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TEXT BY GLEN R. BROWN

Confrontation with religious paraphernalia and the peculiarities of orthodox ritual provokes from most agnostics only a more profound skepticism. Less frequently, it compels an examination of beliefs that actually leads to conversion. Perhaps, under the rarest of all circumstances, it engenders what might be called a second-order veneration, a solemn respect or even reverence-- not for the specific divinity or supernatural entities to which such objects and practices refer, but rather for the intense human conviction with which they are fused: the raw energy of faith. For one who reflects on faith in this abstract form, detached from the particulars of religion or philosophical systems, it appears so manifestly a part of human nature that its absence would almost seem to constitute a pathology, a kind of fall from human grace. From this perspective, faith becomes its own object. Rather than projecting itself onto an exterior deity, it is reflexive, constituting an unshakable belief in the power of belief itself.

LIN STANIONIS: EROS AND PIOUS CANNIBALISM

For Lin Stanionis's journey from agnosticism to faith in faith itself, a catalyst was provided by the ecclesiastical regalia and ritual of the Orthodox Church, to which her father's Eastern European relatives demonstrated such profound devotion that they were never fully able to assimilate themselves into American culture. "They're the kind of Catholics who completely accept the mystical side of religion," she explains. "One of my great aunts devoted her life to the Virgin Mary. She didn't become a nun, but that was her life, and it affected the way she responded to things. I remember that once, when she was suffering from a toothache, she took a match and burned all around her lips. I guess it was a sort of transference of pain. I'm not sure of exactly what she was thinking about, but to her it was a perfectly normal thing to do." Intrigued by the exoticism of this kind of devotion, Stanionis sought to understand it better, not by personal conversion, but rather by exploration of the symbols and practices through which it was professed. Above all, she was fascinated by the mysticism and rituals surrounding the human body in Catholicism, especially as they touched upon the subliminal but profoundly evocative themes of Eros and cannibalism.

The hollowware that Stanionis produced in the early 1980s, soon after completing her MFA at Indiana University, initiated her exploration of the curious relationship among ritual, ingestion, and the erotic. At first, her work focused less on actual religious accouterments and practices than on the simple employment of functional objects in a prescribed and repetitive fashion, as in the use of tableware under the guidance of etiquette. Intuiting in the act of eating a kind of mantric rhythm, as well as an obvious sensual indulgence, she envisioned objects that would illuminate the deep connections among spiritual

above
Ascension (detail), 1999
lead, encaustic, bronze
24 x 24 x 3"
Photograph by Jim Nedresky

desire, sexual appetite, and physical hunger. The earliest of Stanionis's works are organically shaped liqueur cups with bulbous bowls and thin stems that resemble jointed insect legs or wriggling snake bodies. The libidinal pulse of these cups is echoed in a 1993 pair of sterling silver and lacquered-wood salad servers, in which snake bodies, tongues, and phallic forms merge in biomorphic abstraction.

In the mid-1990s, Stanionis's work took a decided shift away from the literal aspects of function and toward a heightened emphasis of the psychological resonance that utilitarian items might possess. "My early spoons were functional and only alluded to the erotic side of eating," she explains. "Then I thought that maybe I didn't want to just make allusions and should create a pair of flat-out erotic spoons—just make them to see what the difference was, to see if they could carry the same information and still be as interesting." The result is *Pair of Spoons*, 1995, a sculpture comprised of a set of utensils with constructed sheet-nickel handles and bowls of a matrix material painted with metallic automobile lacquer. To emphasize the non-functional nature of the ostensibly functional spoons, Stanionis made the bowls convex rather than concave; in order to evoke the erotic, she formed the matrix so that one spoon-bowl suggests a tongue while the other resembles female geni-

above
Untitled Vessel, 1997
bronze, sterling,
polymer clay, wax
18 x 5 x 3 1/2"
Photograph by Jim Nedresky

talia. The effect, as in many Surrealist objects, is the suggestion of unconscious desire projected onto a slice of quotidian reality.

