



# ARTSCAPE

magazine

ANGEL ORENSANZ'S  
**BUILDING AN ART PARADISE**

VISUAL ARTICLE  
**LANGUAGE, MIND AND MEMORY**

SPECIAL REPORT  
**SACRED SPACE:  
ART IN NON-NEUTRAL ENVIRONMENTS**

Summer/Fall 2013







# SACRED SPACE: ART IN NON-NEUTRAL ENVIRONMENTS

by Zoe V. Speas

*"Religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, thus building a wall of separation between Church and State."*

The "wall" for which Jefferson advocated in his 1802 epistle to the Danbury Baptist Association provides a healthy buffer between two great institutions, happily avoiding the consequences of their potential collision. Like the negative and positive poles of a magnet, "church" and "state" exist in easy opposition of one another. With the constitutional separation, fear of political upheaval from the influence of the church (or vice versa) quickly became an antiquated fear, relegated to the sumptuous history of thrones and empires.

The question of separating religion from the State now morphs into the new question of separating religion from contemporary art. In New York City, organizations cross boundaries of religious sect or affiliation to offer an answer. Many institutions—such as the Church of St. Paul the Apostle, the Judson Memorial Church, and the Angel Orensanz Foundation for the Arts—use their unambiguous identities to foster the cultivation of new art, as well as the livelihood of their spiritual communities.

In its central location at 172 Norfolk Street, the **Angel Orensanz Foundation for the Arts** upholds the integrity of its history through acts of preservation, tribute, and the continuation of legacy. Purchased by Angel Orensanz in 1986, the building originated as a synagogue for the

*Left: The Norfolk Street Synagogue, c. 1986.*



Reform Judaism movement as practiced by the resident Congregation, Ansche Slonin. Alexander Saeltzer's design for the building integrated the Congregation's core religious beliefs into the architecture and scale of the synagogue itself. The massive ceilings and sloping archways mirror the acoustic value of the Sistine Chapel, while Saeltzer's façade evokes the style of renowned Christian worship spaces throughout Europe, such as the Cathedral of Cologne or the Friedrichwerdesche Kirche in Germany. The Norfolk Street Synagogue experienced a period of steady prosperity and operated as a cornerstone for the Lower East Side, but ultimately fell to ruin by the mid-20th century and became a home to a largely transient community when Angel Orensanz bought the building for use as an art space and studio.

Today, the space operates as a center for the arts and as a museum, with galleries along the second-floor clerestory level and in a beautiful maze of subterranean apartments beneath the ancient wooden floors of the great hall. The artists that exhibit in this timeless space have a particular challenge, unique to non-neutral spaces such as churches, synagogues, or mosques. The walls are rich with the vibrant paint and colored LED lights that transform the space into something from another world and another time. It is not to say that the art has to compete with the Foundation itself. In fact, Angel

Orensanz has mastered an exceptional technique of using the strength of the building to augment and complement the installations, sculptures, and paintings that he brings to the Foundation. A perfect counterpoint between artist and the sacred space of the former synagogue develops to create for the viewer an entirely original experience of the art. The dialogue established between artist, space, and art has long been a tradition of religious institutions throughout history, one that continues today through the incorporation of contemporary art into non-neutral spaces like the Foundation. It is this specific dialogue that became the basis for an American society of Catholic priests called the **Paulist Fathers**.

A New York City-native and student of Henry D. Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, **Fr. Isaac Hecker** founded the group in 1858. The spirituality Hecker encouraged for the Fathers focused on the need to remain open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit in both great and small moments in life. His work with mid-19th century America was to initiate a dialogue between faith and culture, which he considered vital to the transformation of Catholicism in the United States.

Over 150 years later, the Paulist Fathers follow in Hecker's footsteps in their efforts to incorporate arts community into



*The Angel Orensanz Foundation for the Arts*



*Fr. Isaac Hecker (b. 1818 – d. 1888)*



their own network. When Fr. Frank Sabatté, a member of the Fathers and a visual artist himself, met with his group in Tucson, Arizona, it was the task of pursuing this mission that they rested upon his shoulders.

"They said to me, 'We'd like you to go to New York and start something with the artists,'" said Fr. Sabatté, "we had established our Founder's dialogue with culture through interactions with television and radio, but never visual art."

