their object, in me and outside me—for God. We could say that in that stare, his behaviour "behaves" me.

Faciality

Faces proliferated in Byzantium, not least in churches and public spaces full of icons, frescos, mosaics, and showing stone. Every Byzantine face behaves us. Even modern, secular museum goers are behaved by those faces in icons and other forms that tell us how to look, where to stand, when we can go. From their first face-to-face encounters before their audience, those Byzantine faces were fully in control, for they stated when to be abject, when to speak, when to be grateful. And they still do.

Anyone who, moved and awestruck, has had that stop-dead moment in a Byzantine church knows an echo of those faces' command. The faces of God, his mother, saints and prophets can still hold one, captivate and melt one's free will before them. In that

4 Silverman 2009, 4.

5 See Peers 2012a.

6 Devos 1968; Aubineau 1989.

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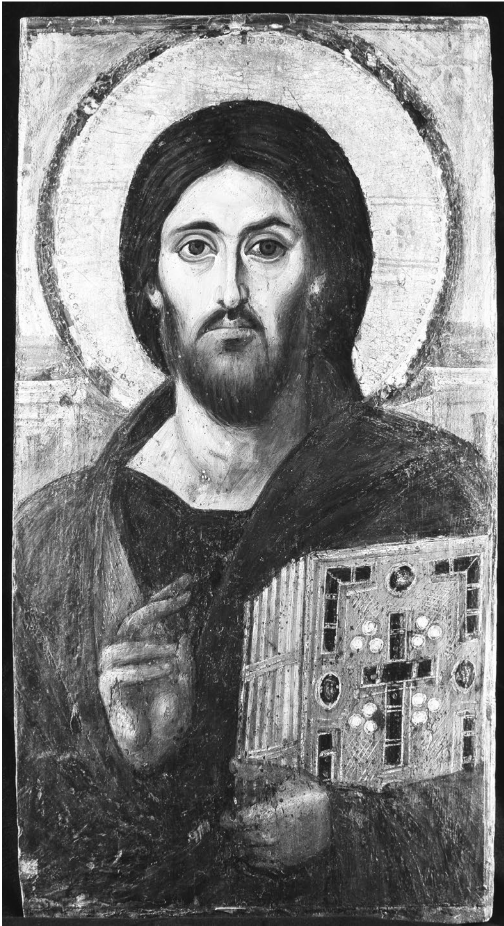

Figure 4. Icon of Christ, sixth/seventh century. Holy Monastery of St. Catherine, Egypt.

way, subjects can circulate, what seemed like simple pictures take charge, and humans become all-seen objects of divine gazes. At the centre of these histories is the originary face—the Mandylion—that embodies that reciprocal gaze between and amongst quasi-objects. The Mandylion was the famous touch relic that Christ created as a self-portrait. It created a divine sanction for divine self-portraiture, and through its creation, it recapitulated the act of creation by God of humanity in his image.[7]

Icon gazes are always active, mutual, and livening—in fact, totalizing—and in that way, we can see forcefully other ways in which Byzantine objects worked so energetically on their viewers, why they break down apparent differences in identity of viewer and thing, why they come alive and act as quasi-objects in the world as we do.[8]

In the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, face is an absolute foundation of our world.[9] In every face-to-face encounter, an ethical obligation introduces itself; it is not just being close enough to another person to see them, but it is a "proximity" in which human relations are imposed by God through all our faces, including theirs. Levinas's position does not directly align with the medieval understanding of the face of God, because he wrote, for example, "The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is discarnate, is the manifestation of the height in God revealed. It is our relations with men […] that give to theological concepts the sole signification they admit of."[10] Whereas

7 Peers 2018b has bibliography and further explorations of the meanings of this foundational relic.

8 See Belting 2005 on this process, too.

9 Levinas 1969; Cohen 1994, 173–94.

10 Levinas 1969, 79.

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for Levinas, that manifestation in face was God disincarnate, for medieval Christians, every face was in relation with God's.

Nevertheless, Levinas allows us to see that the core experience in our existence is through our face, even as we never see that core of self truly. For that encounter, one needs the other, and through him or her, we constitute our social, ethical lives and make our subjecthood. Those ideas also were in operation in the Byzantine world, and Byzantines had those obligations, too, but one insisted on by those faces. Every time a Byzantine looked at a face, an ethical obligation was present. But faces, of course, also had incarnational force, because God assumed humanity and had a face that was originary of all human faces.

From the distinctively Western, fine arts, however, the way in which the face of the icon behaves its beholder is displaced by a teasing out of its emotive qualities and formal particularities as a way into meaning—the aim is the capture and control of the agency involved in the thing. In a passage in *Enchantment: On Charisma and the Sublime in the Arts of the West*, for example, C. Stephen Jaeger attends to the particular dynamic of face during late antiquity, especially as it is embodied in the glorious icon of the Pantocrator in the Monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai (Figure 4).[11]

For Jaeger, this face is the place of the humanity, not the divinity, of Christ, in the serenity, gentleness, and strength displayed in that portion of the panel that constitutes the face. Jaeger also brings to bear the proposition that the face is a white wall/black hole, famously expounded by the philosophers Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze in terms of the concept of the "abstract machine of faciality" in which "significance" and "subjectification" are both at play: "Significance is never without a white wall on which it inscribes is signs and redundancies," an inscription that says "child, woman, mother, man, father, boss, teacher, police officer"—or "Christ"—and is "an affair not of ideology but of economy and the organization of power," while subjectification "is never without a black hole in which it lodges its consciousness, passion, and redundancies." In this model, as applied by Jaeger, the Pantocrator face is "given entirely to a deep and embracing consciousness, full of expressive force, but ultimately ineffable, inexhaustible via words. That is characteristic of many icons; the meaning is invested in the conventional signs and postures," but "the religious force radiates from the face, and it works because the zone of the face is freed from semiotic function" as a "white wall" reflecting objective categories "and given over entirely to an individual emotionality and passion," a "black hole" of subjectivity "that is virtually hypnotic, at the minimum riveting, in its effect on the viewer."[12]

The issues are multiple, and Jaeger is just a useful foil, since his scholarship is deeply learned and admired. But in the first place, Jaeger certainly falls into a heretical position, if we take seriously the theology of post-Chalcedonian Christians of the Greek-speaking East. In stressing the "elevated humanity" of Christ in the icon, divine relationality is neglected: it is God there in that face. And reading that face in terms of its effect on one

11 Jaeger 2012, 98–133.

12 Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 167–68, 175; Jaeger 2012, 110.

