KEITH ACHEPOHL
IF IT PLEASE YOU LORD

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COLLECTING ART, OR—as in this case—ARTIFACTS OF MATERIAL CULTURE, is a necessarily sensitive process for a visual artist, particularly when the subject of the collection is generated by a history outside of the collector’s own experience. The potential for romanticizing “otherness” is one of many potential issues with which a responsible artist/collector is sure to wrestle.

The artist Keith Achepohl’s collection of Italian silver ex-voto is comprised of culturally supercharged objects intended for individual spiritual communication with God. Examining the ex-voto’s history, present and future, from its origins to assimilation into global culture, may assist us in understanding how they function as object both of collection and revelation.

EX-VOTO — “A RELIGIOUS OFFERING GIVEN IN ORDER TO FULFILL A VOW”

Ex-voto can be as ephemeral as rose petals or as solidly precious as a fabricated silver bouquet, and votive practices are linked to the history of many cultures, geographically as far flung as the Latin American Milagro and the Japanese Ema. The devotion, as practiced by the Romans, offered a life (a physical body) in sacrifice “in order to obtain in compensation the enemy’s defeat.” The objects described here are offered after the fact, in gratitude for a grace received in response to prayer, rather than as a physical manifestation of the prayer itself.
The material representation of body parts in the service of spiritual communication has its origin in ancient Mediterranean cultures, a strong influence still felt in the sea-hemmed, history-infused regions of southern Italy. These practices are directly connected to the function and imagery of contemporary “laminae” ex-voto, embossed silver sheets produced both mechanically and by individual craftspeople. The laminae ex-voto are “very modern” in this continuum, with none readily identifiable earlier than the seventeenth century and most dating from the nineteenth. Most are silver sheets (laminae) embossed with images including “eyes, nose, ears, arms, hands, fingers, legs (with and without feet), feet, abdomens, breasts, torsos, genitals, esophagus, lungs, kidneys, vertebral columns, uteruses, etc.”

The thin sheets of silver used in the production of votive objects are themselves the laminae, now produced by industrial rolling mills in modern facilities. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Italian silver work was “still more decorative and extravagantly ornamental” than the silvers, including religious objects, produced by Northern European craftsmen, and was then being produced in quantity in southern Italian workshops and along pilgrimage routes. Those decorative influences, particularly of the various stylistic developments that proliferated in this era, are still evident in the elaborate and beautifully stylized images of contemporary laminae ex-voto of which a sanctuary at Pompeii may have as many as 10,000 repetitions of some forms. Flat silver ex-voto reliefs began to be industrially produced around 1880. Though many continued to be handmade by traditional repoussé techniques, the low relief of the sheet form is particularly adaptable to production stamping processes.

When the object is hand-fabricated, the artisan and the devotee participate in an intense collaboration of craft and content. The silversmith’s skills are engaged on several levels: technically, in terms of process, regarding knowledge of the codified catalogue of reference provided by traditional forms, and as a confidante, in that the silversmith offers “his interested attention to the story” of his client. In this remarkable interaction “the devoted speaks of himself without reserve,” and the artisan and client are united in “solidarity and complicity” in opposition to the church’s “persecutorial attitude” toward the ex-voto tradition (formal church policy doesn’t embrace this evidence of a prior system of beliefs). The process is prolonged, with multiple visits to view progress and make changes. The two cooperate. The silversmith’s expertise is applied to the development of an object that manifests the devotee’s deep spiritual response to a miraculous event.

The metal sheets are “signs” of the disease, the sick part or parts of the body “auspiciously detached from the body of the devotee and displayed in the sacred place where they could no longer harm, crystallized in the incorruptible material.” Many elements of this symbolic body have survived intact from ancient cultures, and reference very diverse devotional practices. The body is rendered in three different modes: “the body of small parts and of internal organs—eyes, lips, breasts, kidneys, lungs, intestines, hands and feet; the body of large parts—the head, chest, back, abdomen, legs and arms; and the body of the entire figure. Almost all these parts refer to a popular ancient anatomy and are synecdoche—parts put for the whole—of illnesses that have struck a zone . . . the kidneys, the lungs or the intestines, are of more recent design.” They also represent a complex negotiation with the concept of mortality.

