

## Is there a God-shaped hole in contemporary art?

The theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, once remarked that modern secular culture has at its heart a hollow 'God-shaped hole,' equating the decline of religious belief with the loss of meaning.<sup>1</sup> In an essay responding to Bultmann's thesis, Langdon Gilkey argued for art's potential to fill that absence, by implication reiterating the commonly-voiced appeal for the museum of art to act as a site of spiritual sustenance.<sup>2</sup> More interesting perhaps is a related but tangential response to Bultmann from the respected church historian, Allan Doig, who some years ago broached this issue, asking the question, 'is there a God-shaped hole in the middle of modern art?'<sup>3</sup> Doig's query was directed rather more towards the perception that a spiritual vacuum is endemic to modern and contemporary art, an assumption with which he fundamentally disagrees. His argument is essentially a defence of the use of modern art in churches, using as examples several canonical works by Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland, Marc Chagall and Henri Matisse, as well as more recent artists like Antony Gormley, thereby disavowing the notion of modern art's besetting godlessness. This argument has two main thrusts: modern art, especially that produced by non-believing artists, need not be feared nor disdained as intrinsically godless, nor should the church, in choosing to patronise it, presume to fill art's 'God-shaped hole' with its own system of thought and interpretation. Art is, and should remain, another way of expressing truths rather than a vehicle for the church to express its own values.

I would like to approach this supposition of a God-shaped hole in art by considering Doig's argument with reference to my own particular field, which is the use of contemporary art within the church, before returning, in my conclusion, to another way of considering this purported vacuity. Against the complaint that contemporary art, especially that originating from secular sources, can have little to offer the church since it has a void where God

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<sup>1</sup> Fuller, P. *Images of God: The Consolations of Lost Illusions*. London: Chatto & Windus. 1985: 192. It is a thought originally attributed to the French philosopher Blaise Pascal, who wrote 'Il y a dans le cœur de tout homme un vide qui a la forme de Dieu' ('There is a vacuum in the heart of every man in the shape of God').

<sup>2</sup> Gilkey, L. 'Can Art Fill the Vacuum?' In *Art, Creativity and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*, ed. Apostolos-Cappadona, D. London: Continuum International Publishing Group. 1995 (1984)

<sup>3</sup> Doig, A. 'Is there a God-Shaped Hole in the Middle of Modern Art?' *The Month* 32 (7). 1999

should be, I would like to propose that the evidence of recent decades suggests otherwise.

### **Policies and criteria for art**

The journal 'Art and Christianity', with which many of you may be familiar, tends not to include a letters page, but in the last issue a letter was included which draws our attention to the persistent unease felt by some over the incorporation of unconventional works by non-confessional artists into the contemporary church. A reader had responded to a review of 'Conflux', an exhibition at Salisbury Cathedral in 2011, which featured the figurative sculptures of Sean Henry, ranged throughout the cathedral and its environs, but the issue he raised were of far greater import than a mere review, and deserve careful consideration. His concern was essentially this: shouldn't art produced for the church be manifestly Christian or directed towards exploring the values associated with a Christian sensibility? It is a valid question and no doubt one that exercises many of those involved in one way or another with church-based contemporary art. Since it was my review which had prompted his letter I thought it my duty to attempt a response, which I what I intend to do today.

A common difficulty for art produced for churches and cathedrals is that the need to fulfil ecclesiastical criteria can take precedence over artistic decisions, a complaint occasionally voiced by artists commissioned by the church. In such cases one finds the demand to produce a 'message-orientated' or 'faith-directed' work of art can place undue restrictions on creativity and undervalue art *as* art.<sup>4</sup> Amongst Christian authors on this subject, plenty of examples can be found in which a distinctively Christian aesthetic and inspiration is deemed solely acceptable against the perceived godlessness of contemporary art and contemporary culture. As one such advocate has put it, art for art's sake should be relinquished in favour of art for God's sake, whereby sacramental values predominate over purely artistic ones.<sup>5</sup> For those of us anxious to promote the vital contribution art makes to a religious milieu, as an equally valid way of seeing, understanding and responding to the world, any such focus on art as overtly 'Christian' could be considered unduly limiting, foreclosing possibilities and inhibiting efforts to think progressively and creatively. In his contribution to the 1993 *Images of Christ* exhibition catalogue Rowan Williams made precisely this point, going so far as to propose that 'art is most seriously religious, even theological, when it

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<sup>4</sup> Begbie, J. *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark. 1991: 248

<sup>5</sup> Ryken, P. *Art for God's Sake: A Call to Recover the Arts*. Phillipsburg, N J: P&R Publishing. 2006

isn't perceived as trying to illustrate Christian truths.'<sup>6</sup> Though counter-intuitive, many of the most memorable ecclesiastical commissions of the past two decades have exemplified this logic.