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is natural for Jaeger's concept of charisma, which is fundamentally about reception, its human-focused gravitational centre.

But the face itself divides and multiplies its effects, according to the white wall/black hole dynamic dichotomy. Most viewers (indeed, every group of students that has ever discussed the icon with me) instinctively put a hand in front of their face in order to distinguish the differences between the two sides of the face. The significance of the difference is not ultimately determinable (probably the dyophysite nature of Jesus), but the open-endedness is a source of its richly unending work on us; the icon is in control of its effects and charisma, not its viewers. And the terms of its current state, this version of the icon is not a fair or accurate version of its late antique or Byzantine self, which would have been clad in revetment and votives, and enclosed by an inscription. That obscuring of the face, not just the encroachment of the frame, but also the light perception that results from the reflective surface, has to be reckoned with. The face withdraws, in fact, as the halation emanates from the surround, and the field that is most legible in our photographs folds into a series of veiling effects. The mysteries intensify, and the face fluctuates between presence and absence, but the icon knows its own charisma and always puts the viewer in a deficit position.[13]

Stephen's Bodies

In the Menil icon, Stephen's gaze is not vertical; it is not directed to heaven, as his last moments were. It is horizontal, it is encompassing, and his actions are likewise directed. The panel is really performing itself, its own special relation. The combination of actions is awkward: the covered left hand somehow steadies the paten and a small box, which may be an incense box, a box for remnants of the Eucharist, or a reliquary. That awkwardness is not arbitrary, because the loop at the end of the chain is evidently between thumb and forefinger—the thumbnail is clearly described, and shadow plainly falls in the area around the middle of his chest, where the paten touches the body from the pressure of the left hand over the outer rim of the paten. Both space and contact are present. The body of the saint is in control of the actions taking place, but it is also not fully determinant; the things he holds have their own provisional nature that his body takes into account.

The body of the saint cannot be taken too literally here. It is clearly not the body of the saint during his lifetime, because he is performing the work of a deacon in the medieval Byzantine world; it is not the martyred body, because he is undamaged, and only the circles of hair cascading from the crown draw attention to the skull shattering that led to this death. He is closer to his angelic self here, heavenly and ethereal in his perfected, beautiful form.[14] And eros is never far: in the fifth century, the empress Pulcheria (398/9–453) took his relics to her bedchamber, like a husband, a metaphor for

13 Of course, Pentcheva 2006 and 2010 has made some of these points, but as I made clear in the Introduction, her version of the phenomenology of icons is skin deep. I have also made arguments that parallel these above in Peers 2004, 101–31.

14 See Carr 2011, 25: the "sweet fullness of Stephen's nubile body."

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virginity, mystical union, and so on, but her strong desire was long remembered.[15] Stephen appeared to Pulcheria and told her that her desire has been realized, according to the Theophanes Confessor (ca. 758/60–817/8), and according to Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopulus (fl. ca. 1320), she let herself be controlled by an "unutterable yearning" for the saint.[16]

Stephen's relational energy is at work here and in other traces. The red cloth over his left hand is meaningful, not only because it matches the red of the embers within the censer, but because it also picks up the red lining of the sleeve of Stephen's right arm. The earthly remnants of the body of the saint are, of course, significant: his cult really dates only from the discovery of his body in 415, north of the walls of Jerusalem, and from that point, his body and cult travelled throughout the Mediterranean.[17] His right hand was especially venerated at his monastery in Constantinople and at the Konstamonitou Monastery on Mount Athos, and other parts were strongly venerated elsewhere, too.[18] The careful description of his right hand on the icon reveals his relation to his relics and to his miraculous energy in the world; the box on the paten may refer to his very own reliquary. That hand was and continues to be a powerful relic—pilgrims still travel to Athos for Stephen's relics and icons.

A number of icons, such as examples in St. Petersburg and at St. Catherine's Monastery on Sinai, share the characteristics of the Menil icon. These icons evidently copy a common model[19]—one suspects they copy a prototype from the monastery at the capital that is now claimed as itself a miraculous icon at the monastery on Athos.[20] These three icons each have a deacon Stephen with paten, box, and censer, they all date to circa 1300, and they all seem to respond to a particular agency the original possessed. Of course, the icons are individuals: for one thing, the other examples are standing figures, and moreover, the panels are differently scaled, the example in the Hermitage being 32 × 18.5 cm and the example from Sinai much larger at 96.8 × 63.8 cm.[21] The original, now lost, it seems, transmitted the agency of the saint to these copies; they share the DNA of that powerful first testimony of the saint in bone, wood, and paint. Those things are in relation to each other, iterations of that original apostolic body.

Transitive senses, here, the expectation of smell, prove the porousness of the picture plane and show the individual expression of the Menil panel. All three examples share a set of actions by Stephen as deacon, but the Menil panel has the censer swinging full,

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15 Aubineau 1989; and see Holum and Vikan 1979, 131–32.

16 Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronographia* (ed. de Boor), 1:86; *Patrologiae Graecae* 146, 1084B.

17 Mango 2004; Bovon 2003; Taylor 2003; Colella 1997.

18 Majeska 1984, 351–53, 385–57; Simonopetra 1969, 119.

19 One should also note that Stephen's narrative history has been depicted in strikingly imaginative ways, including stories about his abduction as an infant by the devil and his attempted crucifixion. See Berger 1973; Gaiffier 1967.

