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Vera Icon: photography and blasphemy in the XXth Century

Introduction

Less than two months ago, in August, the concert staged by the pop star Madonna in Rome provoked vehement reactions from Italian journalists. In particular, they resented the camp piece entitled *Live to tell* which was introduced by the sound of a church organ and sung by Madonna who presented herself crucified and crowned with thorns. On the 7th of August, *Il Messaggero* reproached this casual but calculated use of religious symbols, and *La Repubblica* criticized the erotic malice and the impudent spiritual frenzy of a singer who does not hesitate to crucify herself in the very city keeping Christ's heritage. *Il Corriere della Sera* reproduced the photograph of a fan holding a cross with the inscription "Santa subita" ("saint at once"), an allusion the words recently repeated by admirers of Pope John Paul II just after his death in Rome.



Madonna's show is the product of various cultural traditions. It can be seen as a postmodern version of the medieval passion plays which were repeated throughout the centuries and experienced a revival at the end of the 19th Century. Not only were these theatrical events photographed but they also were a major source for the birth of the first epic cinematographic ventures at the turn of the

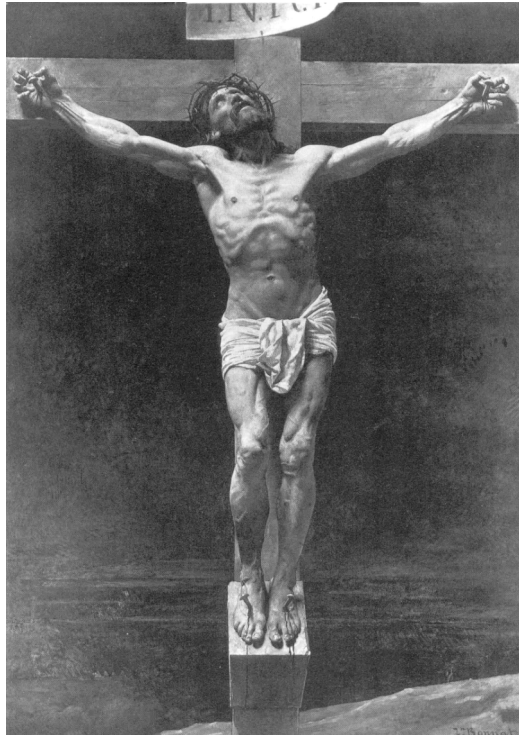
20th Century. Madonna's show was precisely staged a photogenic and filmic event.

But this concert also reminds us of problematic and potentially blasphemous representations of crucified women. Female identifications to with Christ have certain theological bounds and boundaries. The crucifixion can remain metaphorical as exemplified by the patroness of the French town of Beauvais who bears the surname of saint Angadreme *crucified* (a painting of her can be seen in the local church of Saint-Etienne). But this urge to identify with Jesus was more or less accomplished by santa Ghjulia (saint Julie), a Corsican saint who supposedly died in 439, beaten to death and then attached to a cross. The most famous of them all however is Saint Wilgeforte (or Wilgefortis, or Vilgeforte, or Saint Liberata), the legendary virgin daughter of a king of Portugal. In order to be preserved from the husband her father had imposed on her, Wigelforte implored God to make her ugly and was immediately granted with a beard which deterred her intended husband and irritated her royal and pagan father to the point of crucifying her. Some art historians thus explain the existence of the disturbing crucified feminine and bearded figure found for instance in the church of Lucques in France...



In the late 19th Century crucified women can be found in the work of so-called “decadent” or symbolist artists such as the Belgian James Ensor (*Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 1878) but also in several studio photographs of models. Such poses

were originally called “academies” and were made for the generation of naturalist painters craving for a new scientific vision of the martyr. In 1874, the French painter Léon Bonnat provoked a scandal when he exhibited his *Christ* at the Parisian Salon, sketched “from life” (so to speak) from a corpse extracted from the morgue, which the artist had crucified for his purpose (critics resented the model’s physiognomy which was perceived as too anatomical and of lower class and criminal extraction and not fit to adorn the criminal court of the Palais de Justice for which the painting was originally commissioned...).

