

RETURNING AND INTO YOUR ARMS

James Pfaff, Glasgow Cathedral

31st of October 2021 to 31st of January 2022

On the occasion of COP26, Glasgow artist James Pfaff's transient neon and sound installation will be hosted by Glasgow Cathedral and will stay until the end of January. "Returning And Into Your Arms" is a site-specific work made by Pfaff, in collaboration with Glasgow Cathedral, for local citizens and the wider international community to promote the idea of a positive forward movement.

In what ways do Pfaff's work and Glasgow Cathedral interact? What does it mean to show contemporary artwork in a sacred place? We cannot talk about art without mentioning its surrounding environment - context defines it, especially when the object of discussion is a conceptual artwork in the form of a sentence. For centuries churches have been the place of art par excellence, especially when we think of the first public museums are a relatively recent invention (about 200 years old). It would be difficult for us Westerners to imagine the History of Art detached from the Christian one without Giotto's fresco cycle of St. Francis of Assisi and Michelangelo's Pietà.

For centuries art has been commissioned to spread the Christian message and to make it more accessible and understandable to the public. Art, like religion, has always been concerned with the important everlasting aspects of human life: birth, death, relationships, community, future, creation, responsibility, meditation, and soul. More recently, artists have explicitly questioned their existence and the contemporary condition; never before had artists put themselves in the front row, announcing their presence and making work from the soul. The changed role of artists has redefined their secular relation with the Church: commissions gave way to new forms of collaboration where contemporary art is a dialogue between artists' personal processes and messages and those of spirituality and the community. Indeed, churches have continued to host many modern and contemporary artists facilitating incredible installations such as Bill Viola's work at St. Cuthbert's Church in Edinburgh and St Paul's Cathedral in London, Anish Kapoor and Michelangelo Pistoletto's work at St George's Church in Venice and so on. We can all agree that placing an artwork in a church dissolves it from mere exhibition and elevates it to a higher value in dialogue with the space. Before being a place for sharing the Christian message, a church was a unique architectural structure built to create a community available to all. In contemporary dialogue, a church is, first of all, a place where humanity can connect with the spiritual. Christian architecture was born as a space for liturgies, public acts of worship celebrated by the community, corresponding to the early migration of the meaning of the Latin term *ekklesia* from the assembly to the building. One space where the walls serve to embrace and give a contemplative pause from our hectic daily life.

Concerning the location of Pfaff's work - in the middle of St Mungo's Cathedral - a spontaneous question arises: to whom is the sentence addressed? Which community are we talking about? Given that James Pfaff will unveil the work on the occasion of COP26, the recipients will be global citizens. More specifically, they are those who cross the nave - from the Latin word for "ship", the primary and central part of a church - and gather in the choir - the liturgical place - and perhaps share their plans on how to reverse the direction of climate change. Upon entering the Cathedral, people will be intrigued by the novelty of the neon medium carrying a possible liturgical message. Why is it a neon - more associated with the city street - located in a sacred space? Compared to other types of written communication, neon attracts with its light and intensifies the message, making it accessible to everyone thanks to its brevity. With these qualities, it directly encourages action. As Pfaff declares, "neon is one of the best media to express the important [...] for me, this handwork, mastering form, fire and glass, is essential; filled with inert gas and brought to life with electricity, the work has its soul and spirit, and it is a sacred and spiritual light, a living structure." Neon is in continuous flux; a movement made possible by trillions of mighty and minuscule gaseous particles powered by electricity. The installation illuminates and underlines the "Returning" message for a global change by activating these natural elements. The soft white of the neon is sometimes enhanced by a multisensory sound, tuned to the sound of the Universe, sometimes to the Earth's. A secular OM of meditation, the sound of the *aura*.

"The installation has a reception and performative aesthetic. I hope that as the work casts its soft light and sound over the Cathedral nave and viewer's body, the viewer will extract meaning and experience the work in their own way," says Pfaff. The meaning of "Returning And Into Your Arms" is its performative action. People are a fundamental part of the installation, or rather its protagonist: called to cross the entrance and walk under the neon; they are a meaningful community. The artwork's meaning is measured precisely by the diversity of uses allowed to the community and the different relations to the work they can build. The sentence, as a recurrent moment for different situations, works as a flexible formula befitting any context: from the intimate to the universal, as a refrain of a ballad of love by Nick Cave. Pfaff states: "my personal readings of the work do not have primacy" - the work is open to interpretation by the public. Suppose you speak to Pfaff about the meaning of the installation. In that case, he suggests that at least three broad meanings can coexist: Gratitude to the benevolence of the Glasgow community to which the artist returned, a message of brotherhood shared with the religious community, a civic and ethical message for global community action. As in a march of demonstration or a religious procession, the walk is a fundamental moment for reciprocal identification in a community.