20 For other miraculous icons, see Dobschütz 1899, 35–37, 89–90, *115–*17.

21 Bank 1985, 313, colour pl. 231; Mouriki 1990, 113; and Piatnistky 2000, 112–13. See also the similar, sixteenth-century example in Tourta 2011, 92–94. And also Aspra-Vardavaki 2018.

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and Stephen is packed tightly within the frame. In this way, Stephen enacts the relational, transformative agency of his presence.[22] Smell, the incense in his right hand, blankets devotional spaces and bridges that space and ours. It is worth recalling that Stephen's relics were found through the suffusion of the air with a paradisiac fragrance that healed seventy-three Christians right away.[23] The sense of touch paradoxically intensifies through the cloth-covered hand, the hand that emphasizes the relic right hand, Stephen's own. Censing occurs at points of invocation and divine attendance in the liturgy.[24] Incense is divine presence, and the burning embers in the censer on the panel implicate all those present in the smoke's reach. (Smoke is not literally shown or yet emanating.)

Other senses are in play. The Eucharist may be in the box, too, and the censing proves that implicated presence. Taste is also present in the sensation of smelling incense, as well as in the memory of the not-tasted alterations in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Sight is in equilibrium in the fixed, unforced stare of the saint, which betrays the motion, the moving air of the foreground. The contingency is in the necessity of the arc of the censer reversing and the clutch of the paten and box needing to be adjusted consequently. Stephen's silence only increases the intensities of the experientalized bodies within and beyond the icon. The sound of the censer, instinctively supplied by other subjects, is in the ring of the chains and in the clatter as it catches the top of its swing and descends again. "Moreover, sound is not simply like the material; it constitutes a form of material action. Yet the chatter of things is all too easily over*looked*. Things are all too often treated as silent."[25] Stephen's verbal withholding goes strongly against what we know of him from Christian scripture, the elaborate prolixity of his speech in Acts that led to his condemnation and his execution by the hysterical crowd. Stephen's closed lips paradoxically bring to mind the saint's extravagant verbal charisma, which gained him his singular vision of Jesus and God and heaven in his last mortal moments. But that silence is also an object state that gives space for our own enlargements and interpretative body memory, because it pulls us, through itself and its opposite—sound—into materiality and living in the world. The icon is profoundly of the past, but it is sound that paradoxically entangles past and present. The habitus of sound completes Stephen's presence; in fact, sound and silence work its essential weaving of our world with his.

Museum Materiality

Can such things themselves tell their stories, speak their minds, without all this repetitive verbalization on my part—can an exhibition say something "true" about these very old things? The Menil Collection reinstalled its medieval collection in its main pavillion in 2018, and the ways in which the curators mobilized the objects into new configurations and with new meanings and experience emerging is proper testimony to the continuing strength of the institutional mission.

22 See Carr 2011, 23.

23 Clark 1982, 141–42.

24 Harvey 2006.

25 Witmore 2006, 276.

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More than thirty years had passed since the original publication of *Inside the White Cube*, by Brian O'Doherty, but that critique of the ideology of gallery space retains its bite, even after that interval. The St. Stephen icon was previously in a wall vitrine along with other objects selected from the collection's Byzantine holdings and occasionally in exhibitions (Figure 5). An implicit connection to devotion and ritual unified the objects in this vitrine, such as a cross, a lamp, a gold box, and a small limestone (?) reliquary with spout, but the objects were diverse in date, provenance, and materials. And yet all cues that these objects are not art in the way we mean it had been eliminated from the presentation.[26]

Lighting, isolation, artful spacing, depth within the wall absent the objects, positioned them in placelessness. O'Doherty used a striking simile to evoke this utopia within the frame. The stability of the frame is as necessary, he wrote, as an oxygen tank for a diver: "Its limiting security completely defines the experience within."[27] A new context is created for these objects, in other words, that is entirely constructed, and of course this assertion is not news. Museums make utopias: "*Art museums, in the past, were not just displaying art, but were narrating art history, or presenting art in the mirror of its own history*," as Hans Belting has written.[28] They are objects, "things," that contest and invert our constructed expectations and represent them at the same time: a version of a heterotopic world for things.[29]

As of 2018, the new Menil installation makes an entirely different dialogue possible for Stephen's icon (Figure 6). The icon is now in a dynamic spatial relationship with a gold reliquary box dating to the late antique period with a likely provenance of Stobi in the Republic of North Macedonia, as it is known after a name change in 2019.[30] Flanking the icon, on the other side of the door, is a Russian icon of the Anastasis, and viewed from deep within the room, as in this photograph, one can synoptically take in these three things, as well as a large early modern painting of a church interior on the facing wall of the adjacent gallery. The aesthetic appeal and satisfactions, like so much in the Menil, are great. The things here resonate and echo their mutual goldenness. The transition from light to dark, as one enters the gallery room with the gold box in the centre, intensifies focus in a shift of mood and intimacy. The experiential content here is rich. Stephen, for one, is as free as he can be in the current museum world to speak his mind and likewise work his spreading presence.

The Menil Collection is an ideal context for that spread's unfolding. Until March 2012, it preserved the very most stimulating heterotopic monuments of Byzantium in its Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum (originally so-called). From 1997 until its departure, it was a perfect confluence of that medieval world and our own. Moreover, it was able to work in concert with the Rothko Chapel across the street as moving spaces of

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26 O'Doherty 1999, 14.

27 O'Doherty 1999, 18. For a useful overview of the problem of such religious objects in secular museums, see Paine 2013. See now *The Aura* 2020.

