

Between art and ritual

An analysis of the performances of Drag Sethlas at the Gran Canaria Drag Queen Contest (2017–20)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.115442>

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This article analyses the short performances of Drag Sethlas at the yearly Gran Canaria Drag Queen Contest in Spain (2017–20) from the perspective of religious studies and gender studies, following on from an earlier article in which this case was explored in light of the severe blasphemy accusations (by local and national bishops and lay organisations) against the 2017 show. These short performances consist of remarkable representations of Roman Catholic texts, saints, symbols and rituals acted out as prize-winning drag-queen shows that were aired on national television. At the same time, these acts are situated, by reference to famous earlier controversial acts by the pop artists Madonna, Lady Gaga and Ariana Grande, in a genealogy of provocations and blasphemy accusations that are currently made in North American and Western European countries. In exploring the forms of ritualisation (cf. Bell 1989) in the provocation that this type of popular artistic performance with strong religious connotations evokes, I show the presence of a double theatricality in Sethlas's first and most controversial performance: on the one hand a 'holy drama' centred around a religious pattern of penance, repentance and redemption, and on the other hand a specific drag theatricality, with its parodies, mockery and daring erotic scenes. It is precisely the connection between both forms of theatricality, especially the representation of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, who play a large and special role in both forms of theatricality, that contributes most to the provocativeness of this scene.

Introduction

In the early spring of 2017, a young Spanish primary schoolteacher named Borja Casillas won first prize at the Gran Canaria Drag Queen Contest with an act in which he performed as Drag Sethlas, a name taken from Etruscan mythology, equivalent in meaning to the Romans' Vulcanus: the god of fire and volcanoes. In this act, Drag Sethlas changed from the Virgin Mary to Christ on the cross within only three and a half minutes, shrouded in iconic clothing that made them¹ barely distinguishable from the life-size statues of Mary and Jesus that are carried around in religious processions during Easter time in Spain (see Drag Sethlas 2017). Not only did a great audience of more than 6,000 people, predominantly LGBT+² tourists, witness this performance, but it was also aired on national

- 1 When I refer to Drag Sethlas, I use the personal pronoun of they and them and the possessive pronoun of their; in referring to Borja Casillas, I use him and his. I could not find information on Borja Casillas's personal point of view on this matter.
- 2 Abbreviation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender persons and other queer persons.

Spanish television at the same time. Here, a live report was presented of this famous Canarian Drag Queen Contest, which is organised each year during the carnival. Immediately, a string of media events arose around this act, as it was condemned by local and national bishops and by Catholic lay organisations for its ‘blasphemous frivolity’ (El País 2017; Martín 2017). Additionally, the president of the Islamic Federation of the Canary Islands expressed his solidarity with the Catholics and the bishop of the Canary Islands for this ‘blasphemous’ attack on religious belief (ABC Canarias 2017a). The Spanish Association of Christian Lawyers called for Casillas to be prosecuted for ‘crimes against religious sentiment’ (El Mundo 2017), which led to several lawsuits, taking almost 18 months to be settled, with an eventual acquittal (Reina 2018; La Sexta 2018). In 2018, while the trial was still running, Drag Sethlas performed again in a very similar act in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria during their ceremonial abandoning of the one-year drag-queen ‘throne’ (see Drag Sethlas 2018), and in 2020, they won first prize again at this drag-queen contest with a newly designed act about Eve, Adam and the snake in a creative reworking of the biblical story (see Sethlas 2020). This time no similar lawsuit was filed against them.

In this article I will describe and analyse these performances of Drag Sethlas from the perspective of religious studies and gender studies, following on from an earlier article in which I explored this case in light of the severe blasphemy accusations against the 2017 show and their implications (Korte 2020). First, I will explain my interest in this type of performance, starting with some personal observations that seeing Drag Sethlas’s acts evoked at first sight, and I will discuss the assumptions and aims of my approach. I will then turn

to the Spanish national and recent religious history which forms the context of the acts of Drag Sethlas. I will focus on two more specific elements, namely the carnival setting and the fact that these acts were performed at the drag-queen contest. Thirdly, I will analyse the three performances Drag Sethlas made in the Gran Canaria contest (including the artist’s reflections on them),³ with special attention to aspects of ritualisation. My main interest here is in understanding the role of ritualisation in the provocation that this type of popular artistic performance with religious connotations can evoke.⁴ I will end with conclusions on how to locate and interpret these performances considering the current political and religious debates on blasphemy.

3 In this article, I have used English and Spanish newspaper articles and interviews to express the views of Borja Casillas. Despite repeated efforts, I have not been able to get in touch with him directly.

4 Ritualisation is understood here, following the religious studies scholar Catherine Bell, as an activity that imitates aspects of everyday reality while self-consciously contrasting itself with them, and simultaneously referring to an encompassing reality that embodies values shared by a community whose values mostly diverge from those of the dominant culture (Bell 1989: 35–6). However, the case of Drag Sethlas shows the aspects of what Bell terms ‘ritualisation’ to be more layered and complicated, owing to specific settings such as the carnival and the Drag Queen Contest. I speak in this article of ‘double theatricality’ to point to two main and intermingled processes of ritualisation in this case.