The Catholic Church in Italy has been engaged in a parallel, “big-picture” mortality dialogue for centuries. Particularly relevant examples, related to the complex histories of faith and power that shaped that institution, are embodied in monumental memorials to the Popes. Sanctioned, and astonishing, renderings of heroically scaled pontiffs crowd St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. However, over the centuries those individual histories have dimmed and blended, while the sculptures themselves remain an extraordinary testimony to both the power and agency of the art itself, and continue to speak eloquently of the individual human capacity to transcend material limitations through the emotionally intensive and physical work of making.

Until recently that same church disapproved of the use of these individual votive objects, probably because of their clear connection to pagan belief systems and Marian cults. Where the memorial is a monumental bid for immortality, these objects belong to narratives of the individual, the humble and everyday. They reflect the sweep of history in their materials and decorative vocabulary yet are clearly driven by an awareness of the proximity of death and a deep desire to prevail and survive. They are, as noted above, “Parts put for the whole,” but also parts that break down wholeness and render the overwhelming abstractions of mortality into practical, manageable parts.

Over the last thirty years in the United States, artists have accessed a huge range of media strategies and appropriated an international record of cultures and histories. Still, the ex-voto is primarily “a communication” with a profound history, one that must be negotiated by any artist interested in deploying its imagery . . . “a collection of symbol models, which may be utilized as vehicles and channels with which to communicate with the sacred . . . [t]he language of the ex-voto.”

One aspect of the nature of these communications is addressed by Pietro Caggiano in a publication from the sanctuary of Madonna dell’Rosario in Pompeii. He warns that
"During the era of 'social communication' one must avoid the potential dangers of the 'depletion of the sign.' The miracle is . . . an objective sign that is rooted in the 'fact,' not merely tied to the judgment of those who have the power to accept or reject it."6 This statement, referring to the authenticity of the sign, gains aesthetic currency when related to the literary structures outlined by Roland Barthes in his essay "Myth Today."7 He assumes a commonality of experience that lends conviction to intentionally contextualized communications. Speaking of signifier and sign he describes the signifier, a bunch of roses, as "empty" without the signified . . . in his example, passion. It (the bunch of roses) becomes a "full" sign through the author’s intention and the references and associations provided by society’s conventions and traditions.

There are other obvious connections. Walter Benjamin, in his essay “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” says, “Artistic production begins with ceremonial objects destined to serve in a cult.”8 Originally the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult. We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual.9

Examined in relation to this concept of the “authentic,” Benjamin contends that, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” and that reproductions substitute "a plurality of copies for a unique existence."10 However, the evidence of contemporary devotional objects points instead to an embrace of mechanical reproduction for ritual purposes. Their authenticity and "aura" are preserved through "the growth of the devotee's personal labor" and newly interpretive discrimination in their presentation and composition. The contemporary ex-voto provides "proof of the search for an individual and unrepeatable contact"11 often characterized by the use and repurposing of mass-produced materials.

The ambiguous messages that result from breaking the rules of a code and characterize this "combining" process suggest another structure shared with poetry and visual art. Art can be described as "a way of connecting 'messages' together, in order to produce 'texts' in which the 'rule breaking' roles of ambiguity and self reference are fostered and organized."12 As Umberto Eco writes,

a. many messages on different levels are ambiguously organized
b. the ambiguities follow a precise design
c. both the normal and ambiguous devices in any one message exert a contextual pressure on the normal and ambiguous devices in all the others
d. the way in which the 'rules' of one system are violated by one message is the same as that in which the rules of another system are violated by their messages."13

As Terence Hawkes goes on to comment on Eco’s thought:

The effect is to generate an ‘aesthetic idiolect’, a ‘special language’ peculiar to the work of art, which induces in its audience a sense of ‘cosmicity’—that is, of endlessly moving beyond each established level of meaning the moment it is established—of continuously transforming its denotations into new connotations”14

including the eclectic philosophies of postmodernism.