Fr. Sabatté traveled back to the city of Hecker's origins and began to reach out to artists, particularly young adult artists developing their work in Masters of Fine Arts programs, like the one at Hunter College. He visited the College's open studios and began his conversations the same question he most invites regarding his own projects: "Tell me about your work." The young artists Fr. Sabatté contacted opened up to the priest and his approach, which he made clear was not an attempt to convert or apostatize. Their initial reactions, Sabatté explained, were similar to those of members of his parish at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle.

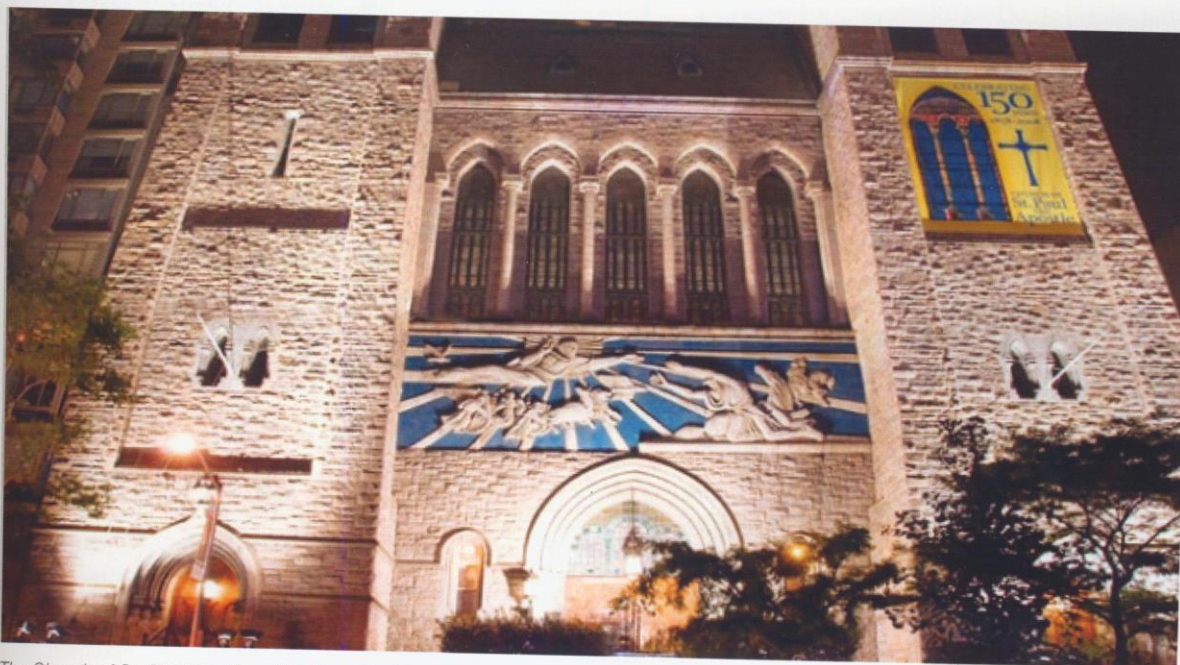
"Some of them were leery of institutional religion. When

I did meet young Catholics in my explorations, most of them identified as 'former Catholics.' It wasn't a matter of hatred," Fr. Sabatté said. "They just weren't sure about the Church."

From this network of artists, Fr. Sabatté created a team of individuals to work towards his goal of presenting an exhibition inside St. Paul's. The end-result was a modest, but significant beginning. Eight artists exhibited their work to a reception of around forty people, but Fr. Sabatté was sure of his progress in pushing the questions that personify the Paulist Fathers' mission: What are artists teaching us about the spirit? **Where are we as a culture, and where are we going?**

Fr. Sabatté compares the questions and their answers to the biblical parable of The Woman at the Well. "The woman had something Jesus needed and He had something she needed," said Fr. Sabatté. "This mutual necessity sparked a conversation. That's why Openings was created."

The artists' collective known as **Openings** emerged as an extension of Fr. Sabatté's work with the artists and community members who attended the yearly exhibits at St. Paul's, as well as monthly discussion groups aimed



*The Church of St. Paul the Apostle, New York City, NY.*

at expanding these dialogues. It is not a religious sect of only Catholic artists, nor does the group seek to ignore the heritage of its founding. Openings trounces the paradigm of the impossibility of art and intellectualism coexisting, reducing it to a relic of "old modernism." As the mission of the collective states:

"Openings believes that the connections between creativity and transcendence foster critical conversation that have the potential to unite individuals across cultural divides."