28 Belting 2009, 54, his italics.

29 I have tried to pursue this position further in Peers 2012b and 2013.

30 Carr 2011, 11.

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Figure 5. Installation view of Stephen in prior display. The Menil Collection. Photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

Figure 6. Installation view of Stephen in current display. The Menil Collection. Photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

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relational experience. And based on the collecting and presentation values of the founders, Dominique and John de Menil, the collection has remained active in imaginative Byzantine exhibition, a tradition continued by a show guest curated by Annemarie Weyl Carr, *Imprinting the Divine* (2011–12).[31]

Inventive and revealing strategies of display can be found by reconceiving what museums can do for historical periods that are not really like ours. Heterotopia opens up possibilities. Michel Foucault proposed heterotopia as a necessary inverse of utopia, and he characterized heterotopia as countersite, "simultaneously represented, contested and inverted."[32] The creative appropriation of Byzantium by American modernists gives some licence to imagining Byzantine objects in a revealing fashion, as long we are honest and self-examining about our own motives. For example, Willem de Kooning called New York City a "Byzantine city," and in performing Byzantium even on that level, he remade Constantinople as an American city. In his art, he also remade Byzantine forms into an authoritative argument for modernism.[33] I would argue that a creative reimagining of Byzantium in a museum context should likewise contend with Byzantium on this level of inversion and appropriation. By recognizing that the museum is a heterotopic site, we can open ways of exploring deep structures of that historical materiality. Paradoxically, admitting we cannot fully know the period historically and recognizing we must not display it like any other object in the world-art tradition gives us the freedom to explore the particularities of Byzantine objects' objectness and of their not-textness.[34] The sensory, sensual extensions of the Stephen icon spreads into the community of things who sit with him or who come into the galleries to visit briefly—that is, we humans.

Thinking about exhibitions as verbs helps do this, even conceiving them as active verbs, not declaratives, as if the world exhibitions *declare* is naturally an extension of our own. Our mode of display often gives the impression of extratemporality; it is not in itself neutral, because "it produces a powerful and continually repeated social experience that enhances the viewer's sense of autonomy and independence," as Mary Anne Staniszewski writes regarding exhibition innovations of Alfred H. Barr, Jr., at the Museum of Modern Art.[35] Barr's legacy is important because he established the default position for Western exhibition practice for the last seventy-five years or so. The verb then cannot be "to be," but must be interpretative. In active ways, exhibitions of Byzantine objects can make the experience challenging to notions we think are true, and on close examination, they always force those notions to yield.

In that way, Byzantine art can be made thinglike, too, joining things from indigenous cultures that have long been treated as craftwork, folklore, ethnographic "cultural material," and making the art less about art and religion and more about the world and rela-

31 Shkapich and de Menil 2004; Nodelman 1997; Carr and Morrocco 1991; Smart 2010.

32 Foucault 1986, 24. On this essay in relation to exhibition, see Avgita 2009.

33 Peers 2010.

34 See Conn 2010, 7–8.

35 Staniszewski 1998, 66.

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tions in it.[36] The argument is that the idea of art should extend to all cultures, and we need to take back art from this period we are concerned with, along with all the implications of these things doing their work in a different key. The social life of these things is crucial for our understandings of them,[37] but it needs to be embedded in recognition of the strangeness and complexity of that life.[38]

Removed from the museum experience is everything not within sight's limited control, and one can justly ask what is lacking from our understanding of Byzantine objects, We might recapture some of the sensory range of Byzantine things through witnessing contemporary Orthodox icon piety, and that experience opens the imagination to historical reactions, but it can also be misleading, because any contemporary anthropological work has shortcomings for historical analysis. Another risk is the belief that modern Orthodoxy resembles medieval Christianity to the degree that it allows us to understand fully what people in the Middle Ages did and felt. And yet anyone who has stood watch in an Orthodox church or who is Orthodox either in belief or habit knows that the total engagement of the senses is necessary for correct worship, and indeed was also in the medieval world. Belief does not enter into this set of actions; orthopraxy is the key here—doing the right thing. And theology enters indirectly, though not for reason of belief, because the assumption here is that theology did not absolutely determine belief or behaviour.

But objects are another matter, because of Byzantine culture's total reliance on matter's relations with the divine. Touching the icons with hands and lips, hearing the words (whispered, spoken, or sung), smelling the candle wax and incense, even tasting the Eucharistic sacrifice are all foldings of the body into the excess offered by religious objects and sites. The sum of looking, touching, smelling, tasting, and hearing is greater than the body parts of the worshipper—and of their articulations, for the limits of language are not the limits of the world.[39] The surplus of senses and lack of unity in them in encounters with objects are objects' puzzle, control, and power.[40]

36 Escobar 2008.

37 See, for example, Parani 2007.

38 Joy 2009.

39 See Howes 2006; Sullivan 1986.

40 For example, Hurcombe 2007.

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Figure 7. Hagia Sophia, interior view. Istanbul. Image in Public Domain.

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Chapter 2

THE BYZANTINE MATERIAL SYMPHONY: SOUND, STUFF, AND THINGS

HAGIA SOPHIA, THE great cathedral church of the Byzantine world, once made—that is fundamentally formed—Byzantine or Orthodox Christian subjects (Figure 7). It gathered them in under its great dome or consigned them to side aisles and balconies in order to bring them into being that properly bodied a medieval Orthodox subjecthood. The building created its own unique environment, an environment larger than any human participant. Emperor and patriarch, it has been said, were the only humans fully able to understand the cosmos under the dome, because their importance for the empire ensured them places at key moments in the centre of the building, from where all components of the building coalesced into a perfect capture of God's creation. That visual supremacy can't be quite accurate; no one standing beneath the dome can see and, more importantly, comprehend the relationship among the diverse and rich constituent parts of the building: the main and subsidiary domes, the withdrawing secondary spaces and levels, and the deceptively porous surfaces that seem to be primarily for streaming light, for making the interior a special kind of outside. In this space, every human scale is reduced to, well, human; no one feels outsized in relation to the cosmos there.