Studying contemporary blasphemy cases at the crossroads of religion, secularity and gender/sexuality⁵

Personally, I was amazed when I saw the controversial clip of Drag Sethlas at the end of February 2017 soon after its release on the internet. My surprise did not concern the fact that this act had immediately come under accusations of blasphemy from local and national church leaders, as this was the reason for my initial interest, but I was struck by the many explicit Roman Catholic ritual elements of which this act consisted. The life-sized statues of Mary and Jesus, embodied by Drag Sethlas and towering high above the crowd, and the attire and movements of the various dancers surrounding them, reminded me immediately of the religious processions of the *Semana Santa*, or Holy Week, which are held in several South European and Latin American countries in the days before Easter (Mitchell 1990; Leone 2014). In particular, I found the spectacle in which Borja Casillas as Drag Sethlas changed from Holy Mary into Christ on the cross breathtaking. I had not expected to encounter such a thoroughly Roman Catholic scene as a subject in the drag-queen contest, considering that a religious staging is usually completely avoided at these types of festivals in Western European countries (Peterson *et al.* 2018: 71–87; Enguix 2017, 2009).⁶

5 The two introductory paragraphs of this article are partly based on my earlier publications regarding the blasphemy cases of the pop star Madonna, the punk band Pussy Riot and Drag Sethlas. References to these publications can be found in the bibliography.

6 This constitutes a significant difference from recent drag shows in the United States, especially from the well-known *RuPaul's Drag Races* television shows, where religious elements are more prominent as part of the acts. In these shows, attempts are made to

Additionally, in the history of this specific contest, which has existed since 1998 and constituted the first drag-queen contest in Spain, only once previously was there a performance consisting of a drag queen and surrounding dancers who started their performance as nuns, in an act meant to show that they had left the convent life behind. This performance ended high in the competition (Melián 2015). I was really surprised to learn that Drag Sethlas's performance, which I would characterise as not only completely composed of Roman Catholic themes and materials, but also as referring intensively to the Spanish religious processions of the *Semana Santa*, could actually win the competition, and simultaneously cause such a stir. However, I also noticed the well-thought-out musical staging of this act, which opened with the song 'Like a Prayer', both famous and controversial in equal measure. The legacy of pop star Madonna was unmistakably present in this act, and thereby entailed an entire genealogy of provocations and blasphemy accusations, especially as they have occurred in recent years in North American and Western European countries (Korte 2009; 2014a).

I already have a long-time interest in investigating contemporary blasphemy accusations in European countries, such

reconcile queer sexuality with (Christian) religion on a personal basis: 'tell your own story'. The context here is usually an Evangelical (Protestant Christian) setting, both in the format of the shows and regarding the audiences and reception. While biblical citations are emphasised, institutionally and ritually religious components in these shows are far less important (Konow 2018; McKinnon 2018; Willsbrough 2019; Bronson 2020). A comparison of the performances of Drag Sethlas with this type of drag show unfortunately falls beyond the scope of this article.

as those against the performances of Drag Sethlas. The origin of this interest lies in my great curiosity for the work of performance artists who are at the same time gender and LGBT+ activists, who work in Western secularised contexts and draw in their work on their own, in most cases Roman Catholic, background. Of course, it is my own Roman Catholic background that makes me so sensitive to their work, but it is remarkable that most of these artists in Western countries who have been accused of blasphemy because of their artistic works, actually do have a Roman Catholic background. I initially started this research with questions such as: What makes religious images and practices so central to the work and performances of these artists? What makes these themes, which are often guided by an emancipatory agenda, so controversial in religious and political terms? And, is it also the other way round, that these works or acts themselves provoke these controversies? I am particularly interested in studying performances that lead to blasphemy accusations, as this provides access to the cutting edge of these controversies and opens up discussions on the broader political and religious contexts of these cases.

In earlier articles, I have argued that the controversy recently sparked in Western secularised countries by feminist and queer works of popular art that embody religious scenes, imagery and ritual is related to the identity politics of ethnic and sexual minorities, and of religious communities, interest groups and lobbyists, involved in a fight over shifting positions of privilege and marginalisation in modern neo-liberal societies. At first, I mainly looked at controversial artworks displayed in public museums. Several famous cases of highly contested works of art publicly exposed or performed in past decades in Western

countries have remarkably common traits in their disputed imagery. They connect almost palpable and often naked human bodies to iconic sacred scenes of Western Christian culture and art, such as the suffering Christ on the cross, the Last Supper, the Virgin Mary with the child Jesus or the Pietà (Mater Dolorosa); scenes that often owe their fame to their exceptional aesthetic quality. Well-known examples are such art works as *Ecce Homo* by Elisabeth Ohlson (Sweden, 1998), *I.N.R.I.* by Serge Bramly and Bettina Rheims (France, 1999), *Yo Mama's Last Supper* by Renee Cox (USA, 1999), *Our Lady* by Alma López (USA, 2001), *Blood Ties* by Katarzyna Kozyra (Poland, 1995/2017) and *Passion* by Dorota Nieznalska (Poland, 2002). Typically, a blasphemy accusation in these cases resulted in withdrawing the works from being shown in public or in closing the exhibition completely (Korte 2009, 2014a).

More recently, I have also investigated acts consisting of social, political and religious critique, performed 'provocatively' by pop and punk artists such as Madonna, Lady Gaga and the Russian formation Pussy Riot, which have become publicly contested for comparable reasons. These works of performance art have been accused – more or less formally – of blasphemy or sacrilege, which contributed to both their notoriety and their controversiality by causing huge media attention. Not only have conservative religious interest groups, religious leaders and representatives targeted these art works and performances, but also secular politicians and civil authorities have declared them offensive, and both parties have tried or even succeeded in stopping, prohibiting or banning their public exhibition or performance. In these cases, the role of the media is huge, and events are magnified, as it were, on enormous projection screens where issues are fought out

that transcend the actual action, as was for instance the case with the performance of Pussy Riot in 2012, where the combined established power of the Russian State and the Orthodox Church came down hard on the female members of the band by sentencing them to several years in prison camps (Korte 2014b; Korte 2022).

