

# Art, faith and fear

Deborah Lewer looks back at Rosemarie Trockel's 1993 installation, *ICH HABE ANGST*, a work which takes on new significance in this age of pandemic.

*So once in Israel love came to us incarnate,  
stood in the doorway between two worlds,  
and we were all afraid.*

Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982)

In this age of pandemic, the world is becoming more intimate with fear. As I write, it is Holy Saturday. I think about entombments, isolation, waiting, disorientation, and mortality. I think about what has been lost for good and about what might yet emerge from this time, unimaginably and utterly new.

Back in November, a distant time when people could still cram together without a care into a darkened lecture hall, I spoke at the final symposium of Art + Christianity's *Visual Communion* series of events. My paper was on ways of rethinking the contemporary altarpiece. Among other works, I looked at a short-lived installation by Rosemarie Trockel from 1993: *ICH HABE ANGST*. It exists today only in photographs. They document the stark black words, in capital letters 45cm high, with which the artist marked in sign-paint the clean white walls of the chancel in St Peter's Jesuit church in Cologne. The German, *ICH HABE ANGST*, is 'I am afraid', or, more literally, 'I have fear'<sup>1</sup>. Now seems the time to revisit it.

Trockel, based for most of her career in Cologne, has been a leading figure in international contemporary art since the 1980s. Best known for her archly subversive pictures made using wool on knitting machines, her wider practice defies categorisation and includes sculpture, installation, video, ceramics, books, drawings, paintings and more. *ICH HABE ANGST* was one of the first installations at the Kunst-Station Sankt Peter Köln (to give it its full title) in a location that could not be more focal: at the church's high altar. Initiated in 1987 by its charismatic former priest and theologian Friedhelm Mennekes, and developed by his successors, the 'art station' at St Peter's is a project as successful as it has been controversial.<sup>2</sup> The roots of both the success and the controversy lie in its audacious integration of significant international contemporary art and music in liturgical worship.<sup>3</sup> Part of Mennekes' creative mission was to 'deconfessionalise' the space for art within the church. This meant clearing out many of the old images, objects and furnishings. It meant not just allotting the odd nook, but making

radical, generous space for contemporary art and music, including that which is challenging, uncomfortable or difficult. Worship takes place, today as then, in the space of art, as art takes place in the space of worship. The work of Jesuit theologians such as Karl Rahner and Alois Grillmeier, influential voices in the reforms of Vatican II, underpinned the formative aspiration. Citing Grillmeier, Mennekes put it as a question of 'construing the truly human in a new way and thereby of permitting the epiphany of the godly to occur more forcefully and favourably.'<sup>4</sup>

'I AM AFRAID'. With these three short, truly human words, Trockel unhinges the altarpiece – literally and metaphorically. Placed in the manner of a triptych where we would more commonly find images of saints, or words from scripture, *these* words are an irritant. They are a disclosure, but whose? What is the variety and the unnamed object of fear? The utterance, 'ICH HABE ANGST' seems at first displaced, if not intentionally misplaced in the context of Eucharistic space. What does it mean to be reminded of fear while doing this to remember him? How does a priest celebrate the Mass before these words, with them 'breathing down his neck' as Mennekes himself put it?<sup>5</sup> Mennekes recounts that some who saw Trockel's work installed in the church were disconcerted. They wondered how to respond in the light of God's recurring imperative, in scripture, *not* to be afraid.<sup>6</sup> In the Eucharistic Liturgy of the tradition most familiar to me, at the confession and absolution these words are said: 'God is love and we are his children. There is no room for fear in love. We love because he loved us first. Let us confess our sins in penitence and faith.'<sup>7</sup> Reading Trockel's words in the light of these opens up the question of the 'room' for fear and its confession.<sup>8</sup>

Two commonly encountered objections to art that breaks with convention in liturgical space are that it risks detracting from the focus of worship or that the nuances of the artwork itself can end up reduced by the highly determined setting to the primarily anecdotal or illustrative. Both risks are taken here, but this is also the work's strength. The stark words are a shock, demanding attention. They suggest an intensely personal subjectivity. They can also be readily and poignantly imagined in the context of Jesus's Passion – in the garden of Gethsemane, in the upper room, or earlier even, over the forty days of the wilderness, perhaps. There



Rosemarie Trockel, *ICH HABE ANGST*, 1993

Installation view Kunststation St Peter Köln

Courtesy Sprüth Magers and the artist.