Although references to the spiritual are less pronounced than the evocations of the erotic in Stanionis's non-functional spoons, at these early stages she had already begun to think about expanding the thematic possibilities of the forms she was using. Most important to her were the parallels between desire for contact with the transcendental and attempts to fathom the secrets of one's own viscera. "The inside of the body is so unknown," she comments. "It's this really mystifying thing that completely determines how you function—all of what's in there that you don't know about. It's really interesting to think about ways of accessing what's inside." Her attempt to access this unknown terrain in an intuitive or even kinesthetic fashion seemed to Stanionis to share some important characteristics with rituals involving union with the divine through symbolic forms of ingestion, and she soon found herself contemplating the Eucharist. "I was thinking about how to

make my objects more potent for the viewer," she explains. "I thought about different kinds of vessels, and somehow it seemed that a natural place to start was with the ceremonies and rituals of the Catholic religion."

Contempleting the idea of transubstantiation—the transformation of the sacramental wine and bread into the actual blood and body of Christ—and the consequent act of symbolic cannibalism in Holy Communion led Stanionis to make a fairly literal interpretation of these rituals titled *Loving Cup*, 1995. The satin-finished nickel vessel, featuring a foot and bowl raised through traditional silversmithing techniques and a four-sided constructed stem, makes a straightforward reference to the Eucharistic chalice. Simple in its contours, it presents an image of high serenity. Constructed as a double bowl with a rim extending inward, its interior is gold plated with an incised sunburst texture similar to those on some baroque monstrances. "I was trying to get the gold to glow," Stanionis explains. "The light reflects off and is thrown back up onto the heart." Cast as a hollow form in silver, the life-sized human heart—molded from a physician's anatomical model purchased at a flea market—sits loosely in the chalice like a kind of cocktail of strange fruit.

While *Loving Cup* literalizes the ingestion of the body of Christ, it maintains an interest in Eros as well, as the title suggests. That the sacred and the erotic can commingle in the Catholic tradition had already been confirmed by Stanionis's readings in hagiography. "I encountered a passage about a saint," she remembers, "who had visions of taking Christ's heart out of the wound on his side and then replacing it with her own. There was this real physical need to access Christ. I like the idea that there was a penetration--and that you could extrapolate from that a sexual kind of activity." For Stanionis, this extrapolation took into consideration ritualistic submission in Christian spirituality—a willing vulnerability—and its similarity to aspects of sexual relations. The critic Dave Hickey, whose writings have stimulated Stanionis's thinking along these lines, has taken the formula one step further by suggesting that these forms of submission share fundamental characteristics with individuals' accustomed manner of relating to works of art. "Simply put," Hickey asserts, "the rituals of 'aesthetic' submission in our culture speak a language so closely analogous to those of sexual and spiritual submission that they are all but indistinguishable when conflated in the same image."[1] Although Stanionis has since begun to explore the implications of this triad of submission, *Loving Cup* remains more specifically concerned with the confluence of spirituality and symbolic cannibalism.