Even more recent are the performances of the Austrian pop singer Conchita Wurst (2014), the Spanish drag queen Sethlas (2017) and the Swedish Gothic artist Anna von Hausswolff (2021), where blasphemy accusations were also involved. These cases must be placed against a developing and fast-changing political scene in Europe: the emergence of 'anti-gender movements' that have appeared since the late 1990s in several Southern and Eastern European countries and in Latin America, but that increasingly are also present in the United States and Western Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017: 1–22; Weber 2014: 143–91). These movements consist of new forms of political mobilisation that focus explicitly on conservative views on gender and sexuality. Additionally, these movements have a particular common pattern across national settings or regarding the conventional East–West divide, which includes a shared discourse of anti-gender rhetoric, a travelling repertoire of protest activities and comparable strategies of mobilising mass movements. These movements fiercely oppose both the women's and LGBT+ rights activities, as well as what they deem the theories behind these positions, relying on conservative understandings of religion that promote natural sexual differences and gender complementarity. These debates often take the form of referring to Roman Catholic moral doctrine, and in particular to the Vatican's explicit anti-gender position, formulated under the reign of Pope Benedict (from 2005 to

2013). The cases of Conchita Wurst, Drag Sethlas and Anna von Hausswolff should be perceived in relation to this changing political climate that could be seen as driven by culture wars: they show a deliberate and sometimes provocative interplay of gendered corporeality and non-normative sexuality with well-known religious themes as the symbolic arena of this fight and are picked out for accusations of blasphemy and profanation because of these aspects of their performances. The clashes that these works of art engender are positioned on the fault line of religion and secularity, and their controversiality is deeply embedded in the ideological debates over this demarcation (Korte 2014a; Igrutinovic *et al.* 2015; Van den Berg 2018; Weber 2014: 143–91).

It is my contention that these many instances of alleged blasphemous imagery, featuring gendered corporeality and non-heteronormative sexuality, which comprise the so-called culture wars of the past two decades, are related to a particular social and cultural shift in modern and predominantly secularising societies regarding the public meaning of both religion and sexuality. This shift concerns the position and public perception of both religion and sexuality as identity markers in their mutual interrelatedness. At stake is an oscillating relationship between religion and sexuality as modern individual and collective markers of identity. Significant in this instability is the emergence of a dichotomous public discourse in which a secular position is equated with acceptance of gender equality and sexualities in the plural, and a religious position with the rejection of equality and sexual diversity. Until late into the twentieth century in Western countries, religious identity counted as a primary marker of one's social position, while sexual preference and behaviour were private to the degree of invisibility. More recently, the

affirmation of sexual diversity in all its (public) manifestations for many has come to count as a core value of modern Western life, as becomes clear for instance in a drag-queen contest or in pride parades, while religious identity has become for them a far more private factor. The cultural shift this implies could be seen as a reshuffling of prominence, power and visibility in relation to the social and personal meaning formerly established of both religion and sexuality (van den Berg *et al.* 2014; Derks and van den Berg 2020: 1–20). The analytical perspective developed here helps to clarify why contemporary works of art and performances that openly combine ‘feminised’ religion and sexual diversity, while intending to take critical feminist and LGBT+ stances, are potentially transgressive in multi-faceted ways and run the risk of being accused of offence, insult and defamation, not only by conservative religious groups and leaders, but also by secular politicians and civil authorities.

The Spanish context: the new political role of ‘gender ideology’

Spain has one of the largest Roman Catholic populations in Europe: more than 70 per cent of the inhabitants (in a population of almost 47 million) identifies itself as Catholic. However, actually only 3 per cent of Spaniards consider religion as one of their three most important values, which is lower than the 5 per cent European average (Johnson and Grim 2013: 133–42; Astor *et al.* 2017). However, the identification of the Spanish nation with Roman Catholicism has deep roots, and national Roman Catholicism has been a very important component of contemporary Spanish nationalism. The explicit identification between Roman Catholicism and nationhood in the Spain of the Franco regime is gradually disappearing from

public discourse, but it remains an important marker for individual attachment to Spain (Pérez-Díaz *et al.* 2010: 24–6; Muñoz 2009). It is therefore remarkable that on 3 July 2005, Spain legalised same-sex marriages in the context of installing measures concerning gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights (Platero 2007). It was a historical event that made Spain the third country in the world to introduce same-sex marriage (Adamczyk 2017: 127–48; Fouz-Hernández 2004). Although the majority of the population supports these regulations, there is a continuing protest against them from the Roman Catholic Church and right-wing parties (Alonso and Lombardo 2018). Recently, these protests have changed in outlook and have become more outspoken, as radical right-wing parties and lay Catholics have joined forces in their fight against what they call ‘gender ideology’. This is inspired by the political ‘culture wars’ taking place in North and South America which gravitate towards themes of gender and homosexuality, while, in Europe, recent Vatican documents on family values and sexual morality play a particularly dominant role. In 2001, Spanish bishops were the first worldwide to refer to ‘gender ideology’ in their attempts to resist the interests of feminists and LGBT+ activism, branding this view of gender a cultural construct, and an objectionable ideology (Cornejo and Galán 2018). Since then, several groups of so-called anti-gender activists have tried to initiate actions against same-sex marriage, abortion, gender and sex education, same-sex adoption, trans issues in public health services and the presence of gender studies in public universities. Although these initiatives have been a political success in terms of the mobilisation of large numbers of concerned people, they have not been very successful in changing laws. The

majority of Spanish Roman Catholics do not follow the Roman Catholic doctrine on private morality, and Spain is the European country where the most lay Catholics are in favour of Roman Catholic priests celebrating wedding ceremonies for same-sex couples. The political climate is marked by this opposition regarding family values and sexual morality, however, in particular since the election of a more conservative government in 2011 (Cornejo-Valle 2020; Cornejo and Galán 2018; Paternotte 2015).