The artist is pointing us in a direction to go, indicating the direction of change. Embracing the thought of the new global movement, *Fridays for future*, the artist supports the necessity to change our mindset right now. We are here and now; we have this opportunity, and we cannot miss it; giving importance and responsibility to this moment means being present. In the same way, the artwork exhibited here cannot be shown at any other time, or the repeated words will look vacuous and trite. The neon work is a sentence made by two moments: the first, "returning", and the second, James Pfaff, specifies the direction "into your arms". The artist becomes an interpreter of the contemporary mood, with his secular confession, he suggests to us an intimate and collective reflection; we have to re-establish our connection to our reality, a personified reality, which can be a spiritual company or a collective embrace, familiar, but also a return to the origins in direct contact with Nature. As the artist says, returning means reducing, reconsidering our priorities, coming back to our hometown. Presenting the work here, at COP26, and sharing a message of an active return to the arms of Nature with that international young generation, Pfaff's intervention "promotes the idea of a positive forward movement". Choosing neon as a medium, he makes the thought visible to leaders and every citizen.

During the Christmas and New Year festivities, "Returning" will stay in the Cathedral and visible to the local community. Can time - its flowing - influence the meaning of the artwork? The flow of time punctuated by the meeting of different communities in the Cathedral will give the sentence written in neon a particular meaning. In a place like a church, where silence reigns, words and sounds become performative.

Pfaff invites you to stand before the work and have a moment to contemplate the feelings of returning to a basilar life - often something we don't have enough time to think about. Experiencing the installation in states of silence or sound, people will hopefully be accompanied in the process of collective meditation and action during COP26 and beyond.

Francesca Seravalle

Francesca Seravalle is a curator of exhibitions and art books, specialising in archival research. She has worked for Magnum Photos, KesselaKramer, and Fabrica and has curated exhibitions in London, Glasgow, Amsterdam, Luxembourg, and Tokyo. She collaborates with multiple European Universities, including London South Bank University, Ual and Ecol. She has participated in numerous international photography juries and resides in Venice.

Translated from Italian.



Sound test 2021

HOMEcomings

Father & Mother I return

From flames of fire tried & pure & white

A note inscribed on the reverse of the final plate of William Blake's epic poem Milton

*Returning And Into Your Arms* are the words that emanate from the pulpitum of Glasgow Cathedral in an ambitious neon text work by Glasgow artist James Pfaff. The soft, cascading white light dances across the medieval stonework floor of the nave, below which lies the crypt of St Mungo, is the work an ode to this sixth-century saint, for whom this great church and city were founded? The experience of wandering and returning played a vital role in the life of St Mungo. Part of the Celtic peregrinators of the early Christian era, St Mungo was banished from Glasgow by the pagan King Morken in AD 565, and spent his exile travelling across Wales and England. He returned to Glasgow in the late sixth century to take up the post of Bishop of Strathclyde at the request of the new King. This life of wandering and homecoming is shared with James Pfaff, who left Glasgow in the mid-nineties, for Hamburg and later London. It was during his self-imposed exile that Pfaff met Alex, and their whirlwind romance proved transformative. The artist himself would attest that this was the catalyst for a metamorphosis within his artistic practice. Suddenly he had found his muse, and the legacy of their inspirational meeting and their shared pilgrimage across America has helped hone his artistic vision. The diaristic roots of his photographs of this period are unmistakable. This is unsurprising given his committed and life-long practice of journal keeping. It was through the combination of these two forms of self-expression - photography and personal writing - that would lead to a further transformation; as the photographs and journals coalesced into an artistic reappropriation of a personal archive, resulting in the highly acclaimed artist book *Alex & Me*, published by Danilo Montanari Editore.