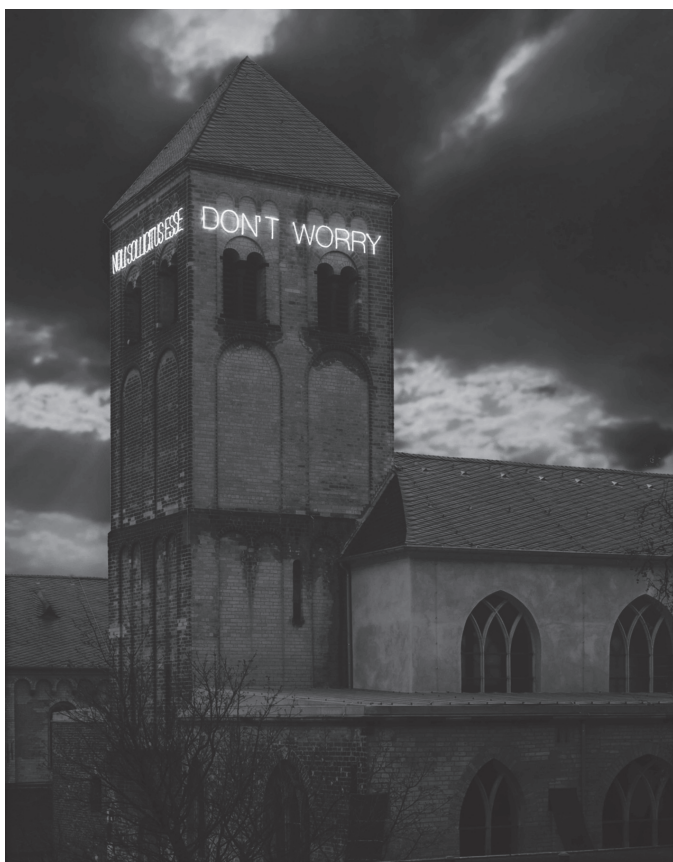
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are countless biblical contexts in which they resonate. They work, that is, in a devotional dramaturgy that may be deeply affective and connective, even as they risk reinscribing the images the words replace. But there are other possible agencies, newly permitted epiphanies. The statement can be met as addressing fears more private, more anonymous, more collective and more contemporary. There are caveats to bringing such words, such art into the context of Eucharistic worship. One might be justifiably around the tension between intimate conversation and collective language.<sup>9</sup> This has always been a balance held in the space of the Eucharist. For all this, fear of contamination by the inconvenient realities of private lives and anxious purity around the permissible and the admissible can mark the body of the Church too. Sacramental theology has always had to hold in equilibrium the profession of the name and ministry of the man who ate with sinners and tax collectors, touched lepers, healed on the Sabbath and dealt with demons with such concerns.

Trockel's work also gives voice to the very real fear – for all kinds of very real and often painful reasons – that many people feel and have felt about entering a church. From this perspective, *ICH HABE ANGST* might be uniquely placed to forge a new intimacy with people who fear judgement or discrimination, with those who have sought refuge and protection in church and religion, whether they found it or not, and with those persecuted for their faith, or, like Jesus, condemned by religious authority. Precisely such readings of the work are full of potential in the assembly of ecclesia.

It can be reasonably claimed that any altarpiece or work resembling one exists in a fluid relationship with its location (church or museum, for example) and with its viewers. Postmodern debates around works of art and mediation have long recognised what has been called a 'discursive incoherence'<sup>10</sup> barely covered by noting that such objects may be experienced as works of art, as devotional aids, or as artefacts of church or social history. They may be conduits or barriers to worship, fragile objects in need of preserva-





Martin Creed, *Work No. 252, DON'T WORRY*, 2005  
 Installation at St Peter's Church, Cologne. Photo: Christian Nitz  
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 (see footnote 6)

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tion, unwanted baggage, tourist attractions, autobiographical testimonies, contested political, gendered or theological propositions, or more.