Since a few years, there have been several counter-protests from the feminist and queer side against these extreme right-wing political views. In these protests, Roman Catholic imagery is deliberately used to support a critical point. Examples are the Mary-Vagina action during a march organised by the Spanish union of the General Workers' Confederation on 1 May 2014 (Jones 2015), the 'kissing Madonnas' action on 18 June 2016 in Valencia on the occasion of Gay Pride (Church Militant 2016), and the 'Our Mother' prayer of the Catalan poet Dolors Miquel, read at an awards event in Barcelona in 2016 (Anderson 2016). Borja Casillas's performance thus seems to tie in with these forms of protest, which all make use of well-known Roman Catholic imagery to vocalise their point of view. There is therefore a climate in which feminists and queer people feel the need to protest against the views of the Roman Catholic Church and the right-wing parties that rely upon this church in their defence of conservative family and sexual values; they tap into the religious sources of Christianity and create their own form of protest. This serves as an initial explanation of why religious imagery is used in these situations, and why these performances create such a stir.

The drag-queen contest during the carnival: escaping the verdict

In the case of the performance of Borja Casillas, the carnival forms an added element that is important to consider here. The Drag Queen Contest of Gran Canaria is one of the most important annual events in the LGBT+ scene in Spain. Since its establishment in 1998, this festival has become part of the five-century-old carnival tradition of Las Palmas on Gran Canaria. The Canary Islands are located south of Morocco in the Atlantic Ocean, about a thousand kilometres from the mainland of Spain. The original population of the islands was related to the Berbers of North Africa. Since the fifteenth century under Spanish rule, the islands have long served as trading posts and bases for Spanish colonial enterprise. The carnival celebrations on these islands have always been exuberant, as they are the result of the blending of different cultures and cultural traditions, of which the Christian carnival is the upper layer. The celebration of spring, sexuality and the return of abundant life is a much older and deeper festive event that is present throughout the entire Mediterranean. Masquerades, satires and many kinds of humorous competitions with singing, dancing and costuming are part of the festivities. The Canary Islands Carnival, as was the case in the whole of Spain, was banned under Franco's regime from 1936 to 1976 and during this period it only survived in derived and underground forms. Since the 1980s, the carnival has returned in full force to the streets and neighbourhoods of Spain (Testa 2020; Brisset 2019; Ruíz and Nadya 2016; Harris 2003).

On the Canary Islands and in the south of Spain, in cities such as Málaga and Cádiz, the annual drag-queen contest has become a permanent part of the carnival celebrations. In Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, the

contest consists of a live concert and a simultaneously broadcast television show in which the main event is a pageant of drag queens, enlivened with other performances of singers and dance numbers. In this drag-queen contest, the artistic talents of the performers, the interpretation of music songs and the dance (which increasingly includes acrobatics) are valued. The contest participants perform three minutes on the stage of the Santa Catalina Park in the heart of the city in very elaborate performances. Days before the gala, a pre-selection is held during which the best candidates are chosen to perform at the gala. In the contest rules there is no limitation on aspects of gender or sexual orientation, although the participants are mostly gay men. The pageant is broadcast by the Spanish national public channel RTVE. Four juries choose the winner together: media, invited guests, fashion and make-up experts, and TV viewers (who vote by phone). The contest is considered the highlight of the carnival period. An audience of about 6,000 people, mostly from the LGBT+ scene, follows the show in the open air and comes to the island especially for this occasion (Miteva 2018; Nortés 2018; Fimiani 2014).

In many other places in Spain, drag-queen contests are not held as part of the carnival, but later in the year. They are then linked to specific pride activities, so that all attention is focused on the LGBT+ movement and activities. On the other hand, when the drag-queen contest is held during carnival time, as on the Canary Islands, an intensification of the reversal takes place, a kind of doubling: both the drag-queen contest and the carnival reverse 'normal' practices – social, political and religious – in all kinds of ways. These carnival conditions also played an important role in the legal verdict that was passed on the behaviour Drag Sethlas was accused of, in which

they were finally acquitted after 18 months of trial. The court ruled that no affront or offensive conduct could be found, but rather a risky and daring performance, as was the case with 'the defendant in his role as Drag Sethlas, who supported his interpretation with the symbolism of Catholic prayers,' in particular the scenery of the Semana Santa (Información Las Palmas de Gran Canaria 2018). The main argument of the court in not declaring Casillas's performance intentionally offensive was built on this event taking place in the period of an originally 'pagan' feast, the provocative and transgressive setting of which could be acknowledged by the audience, irrespective of their individual backgrounds (Información Las Palmas de Gran Canaria 2018; Korte 2020).

The 2017 performance of Drag Sethlas: double theatricality

The act Borja Casillas presented in 2017 at the Drag Queen Contest in Gran Canaria will be unpacked at several levels. Here, I attempt to analyse this act as part of European performance art works that have been accused of blasphemy in recent years, as noted above. That is why I also make a comparison with Madonna's notorious crucifixion performance from 2006, to which Casillas's act explicitly refers.