In this great church, sound, voice, matter, subjectivity formed around and within the architectural space. It happened with the liturgical performances memorably enacted there and with the movements and attentions of human subjects fundamentally made by the sound, light, and elements, such as water, actively in concert there.

I am purposefully moving around the human-centred descriptions of agency normally assumed to be in play in a building, or anywhere, for that matter. I am trying to expand the subject-making potentials of a Byzantine building to include all entities in this made world, beyond just us and comprising buildings and objects and nature (which is never out of these buildings), the very stuff from which the building is composed.[1]

This chapter will try to encourage a listening and looking that is carefully and sympathetically attuned to a more fully animated world than we normally accord our surroundings. In Hagia Sophia, all these elements played out a kind of Orthodox harmony. Liturgical action and singing not only activated the humans performing, but also the building around them, the structure that received, amplified, and returned the sounds as newly animated and independent voices. Matter, too, vibrated to that sound, taking on a voice and subjecthood through the aural intensity. And the glorious objects that were the things in the church, the liturgical furnishings made of valuable substances, also participated in a symphonic intensity of sound and sight that touched all participants. This chapter tries to evoke a fully animated world through all those sensory effects, from building to human, down to the very atomic level of creation—all the levels where God made and found symphony in that world.

1 See Wharton 2015; Burrus 2018, 165–85.

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Figure 8. Byzantine Fresco Chapel, interior view to the east.
The Menil Collection, 1997–2012. Architect: François de Menil.

The difficulty in an argument such as this is that it has to happen, in the first place, far from the object of study and through this verbal demonstration I am performing. In the second place, the historical building is so fundamentally altered through its long existence that capturing any kind of original or authentic experience is impossible. All our descriptions and imaginings have to look or sense away the accretions and revisions of its structure and appearance. The church was built between 532 and 537 by the emperor Justinian (r. 527–65), a miraculous achievement that led to legends of angelic craftsmen needed to bring the project in under time, and even by 558, with the collapse of the dome, a major renovation and reshaping of the nave was necessary. The church became a mosque with the conquest of one of the very last holdouts of the Byzantine world, when Mehmed II the Conqueror (r. 1444–46, 1451–81) captured Constantinople in 1453.

Until 1935, Ayasofya Büyük functioned as a mosque, when it was then converted to secular museum. It straddled both faiths in some ways and it retained elements of both identities while asserting its nondenominational character as a museum in its institutional apparatus of opening hours, tour groups, and constant (it seems) scaffolding.[2] In other words, searching for the authentic Hagia Sophia is a quixotic mission, and the search must proceed indirectly, through the traces left of the building and its descriptions over the centuries and through museum buildings that more fully embrace the

2 The necessary work on the subject is Nelson 2004. On Hagia Sophia in Trebizond, a building that has travelled from church to mosque to museum to mosque, see Peers 2018b, 89. Likewise, Hagia Sophia in Istanbul is once again a mosque, having succumbed to political and confessional pressures.

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Figure 9. Byzantine Fresco Chapel, interior of chapel. The Menil Collection, 1997–2012.

modernist interpretation and mediation of those historical realities than a monument such as the present-day Hagia Sophia can possibly perform.

To bring to life some of the qualities of Hagia Sophia, let me transport us instead to Texas, to the former Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum, where I will try to evoke, counter-intuitively, authentic experiences of medieval Orthodoxy. The museum was active from 1997 to 2012 (Figure 8), was a marvellous site of encounter with a partial Byzantine fresco cycle. The frescoes had been looted from a small rural chapel outside Lysi, a village on the northern, Turkish side of the island of Cyprus; restored beautifully and then installed in a purpose-made pavilion on the Menil Collection campus in Houston, the frescoes spent fifteen rich years in Texas before being (willingly) repatriated to Cyprus, where they can now be seen in the Archbishop Makarios III Byzantine Museum in Nicosia, sadly, the still-divided capital of a still-divided country.[3]

The Menil Chapel was designed by Francois de Menil for the frescoes, and the pavilion strangely echoes Cypriot mountain churches (which Lysi would not qualify as) *and* speaks in modernist idiom. The result was deeply satisfying and generative. The outward shell is geometric, reserved, nondescriptive, a huddle of cement cubes. (It's still used, now for long-term contemporary art installations.) But it opens slowly, subtly: first, a water reservoir, which is channelled under the entrance atrium, leads to a small, cloistered garden; then slowing in the transitional zone between inside and outside adjusts eye and mind to the space into which visitors emerge in the centre of this little complex; and finally, a space quite unlike any other I've encountered myself: the room, hooded by darkness and ringed by light spill, framed a scale version of the thirteenth-century

3 Carr and Morrocco 1991. See now Whitaker et al. 2020 and Fincham 2015.

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chapel from Lysi. Outlined with semiopaque glass panels and stitched by metal rods, the chapel stood there in uncanny isolation (Figure 9). Inside the dome and apse, the original (though carefully restored, it must be said) paintings emerged theatrically to visitors when they were fully drawn into the little structure within that vibrant, diverse space.

The modernity of this setting and, one might say, the theatricality of the frescoes' display make authenticity here appear to be impossible. But I'd like to try to render elements of the Menil space sufficiently "real" that we might even use descriptions of this experience, now sadly possible only in fading memory and weak verbalization, for knowing, somehow, Hagia Sophia. In his book *Sacred Place in Early Medieval Neoplatonism* from 2004, L. Michael Harrington posed this provocative question: "if the medieval builders of the Lysi chapel were to possess the technology needed to build the fresco museum chapel, would they choose to do so?"[4] His book examines the apparent paradox of material space from a Neoplatonist point of view, how a base world can reflect or describe a more perfect, immaterial realm, and he finds compromise for those very different realms in this world. One of those compromises might be said to be the Byzantine chapel, though he does not say so outright.