This year, the collective opened its seventh group exhibition in the body of the church to an opening reception of nearly one thousand community members from across the boroughs. Showcasing the work of 36 artists, **"1.) All of the Above"** opened on September 13, 2013 at the Church of St. Paul, located at 405 W 59th Street on Ninth Avenue. The exhibition will remain open until October 25, 2013, with a special Artist's Walk-Thru tour of the exhibit scheduled on Thursday, October 3rd.

The work on display in "1.) All of the Above" reflects the diversity of artists selected through an open-call application process organized by Fr. Sabatté and a group of deciding jurors. This year, he received over 70 entries. To the thirty-six artists whose work was accepted, Fr. Sabatté explained the restrictions of the physical act of displaying inside St. Paul's—nailing into a select portion of the historic walls, using wire suspension or other specialty devices—in order to preserve the integrity of the building's architecture.

But censorship? Concerns over content? Subject matter restrictions?

*"The job of the artist is to deepen the mystery." Sir Francis Bacon*

Not for Fr. Sabatté. He simply appealed to the artists' understanding of the environment

provided to them. Fr. Sabatté asked them to be conscious of the space of active worship, not as a warning, he explains, but rather than as a cautionary restriction, he requested their awareness as a consideration to the implications inherent to presenting contemporary art in a "sacred space." The exhibit is designed to allow people to make sense of things in context of their own world, to allow artists to teach and to converse

with parishioners, residents of the neighborhood, and beyond. The placards assigned to each sculpture, painting photograph, and installation are written for the benefit of communal understanding.

"We want to nudge people a little, to challenge their perceptions," said Fr. Sabatté, "but we do not want to alienate them."

The tradition of exhibiting inside the church has garnered positive and negative responses since its inception in 2006. While the shows are typically met with encouragement and surprise at the ease with which Openings has bridged the gap between religion and secularism, some members of the parish have decried the juxtaposition of contemporary art and religion, claiming that it disrespected the institution of the church. For Fr. Sabatté, this is to be expected.

In this investigation of the parallels between art and religion, three questions became the platform for beginning a conversation with the individuals involved with Openings and beyond.

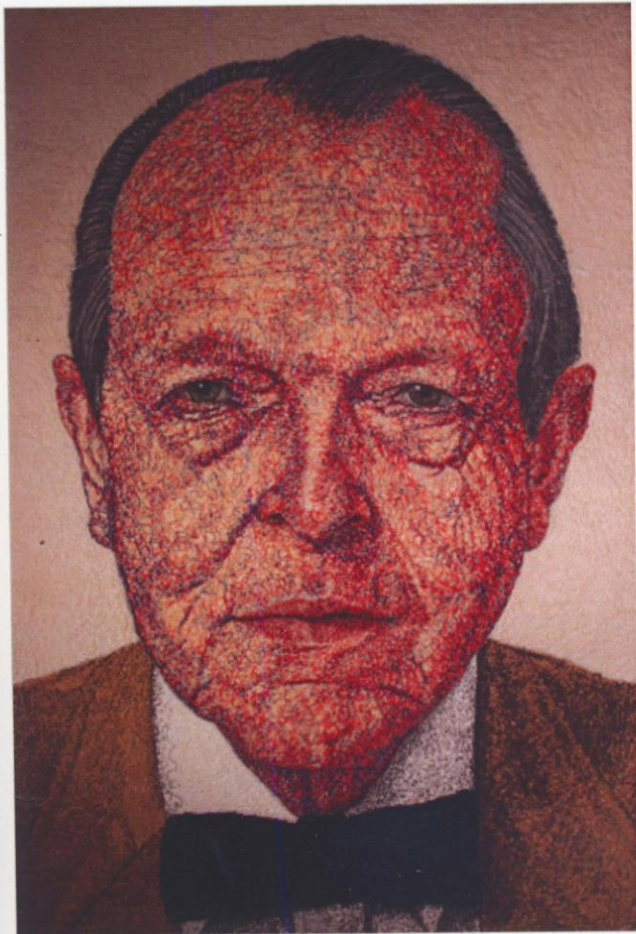
- **"Art is a matter which lies solely between man and his—?"** This question is based off of a quote from Jefferson about the need to separate the Church from the State: "Religion is matter which lies solely between man & his God."

- **Art as a process of "religion."** If church-goers kneel before alters and offer up prayers and partake in ceremony and ritual, what are the parallels between an artist and the execution of his art?