I will start by giving a description of Casillas's act as it originally appeared as part of the complete drag-queen contest, broadcast on television. In this performance, Drag Sethlas appears on stage as the Virgin Mary, crowned and dressed in a long, wide, blue and white gown. This Mary is situated above the heads of a quartet of assistant singers and dancers, on a podium with large candlesticks on both sides. The dancers stride beside this podium as procession members, clothed in the characteristic corresponding outfits of Nazarenes. After

the ring of a church bell, Sethlas begins quietly and modestly mimicking pop star Madonna's prayed 'Act of Contrition', a confession of sins, before moving to the opening lines of Madonna's (very famous song) 'Like a Prayer': 'Life is a mystery, everyone must stand alone, I hear you call my name, and it feels like home.' Sethlas then, still in the attire of the Virgin Mary, descends from the podium, crosses themselves and starts singing a part of Lady Gaga's 'Judas' while dancing together with the Nazarenes: 'But in the cultural sense, I just speak in future tense. Judas, kiss me, if offended, or wear an ear condom next time.' In a fast tableau change, Sethlas withdraws behind closed doors on stage, and the dancers take the floor to the rousing symphonic music of Audiomachine's 'Lachrimae'. When the church bell rings again, the music stops and the dancers vanish behind the doors. A deep male voice commences praying the 'Our Father' in Spanish. Simultaneously, the doors on stage open and, at a very slow pace, a wooden cross is raised high in the air and shows Sethlas as a suffering and broken Christ on it, with the bloody wounds and the crown of thorns very visible. The 'Our Father' sounds until 'perdona nuestras ofensas' (forgive us our trespasses) is said – then Sethlas as Christ comes to life, and begins to speak (in Spanish): 'Do you want my forgiveness? Bend over and enjoy. Feel me in your mouth. Kneel down.' Christ-Sethlas subsequently jumps from the cross and dances to the exciting incantation of Juan Magan's 'Lord of the Night'. The dancers, who in the meantime have changed their clothes to female procession members partly in their underwear, reappear and dance with Christ-Sethlas in an explicit sexualised style, ending this act with an 'Amen', endorsed by the firm establishment of human-sized crosses from the procession.

As this brief description shows, this is

an extraordinarily complex act in which Borja Casillas, supported by four dancers, with the help of pop songs, acting, dancing and costume changes, expresses in a very short time a vision of the Christian idea of 'forgiveness of sins' which at the same time consists of a festive call to transgressive sexuality – remember that this all takes place in less than three and a half minutes! In my view, the complexity of this act is related to, but also affirmed by, the fact that two well-known registers of theatricality are linked here: that of a contemporary drag-queen show and of the processions of the Semana Santa of the Roman Catholic Church. I will first look at the two separately and then discuss the connections between these totally different styles that the creator of this show has brought together here.

What is striking in the case of Sethlas is the strongly ritualising character of the staged act of the 2017 drag-queen contest. Not only are most elements of this act taken from the famous Spanish processions of the Semana Santa, but the entire staging follows a religious pattern of penance, repentance and redemption, which also structures the religious processions of the Semana Santa, and steers the involvement of participants and spectators (Leone 2014; Kuuva 2017). This pattern is also established in the songs and prayers that are chosen by Sethlas for this act. In contrast to the 'blasphemous' performances of Madonna, Lady Gaga and Conchita Wurst, who mainly offer visual citations or 'stills' taken from a well-known Christian past heritage and mediated through famous museal art in their respective acts to evoke reactions from their public, Sethlas himself performs here ritually *throughout* this entire act. They offer penance and redemption in a ritualised setting, which displays an uncanny mixture of art and politics, religion and secularity, and sincerity and mockery.

However, they do more, and this forms the 'drag' aspect of the act: there is an explicit erotic part in Sethlas's performance. This is an element that cannot be found in the religiously controversial performances of Madonna, Lady Gaga, Pussy Riot or Conchita Wurst (Korte 2009, 2014a, 2014b, 2022). I already mentioned the many changes in Drag Sethlas's performance: Sethlas acts as the Virgin Mary who becomes Jesus Christ, the male Nazarenes change into provocative dancing women, the music goes from Madonna's sung repentance via Lady Gaga's 'Judas' to the arousing incantation of Juan Magan's 'Lord of the Night', the iconic images of Mary and Jesus change into dancing personae, and their bodies become explicitly sexual through music, dance and gesture. The most radical alterations lie in the agency and non-normative sexual behaviour that Sethlas contributes to both Mary and Jesus. Not only do Jesus and Mary dance, speak, sing and act about their sexual longing, but that longing is also, in both cases, unexpectedly transgressive. Mary sings about her ambivalent love for the traitor and outcast Judas, and Jesus shows his sexual needs: to be in charge of the sexual satisfaction of others, to touch himself and to be touched, even whipped, by others.

When in this show Drag Sethlas appears for the first time as Christ, he is lifted in an almost dying position on the cross, and a sonorous male voice speaks the official 'Our Father' in Spanish, until this prayer reaches the sentence about forgiving sins. Then Christ-Sethlas comes to life, steps from the cross and begins to speak his transgressive version of forgiving, in which the 'sins' of the audience are renamed as (erotic) needs: 'Do you want my forgiveness?' Sethlas thus offers forgiveness, revisiting the theme with which the scene started, which was recited by Madonna: 'Oh my God, I am

heartily sorry for having offended Thee. And I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishment. But most of all, because I have offended Thee (and I want to be good)'. The actual forgiveness this Jesus offers combines redemption and surrender in the same act: 'Bend over and enjoy'.