Artists have embraced these complex understandings along with those diverse philosophies. Protocols of other media, and the media themselves, are freely accessed by makers who have matured in an era that values interdisciplinary awareness. The resulting works quote sculpture and painting, incorporate photography, paper, fibers, paint, and other materials. They rethink traditional formats, shift scale from the familiarly miniature to the spectacularly gigantic, quote and contextualize objects produced by cultures from around the world. The values of art itself are systematically challenged by artists who understand that the “quality” of the work is relative to the nature of the inquiry. All of the forms and traditions of the medium are open to question, with a resulting exponential expansion of fields, the blurring of traditional boundaries between disciplines, and intense scrutiny of cultural influences and meaning.

Keith Achepohl

Keith Achepohl is one of the visual artists who was attracted to the "little metal objects"15 when he encountered them, first in Venice, and began collecting without directly relating them to his own practice. However, he is a highly skilled intaglio printmaker, and the votive objects are made of silver, tooled and formed "into a message."16 Achepohl
thinks about his copper intaglio work that same way, as an evolving narrative. In fact, he has worked occasionally with the *ex-voto* as subject matter, applying them to lush drawing papers as chine collé, then working back into the whole to develop a new set of ideas.

Once the image is established on paper, he intuitively responds to it, depending on the process, as he says “to tell me what will happen.” He found hands and feet to be important . . . the way we feel our way through life. This lets me be a narrator of other people’s stories . . . but the stories have to be made up.” Somehow this work also allowed him “not to be afraid to make really tender stories.” Achepohl understands head, heart, and hand as the “three aspects of creativity.” With them he can “create a world . . . tell any story.” The origin, selection, and collection of the *ex-voto* objects runs parallel, bringing a visual anthology of individual stories.

The *ex-voto* is the product of a long history of respect and reverence for “the sacred body,” probably born out of human sacrifice that has over time accumulated new meanings and connections to physical miracles, immortality, and Christian faith. Those histories may be hidden in Achepohl’s individual works, but he wouldn’t deliberately include them. He is interested instead in their connection to everyday events, saying that he sees the original process of devotional selection as a profound statement, and that his use of the image can actually embody that interest, as the original testifies to magical intercession in the physical failings of everyday life.

The intellectual exercise of generating ideas and the physical work of making are at the core of Achepohl’s professional life and collections, though he speaks of the “privilege” of making, rather than the labor, skill, and intensity of the process, putting it this way:

> I have been working all my life. My first job, in grade school, was in a nursery potting seedlings. I worked as a teacher more than fifty years but never considered it work. It was a wonderful way to support a family and provide time to make art. I have never considered making art as work. It is working only in the labor sense. The act of creating or bringing visual life to an idea is thrilling and why our “work” place is the greatest refuge we have from the fractious life we sometimes have to endure. That is not work. In the midst of creating we get lost in time and punch no clock. When I think about the hand-made *ex-voto* I love so much it is to think they were not “work” to make either, they were made with love.”

And Achepohl continues to work relentlessly, perhaps because he understands that to work is to be alive, and that the immortality available to the visual artist is the art–work, the artifact of that process.

As a collector, Keith Achepohl has a strong sense of responsibility for the objects he brings together. In her essay, “The Collection, Paradise of Consumption,” Susan Stewart describes the collection as a kind of “ark . . . the archetypal collection, a world which is representative, yet which erases its context of origin.” She asserts that “Once the object is completely severed from its origin, it is possible to generate a new series, to start again within a context that is framed by the selectivity of the collector.” Regarding “selectivity,” Achepohl has many serious collections, and thinks about the metal *ex-voto* related to other objects he researches and collects. They have certain things in common. Works in all the “major collections are anonymous, never signed,” and include African pottery and Turkish weaving. He feels that they are “made from need or love,” not to celebrate individual accomplishment or the power of patronage.

