Imaging Pilgrimage: Art as Embodied Experience  
By K. R. Barush (2021)  
New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts,  
xiv + 261pp, 15 color plates, 44 figures.

Reviewed by Adrienne Nock Ambrose

Part travelogue, part devotional bricolage, Imaging Pilgrimage: Art as Embodied Experience is a book as distinctive as the artwork it features. Religious art historian Kathryn Barush uses the practice of pilgrimage to bring contemporary artists into dialogue with each other, and with the spiritual explorers who engage their work. Barush’s knack for identifying uniquely resonant works is apparent in the creative case studies she features, each of which reflects on the relationship between artistic representation and the experience of pilgrimage. Richly illustrated and replete with testimonials from artists and pilgrims, Barush’s book argues for the transformative potential of an embodied spirituality and demonstrates the role that art and visual expression play in fostering it.

The ambitious scope of the book is one of its strengths; each case study crosses geographical and temporal boundaries, and Barush navigates the crossings with ease. A South African artist who creates shadow boxes and tarot cards featuring Lourdes mementos and a cancer patient who reinterpreted the Camino de Santiago on an island in Puget Sound are just two of the eclectic assortment of artists and pilgrims featured. Barush is also broadly inclusive in terms of artistic genre. Chapter 3 focuses on the use of chant and song by members of the British Pilgrimage Trust as they connect their twenty-first century travels with those of past pilgrims. Chapter 4 features the work of artist Gisela Insuaste and the installations, sculpture,
and performance pieces she creates, many of which vibrantly engage with pilgrimages, both past and present. An especially memorable performance piece combined Insuaste’s Ecuadorian roots with her Catholic heritage in a physical reenactment of her parent’s immigrant journey from Ecuador to New York City; it culminated in Insuaste’s attendance at a bilingual Mass at the Manhattan parish that became her family’s spiritual home.

Despite the vast range of the book, Barush successfully links the case studies by demonstrating how each creator’s stated intentions are aligned with the responses of those who encounter their work. Although reception history is notoriously challenging to document, Barush includes excerpts from interviews and correspondence in order to demonstrate the close correlation between intention and effect. Also linking the various case studies is an awareness frequently articulated by the pilgrims Barush encounters, in which locations, objects, and artworks seem to partake of a power that extends across the limits of time and space. In recalling a labyrinth walk, for example, one pilgrim described it as ‘a memory which takes me back before my own recorded memory into a sacred past of deep connection to the holy’ (p. 207). Barush expands on the Turnerian concept of *communitas* to identify this awareness, introducing ‘extratemporal *communitas*’ to express the ‘feeling that pilgrims have when they encounter a sacred object that links them to all those who had come before, and all those who will come again’ (p. 93). Although Barush insists that she does not intend to make theological claims, the connections she draws between this blurring of temporal boundaries and the Christian emphasis on eschatological hope are suggestive.

Barush’s sensitivity toward and appreciation of the effectiveness of artifacts is apparent throughout. Following in the path of Hans Belting, David Freedberg, and W. J. T. Mitchell, Barush is convinced of the ‘agency of things’ (p. 4). Recognizing the need for ‘the development of a critical lexicon to talk about the efficacy of religious objects in contemporary art’ (p. 94), Barush envisions her work as contributing to this effort. She borrows the idea of a ‘medial shift’ (p. 8), for example, to describe art’s ability to both reflect a transformative pilgrimage experience as well as to instigate it. Put another way, Barush argues that a ‘medial shift’ occurs when an undefined spirit is transferred from place to representation, as in the sketchbook drawings that artist India Windsor-Clive made during a pilgrimage in the English countryside. As viewers of the evocative drawings are invited to participate in a meditative pilgrimage from wherever they are located, the power of art to transmit embodied experience is affirmed.

As Barush points out, the ability of artifacts such as maps and pilgrimage tokens to inspire embodied experience even for those physically unable
to travel has special relevance in our contemporary context of climate crisis and a global pandemic. Viewers of the documentary *Phil’s Camino*, for example, are granted transformative access to both the backyard pilgrimage created by Phil Volker and its prototype in Spain without traveling to either. Similarly, the prevalence of the labyrinth as a contemplative exercise can be engaged, regardless of whether one is walking the medieval version in Chartres cathedral or tracing a painted example at home.

Despite the strengths of the book, Barush’s desire to centralize embodiment, on the one hand, and her focus on how art transmits experience across spatial and temporal boundaries, on the other, at times work at cross purposes. Related to this is the heavy reliance on the transformative potential of Victor Turner’s concept of *communitas* exhibited throughout the book. Barush expands upon Turner’s idea with her assertion that artistic creations can themselves be vehicles of ‘communitas-through-culture’ (p. 7). The many testimonials of artists, viewers, and pilgrims serve to substantiate her claim that art can transmit the transformative experience pilgrimage often engenders. Yet there is a particularity to embodiment that Barush’s reliance on Turner leads her to underemphasize. Turner’s work focused on finding commonalities within the experience of pilgrimage, and emphasized its potential for transcending political and social structures. More recent analyses, however, have drawn attention to pilgrimage’s potential to reflect and reinforce social hierarchies and differences as much as transcend them. (Jill Dubisch’s *In A Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine* (Princeton University Press, 1995) is one influential example.) The celebration of *communitas* evoked through pilgrimage art needs to be balanced by the consideration of examples of cultural appropriation and erasure that are also part of pilgrimage’s legacy. The process by which the Lourdes iconography was developed provides a case in point.

Early in Chapter 2, ‘South Africa → Lourdes: Souvenirs as Sites,’ Barush acknowledges that the sculpture of Our Lady of Lourdes was ‘only loosely based’ on the seer’s (Bernadette Soubirous) vision. Later, she includes a translation of Bernadette’s repudiation of the sculpture: ‘It is beautiful, but it is not she. Oh no, the difference is as of earth from heaven’ (p. 65). Barush also notes that Bernadette became ill and was absent from the ceremonial inauguration of the statue. Such apparent opposition from Bernadette suggests significant slippage between Bernadette’s experience and the authorized image that came to represent it. How did the Renaissance-inspired image, created by a sophisticated Parisian sculptor, come to depict the vision that the young Pyrenean girl Bernadette saw? Barush dismisses any disparity as beside the point, arguing that because the sculptor’s creative
process was a devotional one, the resulting image functioned as a ‘symbol-vehicle’ (another Turnerian concept), capable of creating *communitas* among viewers past, present, and future. Lost in this process, however, was the subversive potential and particularity of Bernadette’s encounter with *Aquéro*, which was at least partially subsumed by the devotionally conventional, Eurocentric depiction that came to represent the vision.

As Barush astutely acknowledges, we need a more resonant way to discuss the efficacy of religious art and objects, and she is to be commended for curating artworks that draw attention to that requirement. By centralizing embodied religious experience and the ways objects often elicit it, Barush contributes to an important expansion in the study of religious art. At the same time, her reliance on Turner points to unresolved theoretical challenges that future studies of embodied religion and artistic expression would do well to address.