- **Sacred Space/Art Space.** How does a non-neutral space—such as a church, synagogue, and "sacred" locations—affect the exhibition of work? What other elements are integrated into art due to the inevitable association with the walls that enclose it?

Fr. Sabatté responded to these questions in his explanation of the types of projects he tackles with his own art. He employs a self-invented form of embroidery which he calls "random stitch free-motion embroidery", a method that involves a loom-like process of weaving and sewing to create any desired image. Using an industrial sewing machine set





Fr. Frank Sabatte. *My Father*. 14"x 18". Embroidery

on a variety of stitch length and thread colors, he builds layers upon layers of texture to create the illusion of depth, skin tone, and life.

The completion of one of these portraits takes weeks and sometimes months to complete. His relationship with the subject matter becomes an incredibly intimate bond between himself and the people he seeks to immortalize with needle and thread.

For Fr. Sabatté, **art is a matter which lies solely between Man & his subject**. The act of creating art brings him into a condition similar to the experience of liminality, which causes the participant to occupy a "space in between." Fr. Sabatté compares it to the act of "contemplative prayer," and in fact asked the artists in his collective and beyond

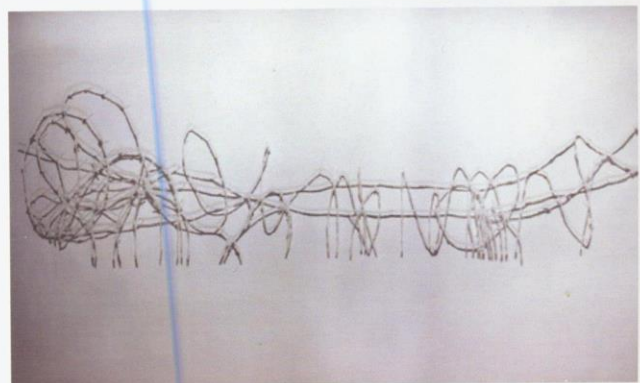
whether they could relate to the condition in their own work.

"When you work, do you tend to lose a sense of yourself? Do you lose a sense of the passage of time?" asked Fr. Sabatté of these artists. "They confirmed that they had undergone some version of this phenomenon in their work, but beyond artists, all people have this connection. What kills it is fear or self-absorption."

Timelessness and total immersion into an act of work is a process of devout commitment. Hours pass, food sits uneaten, and hot coffee goes cold as the individual answers a call from something beyond themselves. **Firth Macmillan**, a Nova Scotia-based artist who exhibited her work as part of the "1.) All of the Above" show at the Church of St. Paul, provided an overview of her process, one that mirrored the tenants of Fr. Sabatté's theories on the execution of art.

**"Art is a matter between myself and what's going on around me,"** she said. "It's my response to the ephemeral, my way of asking and answering questions about the world."

Macmillan, whose preferred media are photography and ceramics, describes the voyage from conception to execution with a beautifully constructed sense of ritual. Her eyes are always open to the world around her, waiting for a single, fleeting moment to strike in order to translate it into her own language. In her time in New York City, she explored the play of light through the branches of trees and the intricate pattern it would create upon the



Firth Macmillan - "Roberta's Defense Redux," 2013.



pavement of Central Park. The hard, merciless line of an abandoned bramble of barbed wire in the snow provided the inspiration for a large-scale silicone sculpture that she included in her 2013 exhibition in Toronto, Canada.

She doesn't describe the path from conception to execution of an impulse as one of a decidedly religious nature, but the artist pointed out the parallels between her work and the act of religious participation. Macmillan's sculpture, "Canopy", was exhibited as part of Openings' "1.) All of the Above", and she recalls the daunting task of translating light streaming through tree branches into a 3-D representation.

"Standing in the snow taking in that barbed wire was like kneeling before the altar," said Macmillan. "The act of noticing as an act of prayer. The ritual of my time and my work in the studio. The celebration ceremony of realizing a piece is finished."

The act of translating the image of light filtering through tree branches was one that Macmillan had never completed before. Her time in the studio and in nature became a balance of experimentation and instinct.

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"It was a huge undertaking," said Macmillan. "From the unconventional technique of creating 'Canopy' to the time consuming process it involved. **I didn't know whether it was going to work at all, and, well, that's faith, isn't it?"**

The atmosphere of the Artists' Walk-Thru on October 3, 2013 echoed the parallel relationship between art and religion, and created a sense of sacred mystery for both the artists presenting their work and the people gathered to partake in the conversation.

