

# ARTINFO

June 1, 2009

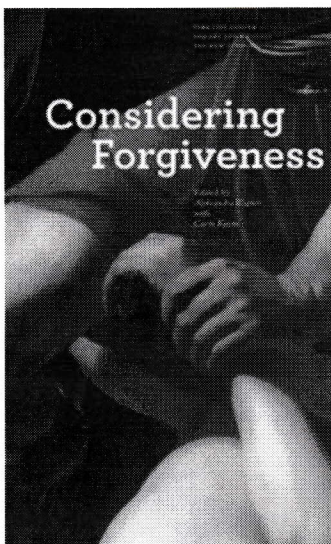
## MODERN PAINTERS

### Considering Forgiveness

By Sasha Archibald

Edited by Aleksandra Wagner with **Carin Kuoni**

(**Vera List Center for Art and Politics**, New York)



Sentenced to 14 years in a Texas penitentiary, Brian Price spent 10 of those as prison chef. Convicts executed in America receive a last meal of their request, and Price prepared some 200 such meals — plates of sirloin steak, butter beans, corn bread, apple cobbler, and the like. His cookery is the subject of Mats Bigert and Sven Bergström's documentary film, *Last Supper*, which was screened in a program of events that led in part to the publication of *Considering Forgiveness*, the first in a series of books produced by New York City's Vera List Center for Art and Politics. Edited by Aleksandra Wagner with Carin Kuoni, *Considering Forgiveness* includes a variety of artists' projects, scholarly articles, exhibition documentation, and even an illustrated poem. Price contributes a statement that is a simple distillation of the book's theme. In it, he explains that making a meal fit to be a man's last is a gesture of love, and in offering that love — rendered in a plate of carefully prepared food — Price learned to forgive the most heinous of crimes.

Price's understanding of forgiveness owes much to a Judeo-Christian framework. Indeed, the topic has given Christ a new foothold in the academy, though its theorists also include Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and others. Forgiveness's current vogue (reference, for instance, a series of PBS specials) reflects the social, psychological, and political necessity of addressing various 20th and 21st-century brutalities. Accordingly, the victims of such brutalities have a special place in theorizing the concept. The comments of the American Jews, discussed here in an essay by Mark Godfrey, who rejected Louis Kahn's proposal for a New York Holocaust memorial (on the grounds that it was too calm, too abstract, and too nonaccusatory) are interesting in this regard, as are the subjects of Anne Aghion's documentary films, Rwandans who were called on to judge their peers' confessions of murder.

In the editor's foreword, Wagner expresses deep ambivalence about the book's subject, describing forgiveness as "suspicious," with "little to recommend it," carrying "meanings fraught with difficulty"

and "a limited legacy." Her honestly aired reservations mollify a cynical reader, but also raise doubts in a more naive one. Certainly, every instance of forgiveness offered or received demands the needling promise of sincerity, a problem directly addressed by the first contribution in the book, *Dark Meat or White Meat?* (2009). A video installation turned book project by Lin + Lam, *Dark Meat* neatly lampoons the empty political gesture of forgiveness by focusing on the US president's annual pardon of two Thanksgiving turkeys. Footage from these absurd press events is paired with a narrative on the history of the presidential pardon, an expansive executive power used mainly for political maneuvering.

The best of the subsequent artworks and essays richly build on the subject of forgiveness, bringing it to bear on unexpected situations, wonderfully explicating dense texts, and documenting communities that are trying (or refusing) to forgive their oppressors. Some contributions, such as Aghion's, are attuned to the slow, tedious process of forgiveness — forgiveness as work — while others treat it as a theoretical construct. In the course of the book, it becomes clear that the exploration of forgiveness as a concept, unmoored from a specific trauma, may be relevant and productive, but lacks something crucial — the psychic difficulty, the rawness, the combination of pain and generosity endemic to the act. Which is to say that a mother who contemplated forgiving the drunken driver who killed her daughter would find little of use in this book . . . or, perhaps, in any other.

An essay by Julia Kristeva suggests that the "post-moral" version of forgiveness, which escapes questions of sincerity, is psychoanalysis. By listening to her patient, the analyst offers forgiveness, much in the way a priest offers absolution. Indeed, projects by Sharon Hayes and Omer Fast, among others, take on the therapeutic power of confessional narrative and self-forgiveness. In contrast, speech is impotent in Susan Hiller's *The Last Silent Movie* (2009), based on archival sound recordings of languages that are now extinct or nearly so. *Considering Forgiveness* includes stills from one section of the film featuring Mukalap, the last surviving speaker of K'ora, a language of the South African Bushmen. The archaic meaning of exhibit is to show a thing before its sacrifice, and this seems exactly the function of Mukalap's address to a crowd of linguists in 1938 (it was as late as 1936 that the Namibian government issued licenses to hunt and kill Bushmen). Mukalap's words are gently admonishing: "You sons of the sea listen, listen just for once how they speak so that you should not again be ignorant." His audience didn't understand a word.

In a 2002 lecture, Derrida perversely argued that even when your wrongdoer stands before you and asks for forgiveness, it cannot legitimately be offered. Time has passed, and this person is not the same one who did the crime. Only in the moment of harm, when the wrongdoer has every intention to do more harm, does "I forgive you" have the purity of meaning it requires. Of course, as Derrida admitted, this is an impossible standard: "To ask me to forgive is to ask me to be mad." Madness indeed, but precisely the sort on which our sanity depends.

"Considering Forgiveness" originally appeared in the Summer 2009 issue of *Modern Painters*. For a complete list of articles from this issue available on ARTINFO, see *Modern Painters' Summer 2009 Table of Contents*.