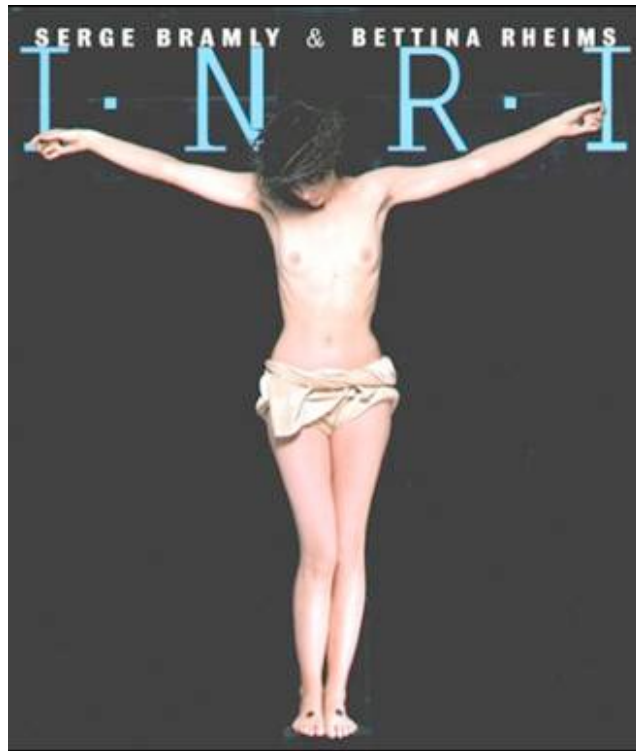


The 19th century studio photographs of crucified women are no doubt ambiguous. The ambiguity characterises in general contemporary artistic nude photography. Most of the shots hardly conceal their erotic dimension and sadistic undertones which more than a century later would give birth to pornographic web imagery exemplified, for instance, in the web site entitled “Crucified Women” that specialises in that kind of gothic fantasies - fantasies which in turn have certain affinities with Madonna’s self-crucifixion in her recent tour.



Cadavers were also nailed to crosses not only for “artistic” but also for “serious” scientific and theological purposes in order to measure the position of the body and to experiment the form of the wounds in the hands and feet. Such is the case of the body of the old women photographed by E. C Templier in 1934 for Doctor Paul Barbet¹: a rather shocking shot preserved in the archives of The Catholic Institute in Paris. One cannot help wondering about the weird morbid and pseudo-scientific idea of using the corpse of a decayed female to give life to the dead body of Christ. Indeed, the boundaries between the scientific, artistic, commercial and gothic uses of crucified females appear sometimes confused.

More recently, the cover of the book *INRI* written by the French journalist Serge Bramly and “illustrated” by the French photographer Bettina Rheims (Paris, Albin Michel, 1998) provoked a scandal in France. It represents a woman half-naked and nailed to the black cover of the book.



This spectacular publication which attempts to fuse textual and visual representations of the Passion has never been studied seriously. It seems to have been rejected by religious milieus as well as by the photographic press, probably because both parties found most of its pictures provocative and kitsch. I propose to study it from an art historical point of view and analyse the origins and effects of misunderstanding, ambiguities and perceptions in connection with the photographic staging of Christ in the XXth Century but also with the history of art in general. In particular I shall then conclude with some remarks on this potentially “blasphemous” book cover.

INRI: project and conception

INRI is a collective work by the French journalist and writer Serge Bramly and the French Parisian photographer Bettina Rheims. Serge Bramly (born in Tunis in 1949) is the author of several books on photography (on Man Ray, and Edward S. Curtis), on art (Leonardo da Vinci), and also published novels (*Madame Satan*) and other book related to spirituality and religion (*Terre Sacrée* deals with the rites of American Indians, *Macumba* is (of course) about voodoo black magic). He has made several books with Bettina Rheims and was married to her.