*ICH HABE ANGST* throws open some theoretical questions then, too. What of the autonomy of the artwork? There are dimensions arguably lost in such a highly determined setting. In the case of this piece, they include its relationship to Minimalism and Conceptualism, or its cool, subtle irony in the face of the large and largely male gestures of the highly wrought neo-Expressionist painterly mode, lingeringly dominant at that time in Germany especially. Scholars of Trockel's practice commonly situate it as part of an enduring feminist engagement with intimacy and interactivity.<sup>11</sup> We might ask whether such potential is compromised or heightened by this placement of the work.

For me at least, Trockel's terse sentence opens a doorway for contact, for connection, for empathy, for honesty, for the play of theological imagination, for lived experience and even for some dark wit. If we are to 'draw near with faith', what is the church, what is that table, to those who instinctively draw back in fear? I don't know if Trockel was aware of Bertrand Russell's famous lecture and essay 'Why I am not a Christian' (1927). Given his argument – one widely rehearsed by many less articulate atheists too – that fear is the basis of religion, *ICH HABE ANGST* and its placement is ripe for some ironic relish too. It is timely to recall that in the era of smallpox epidemics and of the Enlightenment, some conservative theologians worried that inoculation against the rampant and deadly effects of the disease 'interfered with God's will and ... would make people less God-fearing.'<sup>12</sup> Trockel's wit is so pervasive throughout her body of work that such nuances cannot be discounted. How often

has fear kept people in the sanctuary? And kept its accrued objects, habits and images there too? Mennekes herself acknowledges that it takes courage to empty a sacral space and to face the void that is left.<sup>13</sup> Trockel's installation speaks into that void in more ways than one.

It is noteworthy that fear is intimate to Trockel herself. The artist has spoken publicly of her own debilitating agoraphobia, including in the period leading up to the installation of this work.<sup>14</sup> As someone whose anxiety frequently kept her alone at home, and threatened to compromise her artistic career, she is uniquely placed to speak of an amplified, heightened fear in a site that is, by definition, one of contact, touch, breaking and sharing. The work holds in tension individual experience and an aspect of common humanity in a way that is, arguably, deeply Eucharistic. Looking at it now, in 2020, the parallels as well as the differences between lone agoraphobia and 'staying home' as today's collective matter of life and death, also barely need stating.

So, what of *ICH HABE ANGST* at a time when anxiety of so many varieties is pervasive, and often at the same time so isolating? How do we look at this work, at this altar, in the face of the magnitude of a global pandemic, the deadly inequalities of which are exacerbated by congenital habits arguably more virulent in us all than any infection? What is the place of a human confession of fear at the place and time of communal nourishment and thanksgiving in sacrament? Or when such gathering is displaced? Is its wayward intimacy more fittingly silenced, erased, left to another pastoral or aesthetic context?

Its potential is not only in the darkness of Passiontide. It might invite us to approach a place where the commonality

and solidarity of Christ with all who suffer, in body and in mind, is vividly alive. If the suffering Christ is not to be an abstraction, but the broken body of the Church is to be held through every fractured Eucharist, especially now, in isolation and dispersal, then fear – and its expression – has its place, like it or not. When people across the world are suffering unprecedented fears, ways of being together apart can be lifelines to much-needed comfort and reassurance. There is a place for normality, for custom, for maintaining cherished habits and established communities. But to do justice to those who have fear, we should be wary of too much pretence that it is business as usual, that all that has changed is the medium of access – Zoom, YouTube, Facebook or anything else. For one thing, these very media now mean that people of fear can now access (and are accessing) ‘church’ from the safety and anonymity of their homes before they may be ready actually to enter one or approach its table.