Achepohl acknowledges that the history and meaning of the object change when it’s taken from its intended environment and moved into the collection of a visual artist. He can only see the object, its physical and visual attributes. He says it is “my job to reconstruct it, to give it a new life,” whether as part of the collection or processed through his own work. At that point it is “nothing but the life I might imagine it has,” confirming Stewart’s contention that “The world of the ark is not one of nostalgia, but of anticipation.”

Achepohl’s favorites in the collection inevitably connect to individual narratives that are about things being better . . . a relief from grief, which may be a primary attraction in collecting them. Related to this, he refers to his own “moments of great despair,” though he is quick to add that he’s “had one hell of a great life.” The experience of collecting and examining the silver *ex-voto* has helped him understand their purpose in a deep, intimate way. He points to an extraordinary kneeling female figure, whose attitude might be described as abject surrender. Achepohl, the collector, “wants to hold that praying woman, and tell her it’s OK. She is so beautiful.”

Kate Wagle is a metalsmith and Associate Dean and Director of the School of Architecture and Allied Arts at the University of Oregon’s Portland campus.
1. Chudome B. DeForest, "Tina!" The Votive Pictures of Japan: From Articles Written by J. H. DeForest from 1880 to 1886. [Japan]: publisher not identified, 1914.
2. Ibid.
3. Personal communication, Monsignor Pietro Caggiano to Kate Wagle, September 6, 1996.
4. Personal communication, Professor Anna Maria Tripputi to Kate Wagle, September 14, 1996.
5. Ibid.
7. Personal communication, Padre Giuseppe Peragta to Kate Wagle, September 6, 1996.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Michelle Rak, in Sweet Mother (La Madre Bella) (Pompeii: Pontifical Sanctuary of Pompeii, 1960), 76.
13. Ibid., 77.
14. Personal communication, Monsignor Pietro Caggiano to Kate Wagle, September 6, 1996.
15. Rak, Sweet Mother, 95.
19. Ibid., 221–224.
20. Ibid., 226.
21. Ibid., 233.
24. Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics, 141.
25. Personal communication, Keith Achepohl, December 5, 2013.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Personal communication, Keith Achepohl, December 5, 2013.
30. Ibid.
31. Personal communication, Keith Achepohl, December 5, 2013.
32. Ibid.
34. Personal communication, Keith Achepohl, December 5, 2013.

SELECTIONED READINGS

Caggiano, Pietro, Michelle Rak, and Angelo Turchini. Sweet Mother (La Madre Bella) Pompeii: Pontifical Sanctuary of Pompeii, 1990.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Keith Achepohl received a BA from Knox College, an MFA degree from the University of Iowa, and honorary doctorates from Pacific Lutheran University and Knox College. For many years he was head of the printmaking division in the School of Art at the University of Iowa, where he taught undergraduate and graduate courses in intaglio and relief printmaking, as well as graduate courses on print-related subjects. Fulbright awards have taken him to Egypt and Turkey.

Over the years, Achepohl has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions throughout the United States and abroad, and his work is included in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, Spain, and the Kobe Art Museum in Kobe, Japan, among many others.

The current body of mixed-media works on paper was inspired by Achepohl’s collection of ex-voto (offering to a saint or to a divinity and given in fulfillment of a vow or in gratitude or devotion), amassed over a fifty-year period while working and traveling in Italy, Greece, Egypt, and the United States. They were begun while he was an Artist-in-Residence at The International School for Graphic Art (Scuola Internazionale di Grafica) in Venice, Italy in 2010.

NOTES
All works on paper by Keith Achepohl are untitled and numbered
2011–2013
Mixed media on handmade Venetian paper
13.5 x 17 in. (unframed)
20 x 24 in. (framed)
Courtesy of the artist, Eugene, Oregon

All ex-votos are untitled
Italian, 19th–20th century
Brass, silver
Dimensions vary
Collection of Keith Achepohl, Eugene, Oregon

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