Bettina Rheims (born in 1952) is the daughter of Maurice Rheims, art historian, novelist, official auctioneer and member of the French Academy. She began as a

model, journalist and art gallery owner and started out photographing striptease artists and acrobats in the late 70's. She has shown a predilection for staged female nudes moving at the fringe of pornography (for example in the series *Chambres closes*, with Serge Bramly in 1992), but she is also famous for her portraits of celebrities such as Madonna or Catherine Deneuve and for the official portrait of President Jacques Chirac in 1995. Her latest books are entitled *Shangai* (2003, with a text by Bramly on Chinese women) and *Heroïnes* (2006, a series of portraits of famous women in unconventional poses).

Serge Bramly and Bettina Rheims wanted to produce a book in which the text would not be a commentary on the images and the images would not function as mere "illustrations" of the text. The word-image relationship would therefore obey the rule of complicity or, following Roland Barthes' famous distinction in "Rhetoric of the Image" (1964): text and image would work in a system of *relay* in which "the unity of the message is realized at a higher level, namely, at the level of the story, the anecdote, the diegesis" (this relay-text is very important in film, cartoon or in the comic strip).

The preparation of the book took about two years. For weeks the two authors visited museums (the Louvre), read books, and auditioned models (200 professionals and amateurs were eventually selected). The production itself began in February 1997 in a psychiatric hospital ("Asile d'aliénés") founded in 1862 in Ville-Evrard situated in the East of Paris. The institution provided settings for most of the shots staged indoor. It lasted until June and was followed by a second series of shots taken in Majorca which provided the necessary Mediterranean tonality for some of the photographs. Serge Bramly and Bettina Rheims collected a vast iconography including reproduction of paintings but also Polaroids of the models and the settings. The day before shooting each scene they would meet with the decorator and the make-up artist in order to combine all the material.

The production of the photographs for the book was almost a hollywoodian venture. One of the last pages bears a significant title on top: "Générique" meaning "Credits" and including headings such as "casting" or "repérages" (location scoutings). The book was indeed lavishly produced. It cost about 1.5 million francs and was supported by the French Ministère de la Culture (400 000 francs) in conjunction with the Year 2000 Catholic Jubilee (Mission pour la célébration de l'an 2000). It was published in 1998 and the first exhibition of the

“original” photographs took place in the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin in 1999, followed by a world tour including the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris in 2000 where the show coincided with the celebration of the second Millennium. But between 1998 and 2000 the book provoked incessant polemics. The publication went on trial and its authors were physically threatened - even molested - to the point of having to use the services of bodyguards on certain occasions. How can these reactions be explained? Is *INRI* really the blasphemous work some religious milieus have rejected? To quote the president of the catholic League, William Donohue in December 1998: “Why it [the book] took two years to complete this savagery suggests that French Satanists work much more slowly than American ones”...²

Serge Bramly and Bettina Rheims refute such devilish and iconoclastic intentions. They are both of Jewish education (although Bettina Rheims admits to being an atheist) and the two are fascinated with the humanity of Christ. In their foreword the two authors evoke the necessity and stimulation of “remembered” or “foreseen” images defined as “modern icons”. One has the shape of a Christ made of concrete and used as an electric pole in Warsaw with rusty iron threads on the head which look like awesome “tears of blood”. The other image takes the form of a face in an old wall in the Palma railway station simulating the imprint of Jesus’ face on Veronica’s veil at the Calvary and replaying Leonardo da Vinci’s suggestion to young painters that they should study old walls as a stimulus to imagine figures and subjects. The third programmatic image is a work of art, Piero della Francesca’s *Flagellation* (ca 1469) in the church of Urbino. The authors focus on the three figures outside the building on the right and on their detachment which “participates to the tragedy, reinforcing the metaphysical coloration of the painting” (p. 9).