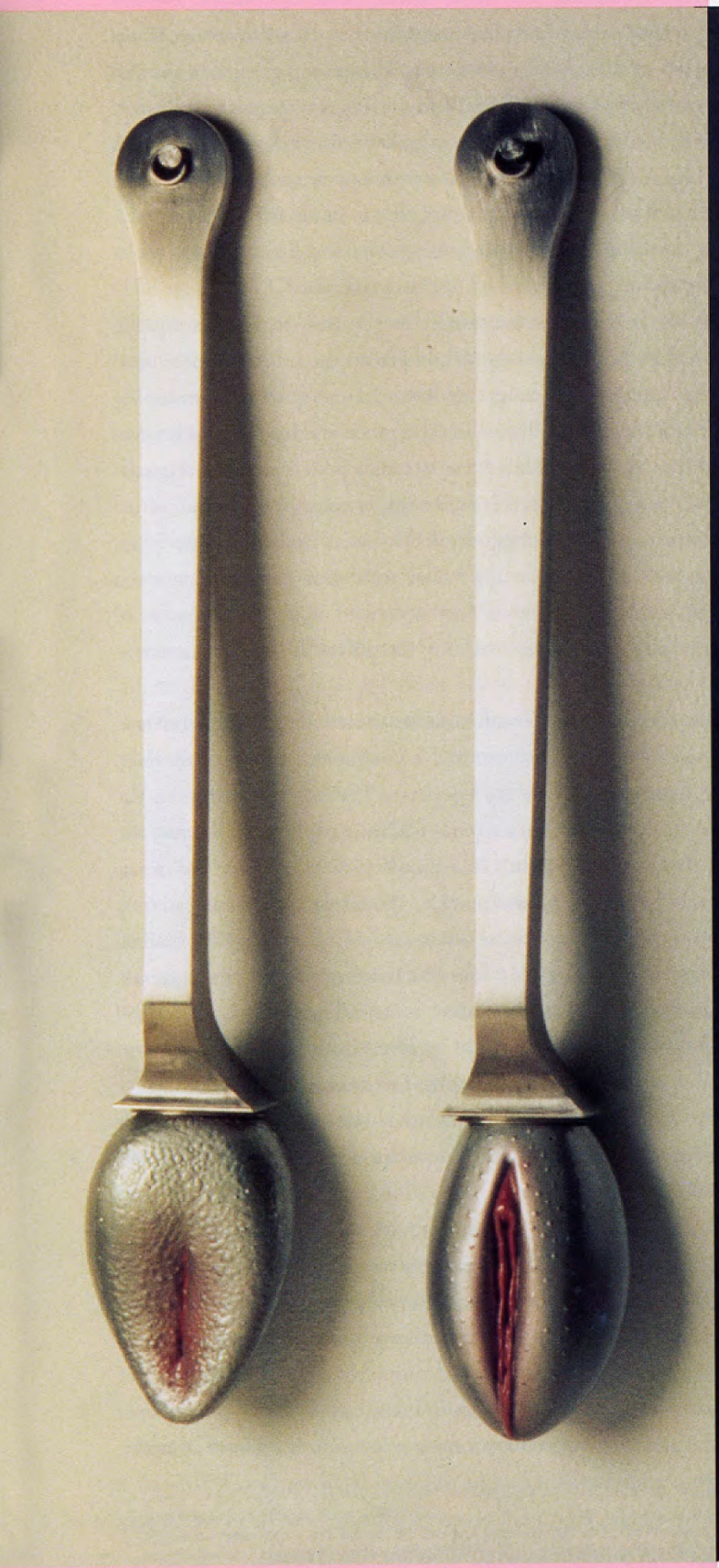
While the Eucharistic chalice was the most immediate influence on *Loving Cup*, Stanionis also recalls vague thoughts about Aztec stone bowls in which human hearts were offered as nourishment for the sun. Other vessels that, like the Eucharistic chalice, are associated with rituals of sacrifice and symbolic cannibalism include the huge, carved human-effigy serving bowls of the Native American potlatch ceremony, Tibetan skull cups, and the ceremonial spoons and bowls produced by many African tribal societies. For Stanionis, the great number of similar rituals and ceremonial paraphernalia originating in so many disparate cultures suggested the operation of common predilections in the human mind. Thus, it is not surprising that her readings occasionally touch on psychoanalysis and depth psychology. Sigmund Freud, of course, offers one of the most memorable explanations for the conflux of cannibalism and spirituality in his hypothesis of primordial patricide, theorizing the consumption of the "violent primal father" as an act intended to appropriate the envied and feared aspects of the father's strength. Accordingly, ritualistic consumption relating to the "totemic meal" is to be interpreted as "a repetition and commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things—of social organization, of moral restrictions and of *religion*."[2]

If *Loving Cup* is the product of an exploration of the relationship between spirituality and symbolic cannibalism, Stanionis's next major work seeks to investigate more fully the connections that she had intuited between spirituality and the erotic, particularly in relation to repression. In *Untitled Vessel*, 1996, allusions to the body's erogenous zones are interspersed with references to Catholic iconography, such as the Sacred Heart and the rosary. Stanionis—who has adorned her studio walls with devotional images that include a postcard depicting Santa Rita in prayer with a phallic nail pene-

above
Loving Cup, 1995
nickel, sterling, 24k gilt
12 x 9 x 6"
Photograph by Jon Blumb

opposite page left
Pair of Spoons, 1995
nickel, lacquer over resin
13 x 3 x 2 1/2"

opposite page right
Candlesticks, 1997
sterling, cast resin
13 x 2 3/4 x 2 1/2"
Photograph by Jim Nedresky