This agential and transgressive sexual appearance of Drag Sethlas as Mary and Jesus is, in my view, an original feature. In the acts of Madonna and Lady Gaga to which this performance refers, the artist's relationship with Jesus is much more ambivalent: Madonna is frozen, almost a 'still life' when she sings her song 'Live to Tell' on the cross in the *Confessions on a Dancefloor* show (Madonna 2010), and Lady Gaga dances in her clip 'Judas' around Judas (and Jesus), but never *becomes* him (Lady Gaga 2011). In the case of Drag Sethlas, they are the performer that becomes both Jesus and Mary, and in these roles, they not only sing and dance, but are also 'touched' by others.

Drag Sethlas's act compared to the controversial show of the pop star Madonna

Borja Casillas is a professional drag queen who has competed in a number of drag-queen contests in Spain since his early twenties. Drag queen shows like the one in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria are among the most visible and established forms of entertainment and mockery in which heteronormative masculinity is challenged by gender reversal and by explicit sexual behaviour. At the same time, homosexual masculinity becomes affirmed in these shows by its stereotypical reversal in hyperbolic heteronormative femininity, which gives these shows their ambivalence and makes them hotly disputed in queer theory (Levitt *et al.* 2018; Stone and Shapiro 2017; Egner and Maloney 2016; Greaf 2016).

Possibly Casillas deliberately decided to undermine this heteronormative femininity, giving this act a gendered and sexual political load by taking up fully-fledged Christian imagery and presenting this with his own twist.⁷

The Spanish literary critic and gender scholar Cristina Garrigós, who engages with female punk artists in her work, focuses on the use of religious iconography in relation to eroticism in the works of Spanish punk artists in popular music (Garrigós 2017). The use of religious iconography is, according to her, very important in order to question gender stereotyping. Garrigós claims to have found a remarkable difference between male and female punk artists in their use of religious iconography. While in the case of male artists, rage and mockery regarding the religious imagery dominate their acts, female punk artists are far more 'introverted': they identify with their own religious heritage and project their struggle into their material. This is also visible in the recent Spanish protest actions against the right-wing parties originated by feminists and queers using religious imagery that I recalled above. In these cases, the seriousness, serenity and lack of rage these protests reflect are signs of the introverted style that Garrigós describes. This could also be the case with Casillas and his drag persona Sethlas. They act according to the Spanish female punk artist model: they identify with their own religious heritage

7 Casillas affirmed that Madonna, Lady Gaga, Taylor Swift and Ariana Grande are important musical examples for him, and in this context stated that 'Ariana Grande wanted to convey that God is a woman as a feminist statement, and women play a very important role in this story.' Interview with Drag Sethlas, Drag Queen Carnaval Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Universidad Fernando Pessoa Canarias, 2020.

and project their struggle *into* these materials by playing the roles of Mary and Jesus themselves and demonstrating, through small but significant gestures, how these figures are part of their own struggle.

Because of the enormous publicity Casillas's act received immediately after it took place, he was forced to speak out publicly about the reasons for this act. In interviews for newspapers, radio and television, he emphasised how thorough and focused the preparation for this act had been. He worked on it for almost a year, supported by the costume designer Nelson Rodríguez, with whom he travelled to Turkey to purchase the fabrics for his clothes. In his explanation for why he chose to perform this act, he revealed that his intention was to shake up the then 20-year-old drag-queen contest: 'I said to myself that I had to do something different, something that the public was asking for, something that nobody would dare to do. So I said, I'll take the risk and I'll do it' (El Espejo Canario 2017; ABC Canarias 2017b). At the same time, he also claimed frequently that it was not his intention to hurt people or to attack their religious feelings. A recurring statement in his interviews is: 'For me it was a way to express myself, to do something different. It was not to upset anyone. It was art. Art is art' (El Espejo Canario 2017; ABC Canarias 2017b).

A salient detail in the publicity Casillas's performance generated was that he had completed a university education for early childhood teaching (at the Fernando Pessoa University) and was trying to obtain the Church Declaration of Academic Competence, which forms a mandatory course required by the Roman Catholic Church to teach religion as part of the teaching profession. 'I am not ready yet. I am only half-way through', he declared at the time, referring to the possibility of getting an official

teacher's appointment in a Spanish school (Crónica 2017; El Espejo Canario 2017). In the media, this reinforced the idea that the act was merely a provocation by Casillas: 'The blasphemous transvestite wants to become a teacher of religion!' (Crónica 2017). On the other hand, this constellation evoked the image that it was precisely out of religious commitment that he made such an act. As for his personal background, he stated that he was baptised Catholic and received confirmation, but that he considered himself an 'agnostic': 'I don't believe in anything and I don't stop believing in anything. I believe that there is something waiting for us upstairs and whatever it is, it is good for us' (Villullas 2017; ABC Canarias 2017b). When asked how he views religion, his answer was cautious: 'I think it's history, just like there are people who like history or geography; I think these are things that are just there, they're written down, and this is a way of getting to know them' (El Espejo Canario 2017). But he also stated the effect of religious feeling: 'The whole religious theme, imagining how everything encompasses you, that relaxes me enormously' (Entrevista Drag Sethlas 2020).