“To recompose such scenes, visions or “apparitions” is our common goal”, they conclude. At first sight, the photographic staging of the flagellation presented in the book does not seem to have anything to do with Piero della Francesca. However the photograph and the painting share the same kind of light (artificial and natural) from above and the same spiritual connotations. Both frame the main action in a closed space, a sort of perspective box accentuated by the orthogonal pavement: perspective operates as a metaphor of vision, of painting as a window (according to Leon Battista Alberti’s *De Pictura* in 1450) and of photography as the technical materialisation of the geometry of vision that has ruled representation since the Renaissance. Finally, the detachment of all the figures in the painting by Piero, their classic and linear plasticity corresponds to the aesthetics of Bettina Rheims’ photography: her taste for symmetry, for clearness - in short for all the formal categories which characterise classic art according the famous Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (*Renaissance and Baroque*, 1888, *Classic Art*, 1898). But most important of all, the work by Piero della Francesca is an answer to the question asked by the authors: “How to represent Jesus today, at the dawn of the XXI Century?”. Serge Bramly and Bettina Rheims conclude their foreword by confessing their intention of just “following the example of past artists who did not hesitate to transpose in their century the episodes of the holy history, framing them whenever with the setting of a Florentine suburb” (p. 11).

The book follows the narrative of the Passion and is divided into seven chapters (*Angel words*, *The work of the holy breath (Les oeuvres du souffle)*, *Hidden childhood*, *Signs and prodigies*, *Healings*, *The Crowning of the king*, *Awakening*). Successive pages of typography alternate with the colour photographs (with one exception: the chapter entitled *Healings* is mainly in black and white). Some

pages (including the scene of the crucifixion) form triptychs. The reader has to unfold them in order to contemplate their visual and formal structure. The text written by Serge Bramly is both narrative (with descriptions, dialogues, focalisation, etc) and analytical when he gives us information about historical uses or reflects on symbols or numbers. The narrative voice thus reflects the duality of the photographs which plays with three levels of representation: the original action (the Passion), the tradition (verbal and visual) and the present time and contemporary perception of them. The bibliography given by the authors is rather eclectic. It includes CDROMS, dictionaries, essays on canonical and non canonical texts (on the apocrypha, on the “secret gospels), books by or on mystics (Rémy de Gourmont’s *Le latin mystique*, 1892) and also on the kabbala, historical essays on Jesus as a Jew, iconographies such as the indispensable *Iconographie de l’art chrétien* by Louis Réau (1955-1959) and Manuel Jover’s richly illustrated *Le Christ dans l’art* (1994). Still, one of the striking features of the text and the photographs is to resituate Jesus in Jewish education and culture. Text and image remind us for instance that the well-known episode known as “the presentation of Jesus to the temple” corresponds in fact to the celebration of the Jewish *bar-mitsva* which occurs when the boy has reached the age of religious majority and is allowed to read the Torah in the synagogue.

The photographs either refer explicitly to iconography and even to specific paintings or appear strikingly detached from the visual traditions. The scene of the baptism of Jesus obviously relates to Piero della Francesca’s version dated 1450. In the painting, St John the Baptist and Jesus look very much alike besides forming a pair from a theological point of view. Serge Bramly and Bettina Rheims have chosen twins to impersonate the two future martyrs (one of them is a top model the other in the pool is a soldier - so Serge Bramly told me).



Another example of pictorial quotation can be found in photograph of Christ lying dead with holes in his feet: an image which obviously pays homage to Andrea Mantegna's *Dead Christ* (1480).



But whereas the Italian painter obeyed decorum by subverting the logic of perspective in order to show the feet smaller than the head, the photographer chooses a focal length (a zoom) to operate the same optical reversal. But the photograph introduces something new: the model in shorts posing as Christ has his eyes open. This symbolic detail is in fact explained by a quotation from an XIth Century gospel book which says: "The lion does not close his eyes when laying down to sleep; so was Jesus' body when he rested within the sepulchre, his spirit was awake to go and break the subterranean gates of hell".

