

Lecture

Paul C. Johnson (University of Michigan)

Art, Presence, Sacrifice: The Death and Rebirth of the Cleveland "Thinker"

The esoteric "religious" powers of figurative sculpture appear most vividly in iconoclastic acts of destruction taken against them. Such acts reveal an ambivalence in iconoclasts' relationships with these artworks, a simultaneous attraction to their nearhuman quality, which allows sculptures to serve as ritual substitutes for live persons, as scapegoats, and a repulsion to them that motivates the attack. Paradoxically, iconoclastic attacks help to produce artworks as sacred—as incarnational, presence-bearing forms. To show this, I consider the case of the 1970 bombing of Rodin's "Thinker" in Cleveland as an act of ritual sacrifice; a sculpture "killed" as though it were a condemned person. Instead of destroying it, though, the iconoclasts animated it. The cast of the Cleveland Museum of Art's Thinker now pulses with life in a way unlike any other version. Damaged by the blast, wrenched apart, its base a jagged plume, the Thinker's ripped legs and hollowed torso open now to a distinct kind of nearhuman agency, as martyr.



Paul Christopher Johnson is Professor of History, Afroamerican and African Studies, and the Doctoral Program in Anthropology and History at the University of Michigan. Working between historical and anthropological modes on issues from secrecy to diaspora to diversely mediated forms of agency, Johnson has done long-term fieldwork in Brazil and Honduras, and shorter-term fieldwork in the Bronx and Paris. He is the author of *Secrets, Gossip and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* (Oxford, 2002), *Diaspora Conversions: Black Carib Religion and the Recovery of Africa* (California, 2007), *Ekklesia: Three Inquiries on Church and State* (Chicago, 2018), with Winnifred Fallers Sullivan and Pamela E. Klassen; and, most recently, *Automatic Religion: Nearhuman Agents of Brazil and France* (Chicago, 2021).

January 27, 2026

6.15 - 7.45 P.M

Big Seminar Room
Hartmannstr. 14, Building D1, Erlangen

Link for attendance:
<https://fau.zoom-x.de/j/62556506187>