Language used by the Menil Collection to position the Byzantine chapel shows alertness to a vaguely Neoplatonist understanding. The chapel was called an "'infinity box," but also an "immaterial materiality," the latter phrase used by Neoplatonists, as Harrington points out, to indicate truly immaterial entities that can be shaped as matter is, such as the soul. The chapel's infinity box brought out a different kind of experiential paradox. The confinement of the space was clear; the cement walls delimited the interior, and the light cascading down the walls made evident the shifts in time through the changeable East Texas sky entering those seams on the walls' surface from the outside. And yet the black shell suspended above and inserted into the ground-level enclosure erased the temporal and spatial. The apparently contradictory qualities of time/not time and space/not space distilled into a very condensed construction are the means by which (to use Neoplatonist language) our mortal comprehension can know the immaterial symbolically, to be sure, but through the fully sensual means that are natural to us. That is to say that symbolism can be only partial—human sin makes it impossible for us to know its meanings fully—but that part is all we can really know, and it is here condensed in the church space, the part that is available to us through our bodies. Father Maximos Constas put it another way, which keeps us in theological, and not art-historical, language: "Like a detour made necessary by an insurmountable obstacle, paradox marked the way, the mysterious path of ascent, but it also designated the place, for it was the symptom, the sign, the irruption into the world of something beyond the world."[5] The Byzantine chapel at the Menil spanned worlds effortlessly. Consecrated, it served as a church for the local Orthodox community and as museum for Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike.

Hagia Sophia has not been able to manage any such accommodations. The stakes are too high for any number of communities, primarily conservative Turks who see ethnic glory in the repurposed building *and* many Greeks, who still call Istanbul "e polis,'" or "the city." But

4 Harrington 2004, 1–2.

5 Constas 2014, 21.

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Figure 10. Byzantine Fresco Chapel, view into dome. The Menil Collection, 1997–2012.

if political and religious rapprochement have been impossible in Istanbul, the ways in which the building sustains irresolvable paradox are not. Those paradoxes have often been noted: the apparently insubstantial qualities of the curtain walls, which soar far above the floor level; the dome, with its window piercings that seem to allow the apex of the building to float; the seemingly immeasurable space contained by walls and domes, so excessive to any one person's ability to see at any one time; and the textures, colours, and diversity of materials covering walls, floors, and ceilings that also manifest natural phenomena in the outer world. All of this is on a scale impossible at the Menil, and anywhere else, for that matter, and the expansive qualities of these paradoxes have always been the goal of writers attempting to capture the building.

In the past, writers have struggled with the limitations of language and the impediments of literary genres. Now we are impeded by the building we experience, since the building we encounter is only very vaguely like the medieval iteration of that monument. The museum identity preserves the building, but it also slows the pulse to well below normal rest, let alone the quickened rate of its former life. As Martina Bagnoli has written about museum senses, "Two hundred years later, museums' displays are still made for 'appetiteless' looking; they are designed to foster an engagement with art that is intended to take the body out of the equation."[6] That may seem a contradictory statement when used to argue that the Menil chapel provided an authentic experience, but the confluence of its compelling qualities produced an extraordinary experience in ways a unique Hagia Sophia can also provide, even if the cathedral-mosque-museum is not transparent to its medieval selves any longer.

But in their original forms, however we now come to imagine or experience them, those two churches made those who came into their realms. Those buildings each formed subjects, not by mirroring or reflecting human experience, but by fundamentally determining them through their assertion of agency and autonomy. Perhaps an effective way into how these spaces formed subjects is through the figural decoration in the interior of some of these domed churches—though not Hagia Sophia, which did have figures of Christ circulating throughout the building, if not in the dome itself. In the modest chapel from Lysi, however, that sense of subject-creation emerged forcefully and clearly (Figure 10).

6 Bagnoli 2016, 14.

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The intensity and strength of the figure of Christ in the dome of the Cypriot chapel are expressive miracles of a kind, and they were felt as such in Middle Ages, as texts attest.[7] The particular moment depicted here is difficult to pinpoint: Christ stares fixedly out of the canopy of heaven, with one hand clutching a book and the other raised in a gesture of address; the angels, along with John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary, indicate the scene of the *Deesis*, the moment of interventions on behalf of those to be judged before the Judge of All; and the empty seat, the *hetoimasia*, or things made ready, awaits the arrival of the Judge (the court having risen, it needs only the great decider to appear). In other words, a dynamic and powerful scene is readied for those who came into the tiny rural chapel or those who made the journey across a parking lot, through the decompression chambers, and into the centre of the infinity box in Houston. (The current installation of the frescoes in Nicosia has robbed the dome of nearly all its majestic intensity.)

How did such figures take charge of and make medieval orthodox Christians? The visual and spatial control effected by those figures is still evident to us, but those Christians had what we might call more transitive expectations from their sacred ritual environments than most of us now do. That's to say, the environment does not "reflect" those expectations.[8] It determines them and in doing so forms those Christians. These Pantocrator figures have intense fixity of expression. The Lysi Christ doesn't blink; he is forever about to enter the world, collapse the threshold between the worlds of the divine and created. Leo VI (r. 886–912) wrote that you might think you were "beholding not a work of art, but the Overseer and Governor of the universe Himself who appeared in human form, as if He had just ceased preaching and stilled His lips."[9] Sources tell us of the Pantocrator Rorschach test: Nicholas Mesarites in the twelfth century famously stated that Christ makes himself benign in appearance to those with clean consciences and fearsome to those with stained souls.[10] Meanwhile, some comparable Cypriot programs contain inscriptions that make the menace of the Christ epiphany unmistakable: fear, tremble, make yourself a more perfect Christian, or this is the terrible visage and voice you will witness at the end of time.

