

## ART

## Snapshots of the Spiritual

## THOMAS ROMA'S PHOTOGRAPHS OF BROOKLYN CAPTURE UNSEEN ARCHITECTURE

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*"The most popular use of the photograph is as a memento of the absent."*—John Berger, *The Look of Things*

ESTATE OF FRANCIS BACON

Bacon's screaming pope of 1953.

On Thursday, Oct. 10, 2002 at 7:00 p.m., Thomas Roma, acclaimed photographer and Associate Professor at Columbia University's School of the Arts, discussed his latest collection, *Sanctuary*, which documents the varieties of religious experience in Brooklyn as seen through its sacred architecture. This event took place in Lerner Hall and was open to the public.

Looking at the work of Thomas Roma, a native New York photographer who in his confrontations with his subjects is known for creating unsettling immediacy, an image of particularly distanced containment struck me. Roma's ongoing docu-

A light cord hangs from the ceiling. The mantle of an upright piano demarcates the foreground with a gently descending slope and acts as a shelf for a collection of books. I am reminded of the indexical nature of the photograph, akin to the early calotypes of Fox Talbot, the early English photographic pioneer who documented the bookselves of his library. In Roma's image, there is just enough focus on this terraced foreground to distinguish the presence of 12 hymnals embossed with crosses (the twelfth is cut off on the right) from a single copy of the Bible. The sacred book rests horizontally aloft, in a stasis that is symbolically associated with a Christ placating his dozen disciples in the image of the last supper.

Upon later reconsideration of the image, I noted not only the contrast between the colors of the white blouses to that of the women's skin, but also to the wide-eyed sclera of the youngest woman in the right foreground. For all the immensely loaded details of this picture, I wondered what precisely had made me stare at it hour after hour. Suddenly, I was reminded of Francis Bacon's screaming pope caught in the metallic crib of his own contention. The menace of the dangling light cord fractures the compositional space to reveal an apparent and dizzyingly vast array of orthogonal and linear constructs that emphasize the interiority of Roma's construction. At once, the image was doubly charged. Within this composition, religious light, the most ancient of metaphors, complicates the seemingly documentary photo.



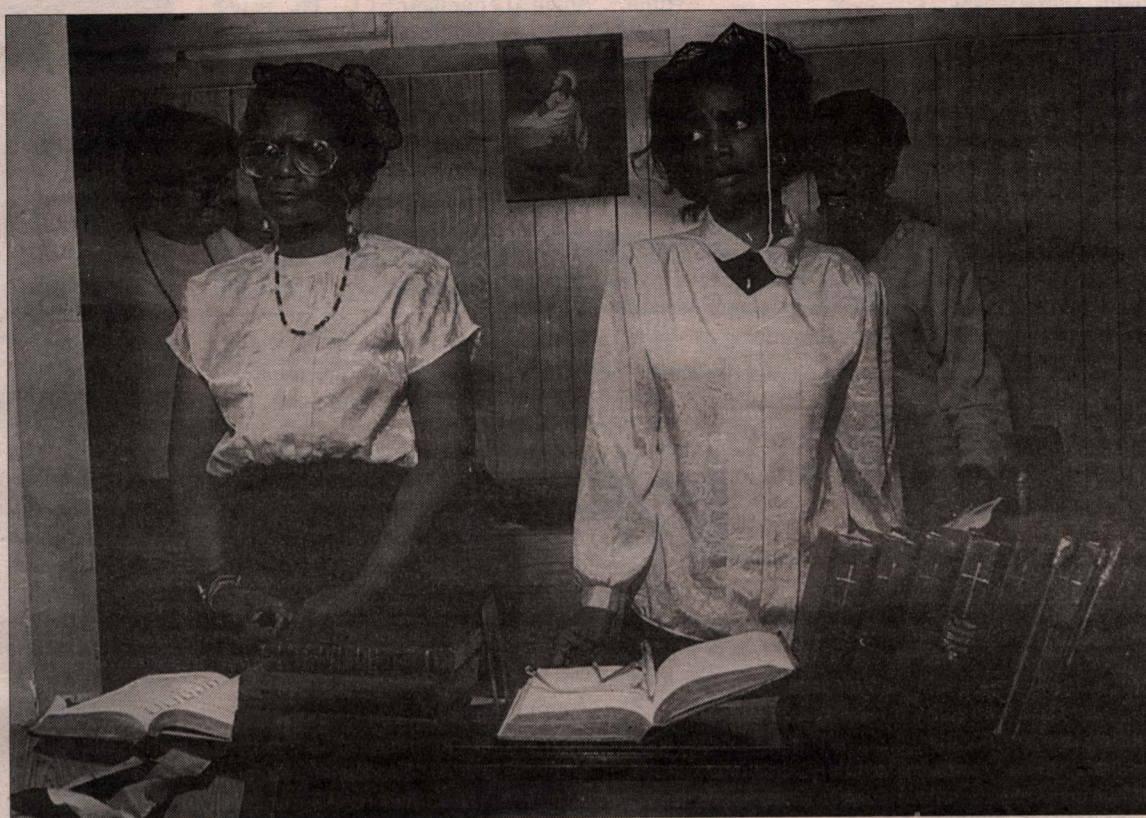
ALTE PINAKOTHEK

Albrecht Dürer's iconic four apostles of 1526.

mentation of religious structures is a project that studies both interiority and exteriority together, photographing the interactions of the people within the lit structure and images of the sanctuaries' exteriors isolated from the context of their urban surroundings. In his series *Come Sunday*, which documents various Brooklyn Baptist parishes, a single image of a muted quartet has an unerring balance.

In this space, four women are framed by both the makeshift choir chancel and the frame of the photo.

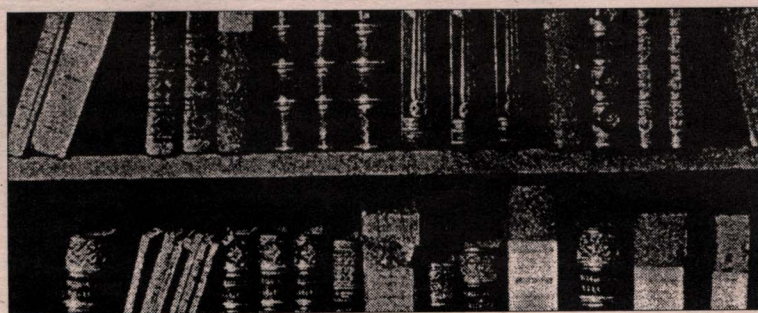
the two pairs of women, much like Dürer's tightly cropped diptych of the four apostles in Munich, an unknown spiritual presence rests between a complex structure of stares. A framed image of Christ praying on the Mount of Olives hangs at the back. An image that is associated with the humanness of Christ's unquestionable devotion to his father, God Almighty, on the eve of his arrest, the reproduction echoes the illumination of the present scene. What's absent in Roma's image is faith.



COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

Curator John Szarkowski organized Thomas Roma's series *Come Sunday* for the MoMA in 1996.

The snapshot fixes the momentary gestures of the scene. I imagine that if the centrally placed book is closed, the huddled collection of worn hymnals will slide out in a domino effect to the left of the frame like fallen tombstones. And when summoned to sing again, the woman in the right foreground will fashion her resting glasses to read the musical staff off the printed page. In the cleft between



THE EASTMAN HOUSE

An example of the indexical from Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature*.