After decades of wandering, Pfaff returned home in 2015, setting up a home studio in the west end of Glasgow. He later exhibited *Alex & Me* at Street Level Photoworks in 2018, and it was whilst preparing this exhibition that his lyrical, idiomatic flourishes would first find form outwith the pages of his journals. Through his experimentation with neon text work Pfaff discovered an artistic process that proved revelatory. Given the diaristic nature of the subject matter from which he draws inspiration, it is perhaps no surprise that the artist would embrace writing as a key component within his practice. Indeed, he is by no means the first photographic artist to embrace text, but unlike Robert Frank or Duane Michals, who inscribed their negatives and prints with a narrative or a cryptic message, Pfaff's approach is about taking photography to its zenith. His is a method born out of an incessant need to disrupt our understanding of what photography is. By pushing far beyond the edge of the image, the text work attempts to discover the very essence of 'photography and its territories'.

To understand this approach one must first delve into the mind of the artist, as Pfaff himself designates photography as existing within four key realms. Firstly, there is the 'negative', the performative act of making a picture. This is often an impulsive, unconscious action, the thing which compels the artist to lift the camera and click the shutter in the first place. This is followed by the second realm of photography, the 'print', which represents everything one would expect within traditional, or as Pfaff terms it - pure photography. Pictures framed, presented on a wall, viewed within the modern temple of the white cube gallery, or feverishly devoured in lusciously printed photobooks.

What lies beyond this is the realm of 'expanded photography', when an artist begins to disrupt the very notion of photography and what a photograph can be. It is here that an artist can first begin to impress his or her own vision upon the photographic material, so beginning the transformation of the known into the imagined. At this point, photographic prints may be altered; even destroyed, by the artist's hand. There is often an intuitive realisation within the artist that the photographs themselves are not enough, and so they begin to embrace elements outwith photography, introducing installational elements and curatorial structures in support of their pictures. If pure photography presents the artist with a limited capacity for expression, expanded photography as a methodology branches out beyond the photograph itself, creating new avenues for artistic exploration.

The final realm is what the artist describes as 'photography and its territories', and this is where we find the artist currently situated. This new neon work, whilst evidently not a photograph, could only be realised as a consequence of Pfaff's artistic journey through these previous realms. There is no doubt that photography is embedded deep within the muscle memory of his very being. His entire artistic output is rooted within the performative tradition of contemporary photographic practice. Whilst he would argue that he has not left photography, it is plain to see his interests lie far beyond that of pure or even expanded photography. 'Drawing with light' is the literal translation of photography, and this is precisely what Pfaff is doing in this new work, bypassing the camera completely whilst retaining the inherent poetic quality of the photographic medium.

In his essay *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes attributes two key elements to our reading of a photograph. Firstly there is the *studium*, the general response that a photograph engenders, be that from its socio-historical context, or aesthetic appeal. The other key element, and one that is key to our understanding of Pfaff's text works, is the *punctum* - the chance element that resonates uniquely with the viewer, removed entirely from the artist's own intention of the work. It is the viewer's own unique experience that they bring to the work that gives the object its punctum, and ultimately



Preparatory drawing 2019

its power. It is through this inner dialogue between viewer and artwork that this new piece derives its emotional clout. Disruption, serendipity, and evocation are qualities that are intrinsic to both photography and poetry, and through the combination of these shared elements Pfaff has created this new work. Multiple readings and interpretations could be offered, both spiritual and secular. Is it a clarion call for change or a simple proclamation of homecoming? Is it a declaration of healing, or a whispered return to nature? Only the viewer can decide. What is certain, however, is that this new neon work for Glasgow Cathedral is the product of an artist who has spent many years diligently finding his voice, resulting in an ambitious and generous gift to the city, regardless of which way you read it.