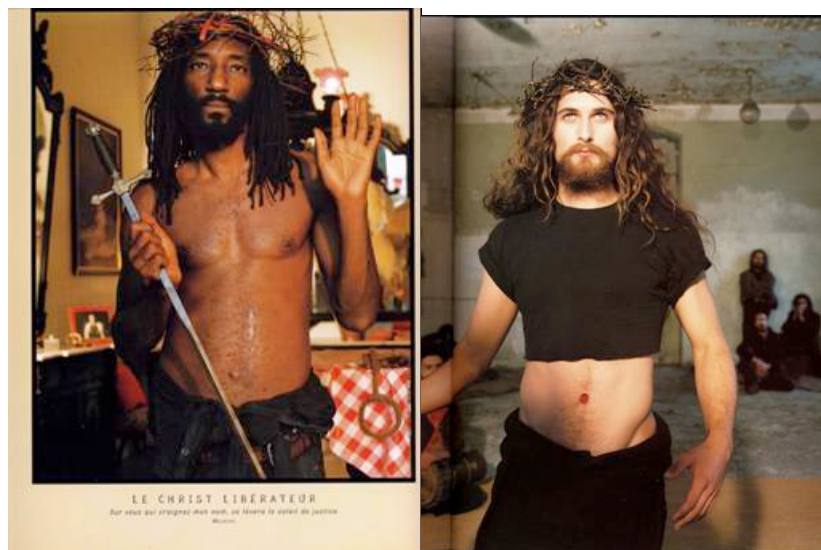
Other scenes have no antecedent such as the syncretic portrait of the Son of Man whose nimbus has been replaced by the seven branched candelabra, the *menorah*, a cosmic multifaceted symbol, rich in messianic significance. The vision of the Holy Family is also unprecedented: old and prosaic personifications of Joseph and Anne under the reflection of a mirror showing a top model virgin ? in ecstasy,

breast-feeding a naked baby. Another striking invention is the triptych presenting Mary Magdalena as a whore as a pennant in the desert and then as a nun humbly compressing her breasts with bandages: a visualisation which has been judged thoroughly pornographic by the ecclesial hierarchy.

The authors have in general omitted episodes confronting the natural with the supernatural. Miracles whenever shown are exposed in their uncanny theatricality, the authors refusing to use the “magic” of photography to perform trucage (trick photography) and produce illusion. On the contrary, they attempted to place photography on the level of painting by introducing allegorical and symbolical references. In this respect, *INRI* could be seen as a manifesto of what is called *staged photography*.

Images of Christ

The most striking option of the book however affects the personification of Jesus. Serge Bramly and Bettina Rheims had no other choice than to choose real models to impersonate Christ. Following Manuel Jover statement in *Le Christ dans l'art* (1994) who insists on the historical and geographical variations of the physiognomy of Jesus, the authors decided to show a polymorphic figure, often Caucasian, sometimes black, more rarely oriental, and even replaced by a stuffed human-sized straw doll.



Even if the most frequent model used is an absolutely canonical one (handsome with a large forehead, blue eyes and a beard), this polymorphism expresses the idea that Jesus was a man and that he belongs today to every nation and every

race. The idea that Jesus is a universal figure with whom every human being can identify - whatever the colour of his skin, hair or eyes - is of course theologically justified and unproblematic. But this obviously does not apply to women impersonating Jesus since a huge scandal arose when the image of a crucified female model circulated in magazines prior to the publication of the book. The scandal prefigures the polemics that would explode in another context with Renee Cox's *Yo Mama's Last Supper*. The scandal that took place in autumn 1998 was also parallel to the one that burst out at the same time in Sweden around the work of Elisabeth Ohlson, *Ecce homo*: a set of twelve photographs showing the disciples as lesbians, gays and drag queens surrounding a Jesus in high heels (the title, *Ecco homo*, is an obvious pun on homosexuality and a gendered defence of Christian beliefs against ecclesial and moral bans)³. One should also bear in mind another American precedent when in 1984 the large bronze sculpture by Edwina Sandys, *Christa*, was shown in the cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York for the United Nations' Decade for Women, which attracted violent opposition.