According to Casillas, his act was heavily inspired by watching videos and concerts by the pop star Madonna, both because of her incessant focus on religious elements in her work, such as the clip 'Like a Prayer' (1989) and the crucifixion scene from the *Confessions on a Dancefloor* tour (2006), but also because of the strongly condemnatory reactions that Madonna's work has evoked around the world. It is the crucifixion scene from Madonna's *Confessions* tour in particular that has been of great influence on Casillas's act (Cuesta 2017; Rosales 2017; Crónica 2017). In her show, Madonna, suspended on a huge shining silver cross, and wearing a crown of thorns on her head, sang one of her already famous

songs, 'Live to Tell', in a newly created setting on stage. At the end of the song, when Madonna leaves the cross and kneels down on the stage in a gesture of praying, pictures of AIDS orphans in Africa and texts from the New Testament were projected on a big screen behind her. The texts consisted of sayings of Jesus from Matthew 25: 'What you have done for the least of mine ...'. This act, as is well known, has been denounced and reviled, and has been qualified as pompous and melodramatic. Madonna has not only been reproached for megalomania and bad taste, but her performance was also denounced as blasphemous and sacrilegious. In almost all countries where Madonna's *Confessions* tour was scheduled, actions were initiated by Christian organisations to prohibit the show, or at least this part of the show, from being performed, and the same happened with the display of the filmed version of this act on television and the internet.

Madonna herself, in reaction to the outrage her performance had caused, explained that the message of her crucifixion scene concerned the ongoing importance of fighting AIDS and taking care of the millions of AIDS orphans in Africa, a message which, according to her, is fully in the spirit of the teachings of Jesus. Her authorised statement ran as follows: 'This is not a mocking of the church. It is no different than a person wearing a Cross or "Taking up the Cross" as it says in the Bible. My performance is neither anti-Christian, sacrilegious or blasphemous. Rather, it is my plea to the audience to encourage mankind to help one another and to see the world as a unified whole. I believe in my heart that if Jesus were alive today he would be doing the same thing' (CBS News 2006).

Actually, Madonna is remarkably restrained when she 'plays Christ': surprisingly, she has left out all her usual

provocations while taking on the role of the crucified Christ. She does not take off her clothes in this scene, and she is not provocatively dressed either. Rather, she shows herself on the cross in a very modest, androgynous style, fully dressed in a blouse, trousers and boots. On the other hand, her performance is still highly susceptible to accusations of hubris and blasphemy, because in this act Madonna poses as a recognisable individual and a woman of stature and fame, the pop star Madonna herself, who intentionally stands for and in the place of Jesus Christ. As she says in her statement cited above, her appearance is all about being recognised as the 'do-gooding Christ', especially towards the AIDS orphans of Africa, who are allowed to figure around Madonna as Christ on the cross (Korte 2009, 2014a).

While Casillas in his show 'wakes up' both the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ from their sterile sleep, in Madonna's case there is no difference at all when she steps down from the cross: she kneels devoutly, remains still and prays silently. Only through the song 'Live to Tell' does it become clear what Madonna's own framing of this act is. This song is about a painful secret, a constrained father-son or father-child relationship, and contains serious complaints about the father who causes this pain: 'a man can tell a thousand lies'. Although a complete song is sung about this theme, it is not evident from the performance what its consequences are, for there is no follow-up. That is a big difference from Casillas, who let his Mary and Jesus come to life and let them pray, dance, sing and express their lust – and in the case of Jesus, grant forgiveness.

In Casillas's case, the scene has a different setting: starting with Madonna's confession of guilt, the theme of sin, penance and forgiveness is encompassing in Casillas's show. Casillas is dressed meticulously

to look like formal statues of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, almost perfectionist in style. However, the difference from Madonna is that this perfection applies to Mary and Jesus and not to himself: he is not recognisable as Casillas throughout the show. In his dressing up for this show, it is not about portraying the 'beneficent Christ' but about Mary and Jesus who are like himself, come to life for himself, behave like he wants to be and do. It is not the detached and well-doing Jesus Christ, but the living, dancing and forgiving Jesus that is portrayed by Casillas. And the name that he has given to the act as a whole could be seen as a prayer text: 'My darling! I don't do miracles, may it be what God wants' (El VaLen 2017).

Therefore, both Madonna and Casillas make use of holy figures and sacred scenes of their own Roman Catholic heritage to state their message, and both, as Cristina Garrigós (2017) observes, draw on their own religious heritage, and identify with it. However, as we have seen, Madonna uses her theatricality to perfect the image of herself that she wants to present in her shows; Casillas, however, makes the image of himself disappear in his performance in exchange for the perfect Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, and uses his theatricality to breathe life into this perfect Mary and Jesus from an enlargement and transgression of his own life.

The 2018 and 2020 performances of Drag Sethlas

Drag Sethlas's subsequent performances of 2018 and 2020 did not cause a similar stir to that analysed above. In the year following his winning of the festival, Casillas was given the opportunity to perform once more and bid farewell to his 'throne' with a complete act. Because at the time the case brought against Casillas in court by the

Association of Christian Lawyers was still pending, a statement was read out by the organisers of the festival which announced that the freedom of speech, laid down in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and signed by Spain in 1978, had to be respected. The association announced, however, that they would keep an eye on Casillas when he performed his new act (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria 2018). For this occasion, Casillas reworked his own spectacle of the year before, having already shown it several times at other festivals during that year with slight but telling changes. This time, the first part of the show, in which Casillas appears as the Virgin Mary, started even more in the processional atmosphere: as in a real Holy Week procession, Drag Sethlas entered the stage with his entire entourage, consisting of the contestants of the 2018 show. The same lyrics and songs by Madonna and Lady Gaga from the year before were presented. Then, behind the scenes, Drag Sethlas again changed into Jesus Christ, but not into Christ on the cross: instead, the Last Supper in Da Vinci style was chosen, which a dozen other contestants joined. After a voice-over with prayer, Jesus and the disciples came dancing from behind the communal table, while 'Personal Jesus' by Depeche Mode sounded: 'Someone to hear your prayers, someone who cares, personal Jesus'. Drag Sethlas then transformed again, this time into a majestic white angel, surrounded by dancers dressed in white, as they sang and danced to 'Kids in the Dark' by Filipe Guera and Bernardo Facolne, and 'On the Run' by Ummet Ozcan. The act concluded with the biblical maxim: 'He who is without sin, let him cast the first stone' (John 8:7).