trating her forehead—is fascinated by the libidinal nature of the ecstatic states experienced by female saints. "The cloistered nuns in the Middle Ages had visions that were very erotic," she observes. "They were definitely sexually repressed." The invention of images, whether by artist or visionary, could hardly have remained untainted by this repression and its effects on the body ego. Critic Donald Kuspit has interpreted the "internal body image" paintings of the contemporary Austrian artist Maria Lassnig, who spent eighteen years in a convent school where she was forbidden to explore herself physically, as marks of her consequent inability to "objectify her body—to get a 'perspective' on it by learning its objective givenness through touch."[3] A rosary in which beads alluding to genitalia punctuate the "Our Fathers," Stanionis's *Untitled Vessel* seems both a comment on such alienation and a kind of cathexis. "My thinking was that, when you use a rosary, it's a meditative device," she explains. "You're reciting and meditating, but at the same time you're touching little body parts as you go along. What would you be thinking about, and where would that take you?"

Although *Untitled Vessel* is constructed like a rosary, it is actually larger and, in fact, is equally inspired by ancient erotic hanging oil lamps and other vessels. While Stanionis had previously used hearts cast from her physician's model as functional vessels, this form is less specific, combining references to a heart with characteristics of a tongue and foreskin. The piece is composed of bronze with a reddish purple patina and "valves" modeled in polymer the latter of which are also reminiscent of the flames on the Sacred Heart. The "foreskin," which Stanionis incorporated for its reference to "revealing something," was produced from a nylon stocking dipped in wax. Embracing the heart form is a ring of pine twigs cast in bronze with polymer tips baked to a state of translucency, a process that lends them the look of semi-precious stones or tiny points of light. This "crown of thorns," like the daggers that impale the heart of the *Mater Dolorosa*, manifests the idea of penetration, the leitmotif of spiritual and erotic ecstasy.

Continuing the strategy of teasing from ecclesiastical accouterments their latent erotic content, Stanionis's next major work is *Candlesticks*, 1997. The candle, a frequent *vanitas* symbol in Renaissance and baroque iconography, alludes not only to the brevity of life but also, more to the point, to the transience of pleasures of the flesh. In deference to the Catholic prohibition against the "spilling of seed" outside the context of procreation, Stanionis cast the sockets of her candlesticks as inverted snail shells that symbolize female genitalia. Consequently, the dripping of the burning candle would evoke the fulfillment of the requisites of physical union, the injunction to "be fruitful and multiply." Further references to insemination are carried into the columns of the candlesticks, which are cast in a waxed, slightly greenish resin whose bubbly interior resembles fish roe suspended in a thick fluid. Supporting these columns are silver bases, whose architectural form is reminiscent of the classical tempietto and which house tiny, pendulous biomorphic forms that Stanionis describes as "uvular." The concept of the body as the temple of the soul is thus made consonant with the image of the Word made flesh, and both are reconciled with the physical performance of the body when driven by the impulsive influence of the libido.

Stanionis, it should be remembered, is not a practicing Catholic, and her works neither affirm nor deny the validity of the Catholic ethos. By conjoining the supposed antitheses of body and spirit, she is attempting neither to demonstrate that Catholicism ultimately provides a balanced mediation between materialism and spirituality nor to deconstruct Catholicism as a theological privileging of the transcendental that cannot, in the end, overcome the material element at its very heart. Her interest remains focused on faith itself, and on the faculty of the mind that can conceive of concepts such as the material and the transcendental and ascribe to them values relative to the life of a human being. As a consequence, a shift away from specifically Catholic references in her work toward a broader exploration of faith was perhaps inevitable. Her most recent sculptures can be more closely associated with ideas derived from her readings on the rituals of Tibetan Buddhism.

The psychoanalyst Carl Jung provides an obvious prototype for Stanionis's comparative study of faith. He clearly identifies the distinction between Western spirituality, as embodied in the various

trating her forehead—is fascinated by the libidinal nature of the ecstatic states experienced by female saints. "The cloistered nuns in the Middle Ages had visions that were very erotic," she observes. "They were definitely sexually repressed." The invention of images, whether by artist or visionary, could hardly have remained untainted by this repression and its effects on the body ego. Critic Donald Kuspit has interpreted the "internal body image" paintings of the contemporary Austrian artist Maria Lassnig, who spent eighteen years in a convent school where she was forbidden to explore herself physically, as marks of her consequent inability to "objectify her body—to get a 'perspective' on it by learning its objective givenness through touch."[3] A rosary in which beads alluding to genitalia punctuate the "Our Fathers," Stanionis's *Untitled Vessel* seems both a comment on such alienation and a kind of cathexis. "My thinking was that, when you use a rosary, it's a meditative device," she explains. "You're reciting and meditating, but at the same time you're touching little body parts as you go along. What would you be thinking about, and where would that take you?"