"I feel like I'm not allowed to stand here," said one visitor as she stepped close to the altar of St. Paul, where a gathering of artists had collected to greet one another. "There's so much incredible art in the building on its own—it's like putting the works of art inside a work of art."

Many artists spoke in depth about the influence of the "sacred space" on their work and choices for this particular exhibition. Jess Willa Wheaton, an artist and current student in the Hunter College MFA program in New York City, presented a small, almost miniature painting affixed to a prominent wall close to the main sacristy of St. Paul's.



Firth Macmillan. "Canopy." 2011. Ceramic. 11 x 15"



"I wanted to create a dialogue with the architecture," she began in her address to the crowd of artists and neighborhood denizens in attendance, "I'm not a very religious person, but I knew I couldn't compete with the scale of this space, so I thought to work in contrast with it."

Standing next to her work on the steps of the worship space, Jess Willa Wheaton suddenly seemed as slight and subtle as the piece of which she spoke. Her voice echoed so softly against the great marble walls that the crowd of sixty or so viewers leaned close, shoulder to shoulder, in order to hear her.

"So much can be contained in so little," she concluded. "In fact, it has to be, to become so much."

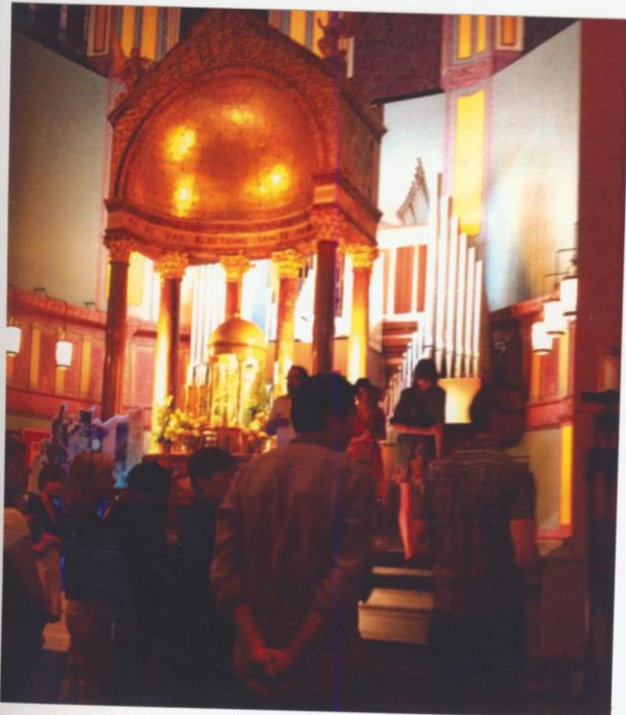
The progression of artists and art-lovers continued along the perimeter of the church, stopping before various installations to give the featured artists an opportunity to discuss their work and invite questions from all those in attendance. The format of the gathering, as arranged by curators Keena Gonzales and Michael Berube, allowed for

an intimate exchange of ideas and critiques. The artists questioned the work of their peers and offered opinions, while Gonzales and Berube acted as monitors to facilitate the discussion.

In the forum of the Walk-Thru, a frequent focus emerged amongst the themes treated by the artists in their work: the importance of ephemera and the elusive moments of life for which we have no ordinary means to preserve. What these artists are able to create, likewise, is extraordinary.

Mark Brennan, a New York City and Cape Cod-based artist, exhibited selections from a series entitled *Plainsong Elegies*. The process involves the capture of the most fragile, delicate plant-life—items the artists specifies as "things just on the edge of disintegrating"—which Brennan finds in nature. Akin to Firth Macmillan's work with the discovery of moments, Brennan effectively "copies" the article—if it survives the transport from the ground to his studio—by an incredible use of detail in acrylic and watercolor.

Brennan derives the title of each portrait in the *Plainsong*



Artists' Walk-Thru for "1.) All of the Above" at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle.



Mark Brennan. Sarah Cooper Hewitt; Oct 12, 1859 - Oct 16, 1930 (2009). Acrylic and watercolor.



Elegies series from tombstones he encounters in the Greenwood cemetery in Brooklyn."In the image presented here, *Sarah Cooper Hewitt; Oct 12, 1859 – Oct 16, 1930*, the memory of the deceased is preserved and commemorated through Brennan's treatment of his subject matter. The artist's approach speaks to the erasure of hierarchy after death. "Like leaves on the ground," Brennan says, "Once we're lowered into the earth, we're all equalized."