In 2020, Casillas ventured back to the Drag Queen Contest in Gran Canaria, with a completely new act. But again, the

religious theme of sin and forgiveness was at the centre of this show. The title of this act was 'If the temptation is beautiful, imagine the sin!' This time, the theme was taken directly from the Bible; the story of Adam, Eve and the serpent from Genesis 2–3 is literally depicted on the large stage doors behind which the changes take place, and when the doors open, the exact same scene becomes visible. In the first part, while the Bible story of the transgression in Paradise is read via voice-over, Drag Sethlas performs as Eve sitting under the tree in the Garden of Eden; they sing a part of 'God is a Woman' by Ariana Grande. They are accompanied by Adam, who picks a piece of fruit from the richly laden tree and gives it to them. When they have sung 'You believe God is a woman', they audibly set their teeth in the apple. That is the signal for the doors to close and for Eve to change into the snake of the same story, sitting in the gaping maw of an even greater snake. This is surrounded by dancers on horseback who, reminiscent of the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Revelation 6), step off their horses and start to dance together with Drag Sethlas. Sethlas's dance turns into a series of acrobatic scenes, in which they wriggle across the stage like a snake. The music is exuberant and festive: 'The children are listening, the music keeps on giving' ('Dirty and Filthy' by David Tort & M.). On the closed doors on stage, the title 'Holy Bible' remains visible throughout the act, as an enormous book constantly present in the background. The dancers change from horsemen into female dancers dressed in the red-and-white style of the serpent. At the end of the act, the snake is lifted up into the great snake maw and drops down 'free' from it: thus freeing itself from the deadly embrace of sin.

In this last act, the perspective has thus become more intellectual and earthlier,

less magical and enchanting than in the two acts performed before. To understand this act fully, the story of Adam, Eve and the serpent has to be recognised as coming from the Christian Bible. The reference to other biblical stories (such as the Horsemen of the Apocalypse), to God as a woman (via Ariana Grande) and to the 'reversed fall from grace' from the serpent's maw also requires a creative knowledge of stories from the Christian tradition. But simultaneously Casillas has also become more reserved in his choice of the persons he portrays. In this act, he fulfils both the role of Eve and that of the serpent; this time he remains on the safe, human and animal side of the characters portrayed. He explicitly does not identify any longer with Mary or Jesus, or any other holy person, but with Eve and the serpent.

Conclusion

I have analysed Drag Sethlas's acts (2017–20) at the Drag Queen Contest in Gran Canaria as part of performance art accused of blasphemy during recent European religious and political conflicts. In particular I wanted to trace aspects of ritualisation in this type of popular artistic performance that is characterised by a high number of religious connotations, to understand how these aspects might have influenced the blasphemy allegations raised against the performances. Although in this case the act took place in a remote corner of Europe, on the Spanish island of Gran Canaria, far south of Spain, and was performed during carnival time and as part of a drag-queen contest, it is noteworthy that various religious authorities immediately spoke out against it and accused it of blasphemy. It is not possible to tell from the formulated charges whether the emerging 'anti-gender' campaign of conservative parties in Spain played an explicit role here. However, since

this was an outspoken LGBT+ event with national appeal, and resistance to this type of movement is one of the focal points of this campaign, it is at least plausible that this 'anti-gender' policy played an active role in the blasphemy lawsuits this performance evoked, especially given its lengthy denunciation from the Spanish Roman Catholic Church and the National Association of Christian Lawyers.

Looking at the act itself, I have demonstrated that in Drag Sethlas's first performance a remarkable double theatricality is present. First, this act refers to the religious processions of the Semana Santa, not only in terms of the external appearance of 'holy drama' centred around Jesus, the Virgin Mary and their followers, but also with the religious pattern of penance, repentance and redemption. Second, this act simultaneously has a specific 'drag' theatricality, with its parodies, mockery and explicit erotic scenes. It is precisely the connection between both forms of theatricality, especially seen in the imagination of Jesus and the Virgin Mary who play a large and special role in both forms of theatricality, namely as the ones who on the one hand appear in recognisable traditional religious roles and on the other hand step out of their expected roles and take a leading part in the drag show, that gives this act its provocative meaning. The citations of the controversial performances of Madonna and Lady Gaga certainly heighten this provocation, but above all, in this form of double theatricality, the surprising representations of the Virgin Mary and Jesus are here the highlights.

The decreasing presence of this double theatricality in the following performances is in my view an important indication of why the later performances of Drag Sethlas were no longer perceived as committing such an offence. In the latest, completely

renewed version of this performance, the content is still about the theme of sin and forgiveness, but the Semana Santa outlook and the double roles of the Virgin Mary and Jesus have disappeared. In their place now stands a more intellectual and ironical interpretation of sin and forgiveness, based on the biblical story of Adam, Eve and the serpent. Drag Sethlas refrains completely from acting as Jesus or the Virgin Mary, opting instead for the earthly roles of Eve and the serpent. Although the ‘story’ of this later performance has become more explicitly focused on the Christian idea of sin, the ritual aspect has been diminished: the double theatricality which links the patterns of the Semana Santa with those of a drag-queen show has vanished. ■



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