A particular story from a tenth-century hagiography demonstrates the full transitive state of these frescoes. In this story, a man falls into the depths of despair over his chances of salvation, and while praying over a long period of time in a fully decorated church, the image of Christ in the dome finally addresses him and, in the end, absolves him.[11] Painted inscriptions give guidance, but the face is sufficient: it always returns your gaze, and moreover, it sustains that gaze, because it is always watching when your gaze is elsewhere. As Father Constas again points out, the gaze is not a distant, disembodied act, outside of self and senses; as with Zacchaeus spied in the sycamore tree, God's gaze

7 See Binning 2018.

8 *Pace* Binning.

9 Akakios 1868, 245; Mango 1986, 202–3.

10 Angold 2017, 94.

11 Wortley 1987, 92–95; Wortley 1996, 101–2.

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captures all from that place looking over the rim of heaven, and it pulls each person in, just as Zacchaeus was told to offer his hospitality (Luke 19: 1–11).[12]

Here, a subject is made among those who might have assumed they were in possession of the controlling gaze, but these painted spaces have ways of undermining that assumption of self-control and self-determination. Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580–662) increased the intensity of selves imbricated in these encounters when he wrote that it was "like a crystal-clear mirror capturing completely the whole shape of God the Word who is looking at himself in me.[13]

That visual mirroring was intensely formative in a neck-bending way, in the manner of an infinity mirror, the constant, perpetual work of God's likeness in humans. In addition, the deep faceting of the experience with the audial complicated subjects' integrity in these vibrant and complicating spaces. The voices read and acknowledged through inscriptions in these church interiors, as well as the reports of the paintings talking and talking back, reveals some of the verbal—and not just visual—charges there. I would like to try to describe some of the ramifications of this visual and aural mixture in a Byzantine interior. Perhaps, just as the Menil chapel showed how an infinity box worked and made meaning in a Byzantine mode,[14] that infinity's sonorous reach and hold on its human subjects can also be described.[15]

The voices of God, prophets, and living persons have, from an early point in Christian examination of self, been intertwined. The voices of the Psalms are the best example. In the fourth century, Athanasius of Alexandria famously talked about the voice of Christ speaking through David speaking through Christians praying the Psalms, to the degree that each voice is folded into the other, like the infinity mirror with sound. We could put it this way, taking a passage from Dominic Pettman's recent book, *Sonic Intimacy*: "At some level, thanks to our strong theological heritage, we all suspect that we are puppets and other unseen forces are making us speak. Existence is essentially ventriloquial. This is what the voice is telling us."[16] Another way might be to assert the sonic imbrication of the Psalms, for example, as opening selfhood to divine and historical voices speaking with and in our own voices.

However, I also want to try, briefly, to argue for the voices that extend beyond the human and divine maker. Voice is not the sole possession of humans, nor also of other creatures, but also the possession of elements and matter. I would like to make a short plea for the voices that all matter can use to enter into a harmonious chorus

12 Constas 2014, 31.

13 *Patrologiae Graecae* 91, 1137B; trans. in Constas 2014, 32.

14 From "The Library of Babel," in Borges 1998, 112: "In the vestibule there is a mirror, which faithfully duplicates appearances. Men often infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite—if it were, what need would there be for that illusory replication? I prefer to dream that burnished surfaces are a figuration and promise of the infinite."

15 The chapel museum has hosted a series of musical events, such as a marimba–cello concert in March 2012, along with a choral concert in the lead-up to the frescoes' departure, and a saxophone performance in March 2018.

16 Pettman 2017, 91.

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with the maker, even in these medieval buildings (or maybe especially) such as Hagia Sophia. Some indigenous cosmologies make this claim, such as the testimony in Patricio Guzmán's documentary *The Pearl Button* (2015), which deals with Chilean persecution of First Nations peoples and political activists under Pinochet: "They say that water has memory. I believe it also has a voice. If we were to get very close to it, we'd be able to hear the voices of each of the Indians and the disappeared."[17]

We need to extend the range of thought and voice and accept the many subjects at work in an activated building such as Hagia Sophia or the Menil chapel—accept that persons are throughout, not just humans. As Eduardo Kohn wrote, the world is also enchanted in an ecology of selves, a place of indistinction, as he puts it.[18] Sound is part of the web of dividuals, and it forces representation, that is self-making, among all who hear there.

I can give a couple of examples that might show better how sound makes subject in Byzantine telling and understanding. The first comes from classical legend, from the life of the great warrior Achilles. Not in Homer's account, but in other classical authors and very popular, the story relates in its basic terms an attempt by Achilles's mother, Thetis, to preserve the life of her son by hiding him in disguise as a woman at the court of Lycomedes on the island of Skyros. The Greeks cannot win the Trojan War without the great warrior, so Odysseus is sent to retrieve him. The wily one flushes Achilles out with a sonic reflex. He has the trumpet sounded, an alarm for entry into battle, and Achilles answers his *true* nature without thought, sheds his drag, and seizes a weapon. Here is one way sound returns us to our selves, through an involuntary submission to sonic imperatives. The trumpet tells Achilles who he is, in other words, and the glorious warrior cannot help but obey.

The trope of the musical instrument possessing some kind of soul and personhood goes deep into antiquity, too, and it also has implications for the Christian performance of God-bound selves. The singing of the Psalms already mentioned, for example, engages instruments beyond the human (and others') voices, namely, the harp, which is sometimes conflated with the human performer, in the sense of God playing the singer like a harp. That confusion of agency—the human playing the instrument is also the instrument played by God, and so on—is a fundamental means by which human and other subjects are formed in Christian thought and performance.