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The psychoanalyst Carl Jung provides an obvious prototype for Stanionis's comparative study of faith. He clearly identifies the distinction between Western spirituality, as embodied in the various

forms of Judeo-Christian belief, and Eastern forms of spirituality such as Buddhism—a contrast of monism and transcendentalism. "With us," Jung conjectured, "man is incommensurably small and the grace of God is everything; but in the East, man is God and he redeems himself."[4] For Stanionis, the most intriguing aspect of this divergence in thought is that it appears almost superficial when contrasted with the continuity in the relationship each region implies among spirituality, eroticism (auto-eroticism, in the case of monistic spirituality), and symbolic cannibalism. When viewed as a product of the psyche and its conflicting energies of libido and the death instinct, faith could hardly be free of these shadowy underpinnings, regardless of the cultural context in which it might reveal itself.

The first in her current series of work, Stanionis's relatively large, wall-mounted sculpture, *Mystic Interchange*, 1998, is an attempt to revisit, in the context of Tibetan Buddhism, the triad of spirituality, eroticism, and ritual ingestion that constitutes the focus of her earlier Catholic-inspired pieces. The sculpture is framed by a two-foot diameter hollow, circular form that Stanionis had specially fabricated in lead-coated steel. "This part of the piece is a reference to a mandala," she explains. "I was interested in the circle as a complete form, with one point in the center, and the way that the cosmos could be seen as an endless expansion and contraction from that point." Within the circle is a rectangle defined by an inset panel composed of sections of "blueboard" (sheets of home-insulation material) laminated together to form a block, which Stanionis then coated in tinted beeswax, giving it the texture and color of pale flesh. Representing a female pelvic region, the rectangular panel is a reference to a chakra, one of the six locations along the spine that are defined in yoga as sources of energy. The vulva, formed as a ring of cast-bronze human tongues, suggests a kind of defanged *vagina dentata*. This is an inversion of the Western image embodying castration anxiety, implying instead a caress, a motion of healing rather than severing. At the center of this lingual ring, which Stanionis has likened to a lotus, is a cast-silver heart.

A unifying work on a number of levels, *Mystic Interchange* merges Eros and spirituality under the theme of willing submission. "The mystic interchange I have in mind," Stanionis explains, "is one in which you open yourself up to be vulnerable, allowing a sort of exchange to happen. I wanted that vulnerability, and in a way I saw it as a sexual vulnerability. The heart is right there in a state of readiness, where you could access it." A third aspect of vulnerability is suggested through Stanionis's linking of the exposed heart to the ritual of the "sky burial," in which the corpse of a Tibetan monk is left in the open to be eviscerated and ingested by ravens. Physically the bones are picked clean; metaphorically, the body is re-absorbed—cannibalized—back into the larger whole of nature. Here the energies of Eros and Thanatos perform a provocative ritual of recycling that projects the psyche onto the cosmos in an endless play of birth, death, and rebirth.

For Stanionis, the mind's ability to enact this drama and to charge it simultaneously with the characteristics of both mystery and truth is evidence of the highest human faculty—the supreme power of faith. The degree to which the intangible properties of this faith can actually be embodied in material objects is, of course, difficult to assess—but then Stanionis is not setting out to make icons. She clearly does not expect to effect any conversions. At the same time, her own faith in faith is self-evident, and her work provides a more than sufficient starting point for the viewer's reflections upon his or her own power of belief. To attempt to provide more would be to slip into dogmatism; to attempt less would surely be tantamount to a kind of apostasy, and Stanionis is nothing if not devout. M

Glen R. Brown is an art historian at Kansas State University.

[1] Dave Hickey, "Nothing Like the Son," *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993), 35.
[2] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), 13,142 [My emphasis].
[3] Donald Kuspit, "The Hospital of the Body: Maria Lassnig's Body Ego Portraits," *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 206.
[4] Carl G. Jung, "Psychological Commentary on 'The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation,'" (1939), *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, eds. H. Read, M. Fordham, G. Adler, and W. McGuire (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 11, 480.