The topic is so hot that even before the book *INRI* was ever in bookstores it was attacked by the AGRIF (« L'Alliance générale contre le racisme et pour le respect de l'identité française et chrétienne » - General alliance against racism and for the respect of French and christian identity). This alliance based itself on an article (in the magazine *Photo*, November 1998) announcing the publication and reproducing some of the pictures. Founded in 1984, the AGRIF publishes a homophobic newspaper entitled *La Griffé* (meaning "the claw") and it emanates from catholic fundamentalists close to the French extreme right, the Front National. The AGRIF is known for its law suits and attempts to censure films such as *Je vous salue Marie* by Jean-Luc Godard, *Amen* by Costa-Gavras, and in particular *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Martin Scorsese, even encouraging attacks on theatres showing the film (one theatre in Saint-Michel, Paris, was actually bombed in 1988, causing one death and thirteen people wounded). But the protest of the AGRIF were not officially sustained by the French Church because the French State is secular and does not recognise any religion in particular and is therefore alien to the very notion of "blasphemy". The Church nonetheless issued a statement signed by father Olivier de La Brosse, spokesman of the Conference of the bishops of France which says: "The book is now on sale. It is obvious that Mrs Bettina Rheims misses her target: one cannot pretend to use the image to transmit a message while ignoring the weight of symbols and their

meaning. These photographs subvert the episodes of the life of Jesus in a provocative *mise-en scène*. [...] Inadequacies in the analysis and amalgams add to the ambiguity of its illustrations. This album will not help popularize the gospel. Even one of the heads of the Parisian mosque brandished anathema in the name of the “professional” solidarity between religions...

The publication of *INRI* led to a lawsuit by a fundamentalist priest, Philippe Laguérie (a member of the Fraternity of saint Pius X), against three bookstores in Bordeaux. The president of the Court judged that the cover of the book was a “provocative publicity ridiculing the crucifixion [and] constituting an aggression to the individual beliefs of christians”. He decided to forbid the exhibition of the book but not its sale, which made a huge publicity for the book. This judgement was then broken a month later and the priest had to pay 8000 francs in damages to one of the bookstores (the FNAC) which had hired a lawyer. This second judgement expressly stated that the publication had “no intention of mocking Christian beliefs and traditional symbols of this religion”. In the mean time, Serge Bramly and Bettina Rheims were aggressed by mail and even threatened physically.

The publication was followed by an exhibition first shown in Berlin in 1999, which then toured in Europe and in the World. The show stopped in France in 2000 at the Maison européenne de la photographie in Paris and was supported by the Ministry of Culture. Serge Bramly recently told me that the French church resented the idea of the exhibition taking place during Easter. The two authors agreed to modify the schedule on one condition: that in compensation the agitation of the fundamentalists would stop. And it did stop.

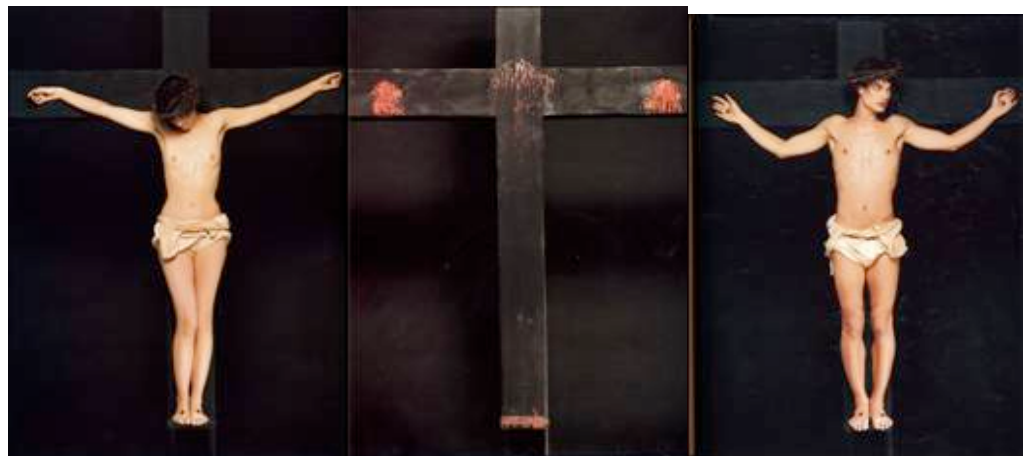
The problem of the book cover

The decision to use the picture of the female crucifixion as a cover for the book was in fact the decision of the publisher. The authors would have preferred the letters *INRI* (Jesus from Nazareth King of the Jews). Bettina Rheims later regretted having accepted the idea because she was perfectly aware of another French precedent: the poster for the film *Ave Maria* directed by Jacques Richard (1984), which shows a semi-naked woman tied to a cross. The poster was