John Farrell

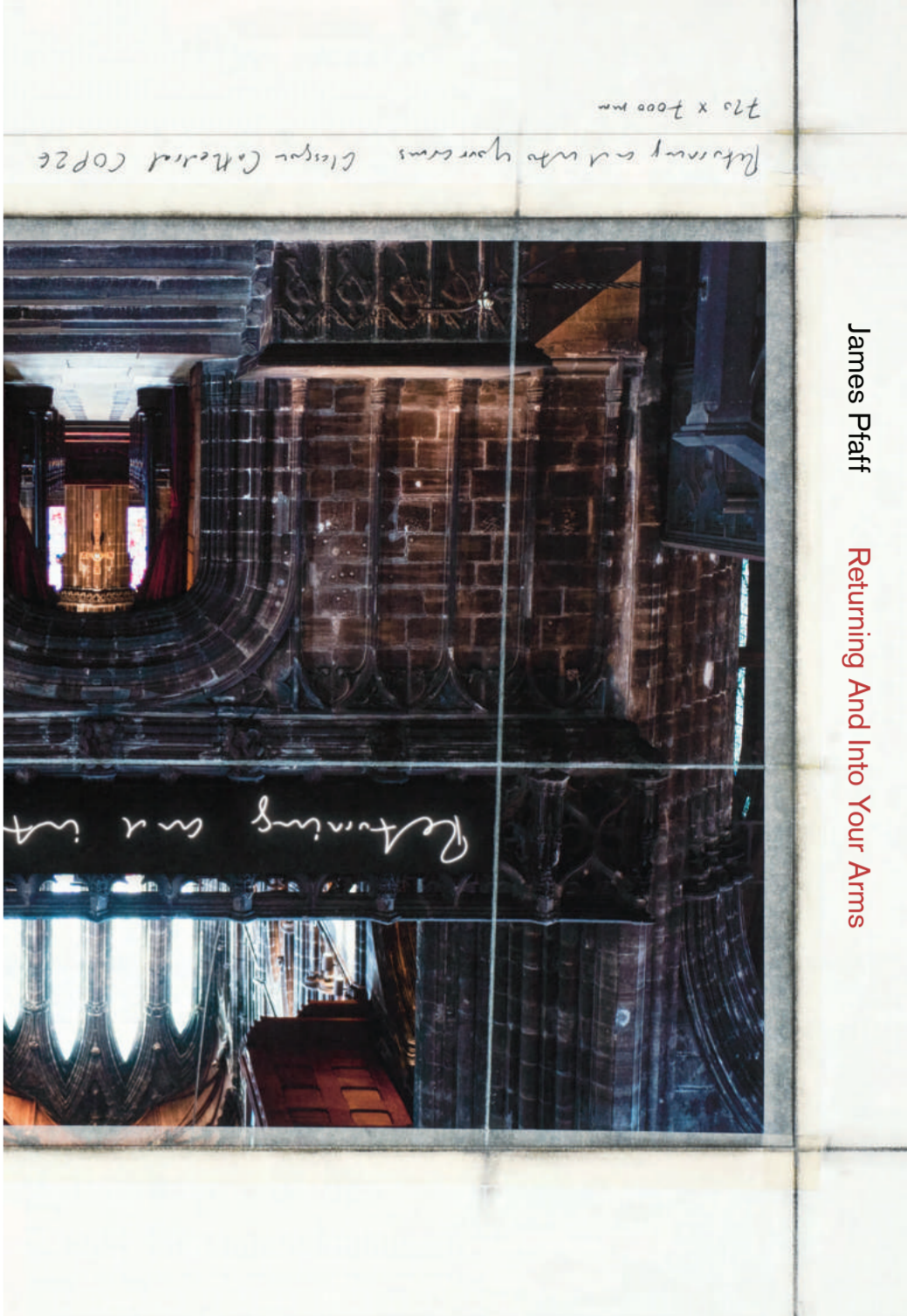
John Farrell is an artist and writer based in Glasgow. His writings on photography have been published in several books and journals, and his work has been exhibited across Scotland and internationally.



Glasgow Cathedral 1865



Glasgow Cathedral plan 1887



James Pfaff

Returning And Into Your Arms



James Pfaff is an artist and graduate of the Glasgow School of Art who has been working with the photographic medium for over 30 years. In 2016 his first artist book, "Alex & Me" (Danilo Montanari Editore), was published. In 2018, the work was reappraised in exhibition form as a solo show at Street Level Photoworks for Glasgow International (GI). The exhibition was nominated for The Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize 2019. A neon-based wall composition from the show - Ever Been Changed By Someone? was awarded The Emma Herman-Smith Environmental Art Award for artwork of merit in environmental art in 2019.

He moved to Hamburg in 1994, then London in 2001, where he continued to work and exhibit his projects whilst working commercially, with amongst others, the artist Banksy. He returned to Glasgow in 2015.

2019

Original text work 2019

Returning and into your arms