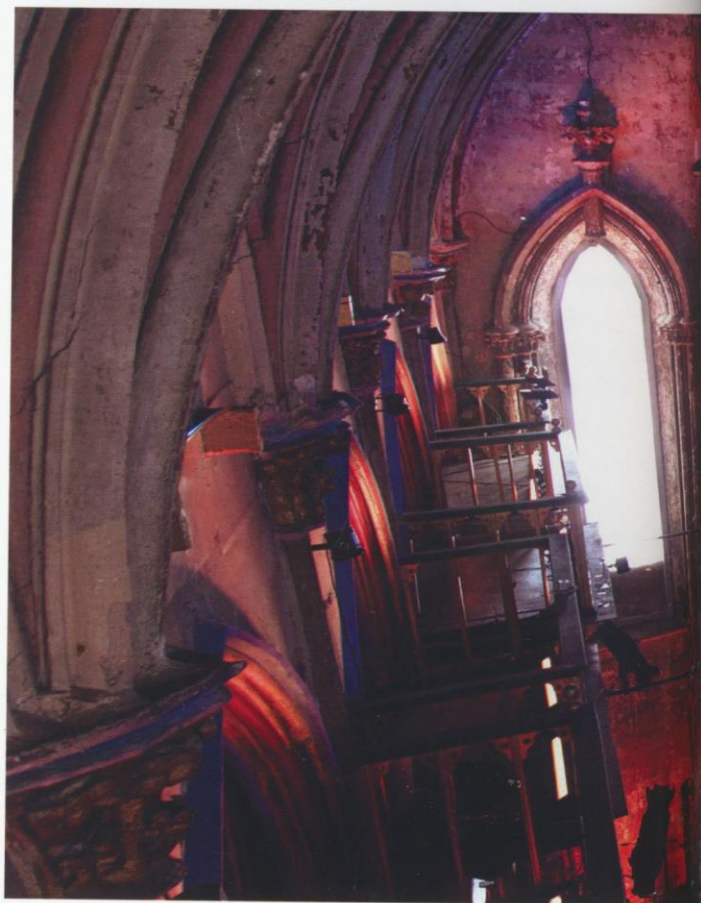
From something so slight and impermanent like a trampled weed or flower, Brennan is able to pay tribute to those who have gone before us—a practice which, according to Fr. Frank Sabatté, evokes a particularly significant element of the Catholic tradition.

"As Catholics, we believe in the Communion of Saints," he explains, "and through this communion, we believe that our beloved dead are never forgotten, and in fact never leave us."

Fr. Sabatté extended the connection between Brennan's art and this aspect of Catholicism in his own work. After years of developing his technique of embroidery portraiture, Fr. Sabatté was struck by the photographic evidence discovered recently in association with the Khmer Rouge period of Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge regime oversaw the genocide



Fr. Frank Sabatté. *Number 24, Cambodia 1975*; 20"x20". Embroidery.