A recent aspect of my research has been an analysis of the growing number of arts policies now being introduced by cathedral chapters. These are in effect an effort to ratify the use of contemporary art invited into or commissioned for their respective spaces, and invariably attempt to determine whether said art ought to fulfil religious as well as aesthetic criteria. Implicit in all such policy-making is the degree to which 'Christian' should be a descriptor of the art or artists engaged by the church. Some policies lay down fairly prescriptive rules while others attempt to keep their parameters as loose and open to interpretation as possible. Those policies that are more conciliatory underline the valued place of the visual arts as a source of spiritual insight, regardless of whether or not an artist is a professed Christian. However, underlying several of the policies, unwritten but implied, is also the need to contain the unruly, subversive or unmanageable potential of art, especially an art with secular rather than religious origins.

This new trend for arts policies clearly discloses a desire on the part of the church to defend a modern ecclesiastical artistic tradition. However, at their best such prescriptions can be delimiting; at their worst they could be characterised as a kind of 'soft iconoclasm,' to coin a phrase from a very recent study.<sup>7</sup> Even amongst those at the forefront of encouraging a vital role for art in ecclesiastical spaces such discourses continue to predominate. For example, in 2009, at a conference debating the role of the visual arts in cathedrals, a set of criteria for commissioning was proposed by a senior clergyman. It is worth our while to consider his proposals since his choice of criteria is so frequently reiterated. He outlined three essential qualities that he felt had to be taken into account or, to use his term, 'negotiated,' in any commission for the church: aesthetic quality, clear Christian symbolism and accessibility.<sup>8</sup> Although we can see why he would describe these three as essential it is not insignificant that he chose to speak of negotiating since the viability of all three conditions is debatable. We would be unlikely to demand such rigorous criteria of a non-ecclesiastical work, and might well question the advisability of doing so for a church context.

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, R. 'Art: Taking Time and Making Sense.' In *Images of Christ: Religious Iconography in Twentieth Century British Art*, ed. Devonshire Jones, T. Northampton: St Matthew's Centenary Art Committee. 1993: 27

<sup>7</sup> Siedell, D. *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art*. Michigan: Grand Rapids. 2008: 14. By 'soft iconoclasm' Siedell means to defend art's fundamental right to be art against all other extraneous demands.

<sup>8</sup> John Inge, Bishop of Worcester. *Cathedrals and the Visual Arts*. Sarum College, Salisbury. 2009

The first condition may be subsumed into subjective criteria of taste, however much voices within the arts, media or the church call for certain objective standards to be upheld. If we are to utilise this criterion we would need to understand precisely what is meant by aesthetic quality. Although there may be an argument in favour of this condition it is no easy matter to decide its parameters or scope, especially where the use of new media are concerned. It may be that certain assumptions inform (or rather pre-form) aesthetic expectations. The second condition barely seems to apply at all based on many of the successful precedents for contemporary ecclesiastical art. Christian symbolism is often absent, and when it is present is often far from clear. This lack of clarity is compounded by a frequently lamented lack of visual and symbolic literacy among the lay public (where a common complaint concerning the first condition is that it is compromised by a lack of visual sensitivity or education on the part of the clergy). Of course, a perceived decline in the power and communicability of traditional Christian symbolism, along with the appropriation and wilful distortion of religious imagery in much contemporary art outside the church, does not necessarily devalue the importance of such symbolism, but it does cause us to ponder the efficacy of such a condition. As Paul Tillich once mordantly noted, the poverty of a great deal of 'church-sponsored art' has been its adherence to such clear and distinct directives, often resulting in an art that calls for iconoclasm! Does clear Christian symbolism preclude all forms of abstraction, for example, or rule out ambient or conceptual works? Are works based upon the symbols of other religions automatically disqualified? Several significant pieces of church art would be ineligible on these grounds. Would it discount works that might be considered difficult or abstruse? This was a criticism often levelled at Epstein's sculptures, but few today would dismiss his works for the church as lacking in relevant symbolism.