The reed and flute are related to this extension of subjectivity. God can be the player, and the Christian the reed pipe or flute, but the world outside God and human creation is also in concert. Jacob of Serug (451–521), for example, not only claims a role as God's flute, filled with melody through inspiration (a purposeful pun) of the Lord, but he also makes a case for reeds in the wild creating their own musical praise in concert with the wind.[19]

Moreover, water was naturally voice-full thoughtful in the Byzantine world: the traveller known as the Bordeaux Pilgrim (writing about a journey in 333–34) mentioned, for example, that the pool at Siloam observed the Sabbath and ceased flowing on this

17 Guzmán 2015, 1:17.

18 Kohn 2013, 16.

19 See Haines-Eitzen 2017, 118.

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day, and Egeria, the Spanish pilgrim of the fourth century, likewise described the reactive quality of the fountain that flowed at the site of Job's dunghill when it changed its nature to issuing blood, pus, and gall.[20] Hagia Sophia had potent waters that healed and sang, what Eunice Dauterman Maguire calls "liquid utterances,"[21] because the fountain in the forecourt babbled and burbled its pure streams, according to the ekphrasis of Paul the Silentiary in the mid-sixth century.[22] The sound and its kinetic energy (it "leapt into the air") lent force to its nature as healing agent, too. The water was known to "drive away all suffering" when drawn in "the month of the golden vestments" and at the "mystic feast" of Epiphany, which occurs in January, but also when the consuls came to office in their sumptuous robes. There is a long tradition of the healing and apotropaic qualities of water, and the watery basis of medicine and protection was well established in the church. Moreover, a liquid understanding of the entire building was frequently expressed: according to Paul, the marble on the floors of the church represented water, and some lanes in the flooring were treated like rivers of paradise.[23]

That description is more than metaphor: stone was formed by compressing earth and water, according to ancient and Byzantine geology, and marble reveals its aqueous origins in its veining, polish, and glitter, very similar to gold, which likewise is a watery substance. Not only was gold most frequently found in rivers and streams and therefore considered to be primarily a water-born metal, but it also revealed its watery nature in its self-destabilizing glow and halation, when light makes gold shine and blur. In the interior of the church, covered with marble and gold (and little or no figuration), the abstract fields of floor, walls, arches, and dome lived a liquid identity in its material demonstrations of indistinctions.

The acoustic qualities of the paradoxically watery composition of the interior of Hagia Sophia have been studied recently by Bissera Pentcheva and colleagues. Those scholars have attempted to measure and replicate sound performance, and they describe the power of melody and assonance in the building, the ways it built its sonic power during its frequent liturgical celebrations. The building both revealed its acoustic dynamism in moments of clarity, for example, when the patriarch rose onto the ambo in the middle of the nave to deliver his sermon—though even then, the ambient distractions were no small thing—and moments of sonic confusion, which seem more common in analysis, when words became lost in the murk of the resounding noise of the music, perhaps even resembling thunder at times, according to Agathias, another sixth-century

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20 On the Bordeaux Pilgrim, see Geyer et al. 1965, 16 (592); Wilkinson 2002, 30; and on Egeria, see Geyer et al. 1965, 57 (*in lacuna post* 16.4); Wilkinson 2002, 129n8; Alturo 2005; De Bruyne 1909.

21 Dauterman Maguire 2016, 183.

22 Mango 1986, 85. See also van Opstall 2018. And on the apotropaic qualities of water, see Maguire 2019, 207.

23 Onians 1980, 9, on Paul the Silentiary, *Narratio de S. Sophia*, 26 (Preger 1901–07/1975: 1:102–4; Mango 1986, 101), "The significance of this passage is considerable. By implying that Justinian himself saw the marble as representing water and stating that particular strips of marble were treated as representing the rivers of paradise in early rituals it takes our texts out of the realm of mere rhetorical inflation into that of real contemporary experience."

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writer on the building.[24] That oceanic sound must have had deeply affective power for all the human participants as they swam in the noise of that vast space.[25] That noise was both a sign of well-being for the Christian empire and created unity and relation among all the humans trembled by those reverberating sounds.

Byzantines are often viewed as a strongly scopophilic culture, with their rich visual traditions and extensive speculations on image theory, but sound provided a complementary affective presence in ritual performances, such as the singing of Psalms. The resonance of the Psalms, an essential part of every liturgy, troubled the smooth surface of discrete subjectivity, but the sound amplified and noisied by the interior of the great cathedral had a more immediate affective impact on humans in that space. That impact might be close to what Dominic Pettman calls an "aural punctum," where the "unexpected piercing by sound" leaves a deeply affective wound or trace, a stirring, in listeners who are also in this case performers.[26] The Psalms return to the humans singing, both confused and intensified. Jean-Luc Nancy has written succinctly about this effect: "To sound is to vibrate in itself or by itself: it is not only, for the sonorous body, to emit a sound, but it is also to stretch out, to carry itself and be resolved into vibrations that both return to itself and place it outside itself."[27] Here, sound enlarges and ramifies, pulling each participant into the same voice, a voice that transcends temporal limitations and subject positions.

In this chapter, I've attempted to hint at the symphonic effects of voices gathered together in particular Byzantine buildings, voices that included human and divine, building and representation, instrument and Psalm. Those multiple subjects also resonated in space and among themselves. The mingling of subjects, it seems to me, is the process of divinizing, of the thoroughgoing entry of God into every part of creation. It also seems to me that the Menil Chapel was also a Byzantine space, able to speak Byzantine subject formation to modern people, open, despite ourselves, as we've always been, to the face and voice, the light and sound, of that divine power emanating from the dome.

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24 Frendo 1975, 143 [5.3–4]: "He also produced the effect of thunder and lightning in his room, using a slightly concave disk with a reflective surface by means of which he trapped the sun's rays and then turned the disk round and suddenly shot a powerful beam of light into the room, so powerful in fact that it dazzled everyone it came into contact with. At the same time, he contrived to produce the deep, booming sound by the percussion of resonant objects and achieve the effect of loud and terrifying peals of thunder." See Papalexandrou 2017, 72.

25 See Schwartz 2011, 28, "Just as noise is what we make of certain sounds, the meanings we assign to noise are no less consequential than the meanings we assign to other sounds. Noise may be unwanted or incomprehensible sounds; it is never insignificant sound."

26 Pettman 2017, 44–48.

27 Nancy 2002, 8.

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