withdrawn under legal action filed by catholic fundamentalists. Bettina Rheims knew about it because she actually took the picture used for the film poster...



Serge Bramly and Bettina Rheims made lots of attempts to capture this central episode of the crucifixion. The triptych including the litigious photograph in *INRI* is part of a group of pictures showing the episode. (Two other pages show the instruments of the Passion, one starring a middle-aged Christ in an empty building and the last second? one capturing a youngish Jesus nailed on the cross and looking at the sky with Mary and Joseph of Arimathea next to him, placed in an industrial waste land.) The centre of the incriminated triptych shows an empty cross painted with blood: a reference to modern painting (the Viennese actionists and possibly the work of Arnulf Rainer), but also a remainder of the cross symbolizing the body of the Saviour.



On the left is the “scandalous” women, head down and on the right a young supermodel looking on his left. Serge Bramly told me that he and Bettina Rheims

were struck by the fact that none of the male models could pose in a “natural” or “gracious” manner. Contrary to what religious conservatives may think, it is true that the woman’s pose is perfect according to the traditional vision of the body on the cross. She represents the perfect photographic equivalent of Diego Velasquez’ *Jesus on the Cross* (ca. 1632).



What Bettina Rheims’s photograph retrospectively *reveals* is not only the sensuality but more specifically the effeminacy of personifications that are seen as undisputed models for religious art and pious contemplation. What this photographic triptych formalizes and symbolizes is in fact the essential human nature of Christ materialized by Velasquez’ crucified androgynous and by Bettina Rheims and Serge Bramly’s serial vision.

In short, from an art historical and theological point of view, the crucifixion imagined by the two French authors does not only seem accurate. It should in fact appear traditional or canonical if photography would stop being perceived on a literal level and if the medium was read instead as a visual and conceptual discourse. Finally, if the Church is so angry with the *INRI*’s female representation of Christ it may not be for artistic reasons, not even on theological grounds. This iconography is part of the recent polemics on the place of women in the Church in relation to the strictly male ordination of priests. Last year, parallel to the *Da Vinci Code* affair, the advertising agency Air Paris produced a huge poster for the brand name “Buffalo Jeans” designed by Marithé and François Girbaud. It presented a new version of the Last Supper in which Christ and the eleven disciples are played by women - except for a man (perhaps St. John), half naked and sitting with his back turned to the spectator at the right of the Jesus woman.



This poster was attacked by the highest authority: the association *Croyance et Liberté* (Belief and Liberty) which depends on the conference of the bishops of France. The Church won the suit and the poster was censured because it was judged offensive to religious sensibility, because it subverted the Last Supper with pornographic allusions and because it was too aggressive and degrading for purely commercial purposes. But it may well be that the erotic and commercial elements incriminated in the poster are only a façade hiding the real problem of patriarchal religions in contemporary society striving to control the orthodoxy of images in the midst of what is considered a major cultural and pictorial turn.

PS : This study is part of a three years interdisciplinary research project (literature, art history, cinema, theology) supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation and entitled «Les usages du Christ au XXe siècle» (2006-2008). It was presented at the international conference

Christ in Contemporary Cultures. A Cultural Studies Conference

Gordon College, Wenham USA September 28-30, 2006

¹ Paul Barbet is the author of *Les Cinq Plaies du Christ* (Paris, Dillen & Cie, 1935) and an ardent defender of the disputed authenticity of the Turin shroud.

² http://www.catholicleague.org/98press_releases/pr=498.html

³ <http://www.jesusinlove.org/links.php>