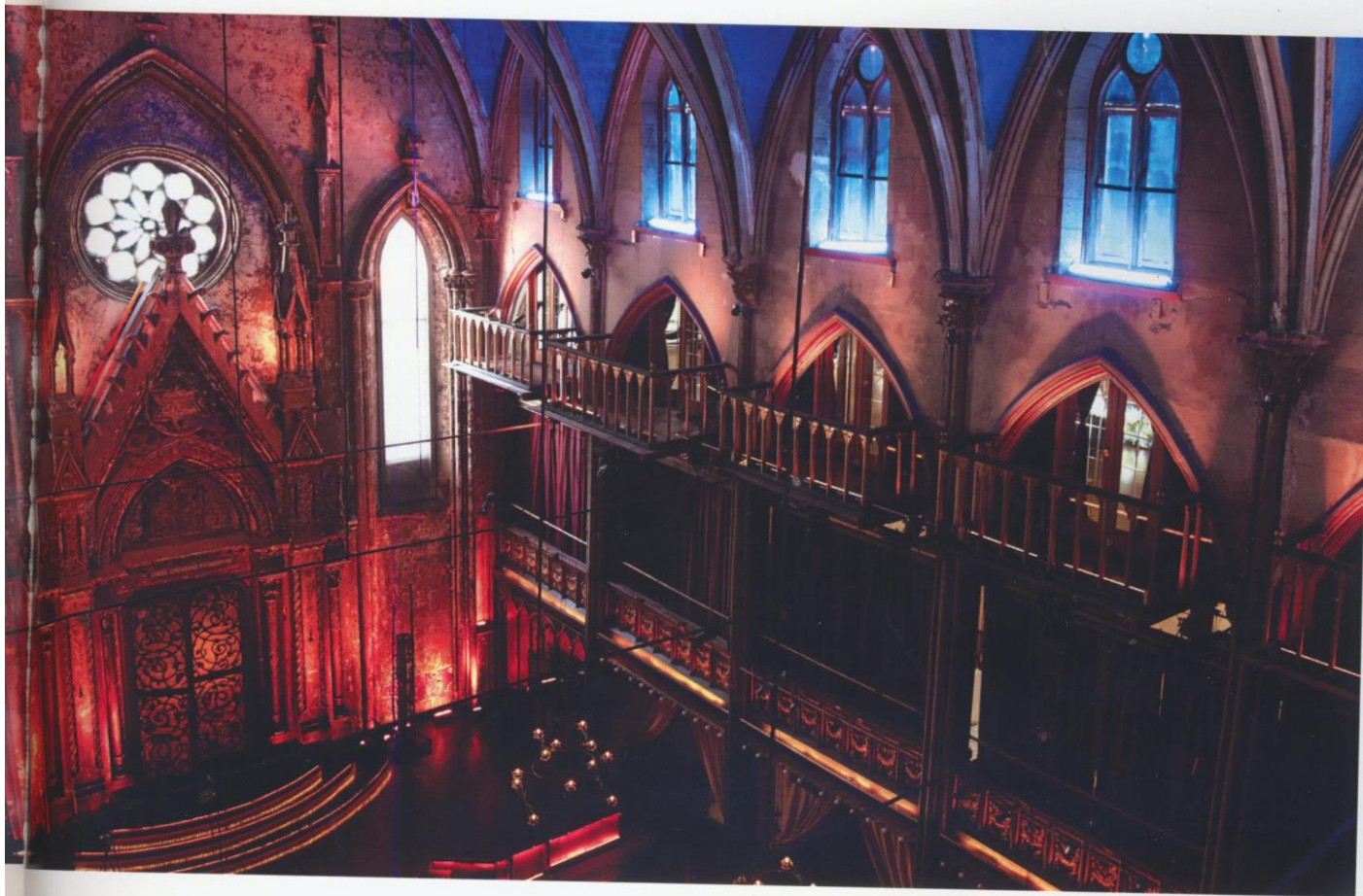
*The Angel Orensanz Foundation*

of 1.7 million people under the rule of Pol Pot in the 1970s—especially targeting pregnant women and children in an attempt to exterminate the race. The massacres involved a systematic process of photographing victims before their subsequent torture and execution.

In these photographs, young Cambodian children in navy uniform were pictured with tags pinned to the fabric of their clothes, as a means of record keeping. The wrinkled and faded tags belied their repeated use as the death toll increased. Fr. Sabatté was particularly drawn to the image of a beautiful young girl with the numbers '2' and '4' pinned to her shirt, and conceived of a series in which he would replicate these images through his intricate method of portraiture.

Horrific as the story of his subjects may be, Fr. Sabatté drew great solace from the creation of his tributes to them.





The portraits, each taking approximately a month to complete, allowed him to engage in deep communion with his beloved dead. He described the process as one of fellowship, of getting to know and to love the individuals whose memories he preserved through his art.

The Artists' Walk-Thru created a similar communion between artists, the audience, and the environment. It was an active recognition of the universality of art, of its inherent quality that excludes no one. The work of Isaac Hecker and the Paulist Fathers, of Fr. Frank Sabatté, of the artists' collective Openings, and of the many other similar institutions in New York City such as the Angel Orensanz Foundation challenges both artist and viewer to invite subjectivity instead of avoiding it. Without the context of stark, white walls of a neutral gallery space or the viewing behavior such a location demands, art is able

to stand on its own and to deliver a message on an even higher level than previously thought possible.

Art has served to provide humanity with a link to that which they can neither express in words nor actions, and only fleetingly in dreams. It requires no one to identify with a specific religion, creed, or societal sect. Art is a universal language that calls the world to engage in active dialogue within and beyond itself. To exhibit art in a non-neutral space like a cathedral or synagogue intensifies that call by associating with the millennia of history steeped within the bricks and mortar of the buildings themselves.