Were anything normal about this Easter I would have been on the other side of the Atlantic joining the weekend crowds at the Chicago Art Institute’s ‘El Greco: Ambition and Defiance’ exhibition and preparing to review it for this issue of *Art & Christianity*. I am struck now by what had led me to want to write about that exhibition. Its particular curatorial focus intrigued me. It proposed to investigate El Greco, painter of dazzling spiritual fervour, as a career artist and ‘the astounding ambition that drove him to relentlessly pursue success’.<sup>15</sup> I wanted to see what the curators would do with this, remembering when I last saw a comparable approach – albeit to a very different artist – yield fascinating results (with the Tate Modern’s 2013 Paul Klee retrospective). I wanted to consider the relative merits of looking at confidence, ambition and success – including in the framework of church patronage. I wanted to consider it as a counterweight to arguably more crowd-pleasing curatorial emphases, such as on the isolated or failing ‘anxious artist’, for instance (explicit in the interpretation at the exhibition ‘Munch : Van Gogh’ at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam in 2015–16, to name just one example). Diverted now to revisit Trockel, as I isolate myself against the dangers of an unseen virus, instead, I find myself musing what a church and its invitation to communion would be like if the words behind the altar read ‘I HAVE CONFIDENCE’, ‘I HAVE AMBITION’, ‘I AM SUCCESSFUL’, ‘I HAVE IMMUNITY’ or even: ‘I HAVE FAITH’. What epiphanies of the godly could they permit? How many of us would feel communion at that table and if we did without equivocation, why would we need to be there in the first place?

In a culture and an economy that prizes confidence and strength, vulnerability is fatal to much we hold dear. Nothing imperils the economic virility of global capitalism that keeps wealth and poverty as it is like loss of confidence. This time of crisis may be the time to discern, urgently, between fear that holds tyranny in its place and the room for love that might be found in a new kind of immunity, in collective resistance. In his impassioned polemic against our

society of ‘24/7 multitasking in order to achieve, accomplish, perform and possess’, *Sabbath as Resistance*, Walter Bruggemann sees the potential for ‘compassionate solidarity’ precisely in ‘restraint, withdrawal, or divestment from the concrete practices of society that specialize in anxiety.’<sup>16</sup> He was not writing in an age of pandemic, but his words are as relevant as Trockel’s now. At the doorway between two worlds, the old and the new, we are all afraid. Bringing fear into the church, breaking it open and sharing the experience might be a form of resistance we need as much as the vaccination we long for.

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1. The now common English usage of the word ‘angst’, derives from various linguistic and cultural contexts including Scandinavia. In Anglophone use it has taken on distinct cultural inflections over time, suggestive of dread, existential fear or anxiety in more personalized contexts. Its use in German, however, retains the more straightforward meaning of ‘fear’ in many varieties.
2. An example of the kinds of controversy the congregation has faced was when in 2001 the then Cardinal Josef Ratzinger forbade the further use in Sankt Peter of a white granite sculpture, *Gurutz Aldare*, by the Basque artist Eduardo Chillida, as an altar.
3. See: [www.sankt-peter-koeln.de](http://www.sankt-peter-koeln.de)
4. Friedhelm Mennekes, *Triptychon: Moderne Altarbilder* (Frankfurt a.M. and Leipzig: Insel Verlag 1995), pp. 8–9.
5. Mennekes, *Triptychon*, p. 99.
6. Indeed, Sankt Peter’s most visible permanent installation, since 2000, is Martin Creed’s *Work No. 252, DON’T WORRY*, which consists of the phrase, in neon, in four languages (Latin, Greek, German and English) installed on the four sides of the church tower.
7. Scottish Liturgy 1982 (Scottish Episcopal Church).
8. Reading Trockel’s words in the light of Martin Luther’s theological ambivalence around ‘fear’ of God might open it up in further ways (my thanks to Charles Pickstone for this point).
9. Some of Simone Weil’s distinction between ‘the language of the marketplace’ and ‘the language of the nuptial chamber’ is relevant here, cf. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009 [1951]), p. 35.
10. Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. 14.
11. Gregory Williams, ‘The Art of Indecision: Rosemarie Trockel’s Book Drafts’, in *Rosemarie Trockel: Drawings, Collages and Book Drafts*, (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2010), p. 13.
12. Anthony Gottlieb, *The Dream of Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Philosophy* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), p. 240.
13. *Zwischen Freiheit und Bindung: Friedhelm Mennekes im Gespräch mit Brigitta Lentz über Kirche und Kunst* (Cologne: Wienand Verlag, 2008), pp. 134–135.
14. ‘Rosemarie Trockel talks to Isabelle Graw’. (‘80s Then), *Artforum International* vol. 41, issue 7, March 2003.
15. From the exhibition website at [www.artic.edu](http://www.artic.edu)
16. Walter Bruggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), pp. 45, 85.