We could go on but let's move on to the third condition of accessibility, which is an extension of the second. What is required of a work of art for it to be accessible, and to whom must it be accessible? Does this imply easy access to a work? Does it infer that at some level everyone should be able to appreciate it? Isn't there a sense in which at times accessibility takes second place to mystery, uncertainty or complexity? A work of art may be initially accessible on one level but guarded on another, requiring effort, patience or determination on the part of the viewer. Multifarious discourses of art, no less than the complexities of theology itself and the richness of human experience would seem to militate against anything other than a discrepant view of accessibility.

From a certain Christian standpoint one might justifiably lay down the law on these three conditions and demand that it is only good and right that a work of art in an ecclesiastical setting fulfil these requirements, but one would be going against a tradition of modern art in the church, from Marie-Alain

Couturier, Walter Hussey and George Bell onwards, that has sought to extend the range of artistic form and content beyond such narrow limitations. In his defence of Hussey's commissions for St. Matthew's, for example, Sir Kenneth Clark offered a robust retort to critics of the use of a contemporary, often difficult, idiom in art for the church, objecting to 'the fallacy that works of Church Art must be immediately perceptible and understandable to everybody.'<sup>9</sup> This charge is no less relevant today. Doesn't this model place all the emphasis of communication upon the work of art – to be aesthetically pleasing, symbolically clear and hermeneutically unchallenging – as well as presupposing an ideal or universal subject to whom it communicates its meaning and message? Such a model is rarely invoked outside the church today, but nor is it typically found inside it.

If we take the most recent winning entries of the *ACE Award for Art in a Religious Context*, a recognised award for works that are judged to be not only significant works of art in their own right but specifically so within their ecclesiastical setting, then we will discover that these criteria, although undoubtedly widely supported, hardly apply at all. 2011's winners, two windows by James Hugonin and Anne Vibeke Mou for the parish church of St John's in Healey, certainly work with a familiar ecclesiastical aesthetic, but in unfamiliar ways. Their commemorative purpose for which they were commissioned is also manifestly clear, each window accompanied by a plaque bearing the names of the church warden's parents. In each case, however, no clear Christian symbolism is evident nor do they necessarily invite accessibility. One is motivated by diagrammatic abstraction, the other informed by minimalism; one follows a programmatic grid, the other is ethereal and vaporous; each is designed to invite contemplation yet each works with unconventional form and ambiguous meaning. Similarly, neither Tracey Emin's permanent neon work, *For You*, in Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral, nor Rose Finn-Kelcey's *Angel*, temporarily sited atop St. Paul's Church in London, offer a straightforward aesthetic, clear symbolism nor certain accessibility. Although we might think we know to whom Emin's statement – 'I felt you and I knew you loved me' – is directed, this cannot be taken for granted. And although as a work of light it clearly resonates with the aesthetic quality of the stained glass directly above it, what about the fact that it is delivered in an aesthetic form whose nearest equivalent is the electric signage found in any public institution today? There are many for whom the use of neon represents tawdry populism ill-suited to what might otherwise be read as a statement of devotion. In point of fact, the work is surprisingly nuanced. Unlike the neon texts of Bruce Nauman or Martin Creed the thicks and thins of her pink neon script replicate the personality of the written hand,

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<sup>9</sup> Clark, K., cited in Hussey, W. *Patron of Art: The Revival of a Great Tradition Among Modern Artists*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 1985: 41

adding a candid note of intimacy to a very public setting. Set beneath the enormity of Carl Edwards's colourful and multi-fragmented window, Emin's text posits a still and meditative focal point, offering the viewer an affective, tender statement; mawkish perhaps, but sincere, a human dimension within the cavernous proportions of the nave. Finn-Kelsey's work, on the other hand, is saturated with the language of popular culture, using the economical language of mobile phone texting to spell out, in colourful shimmer discs, the most 'visually economic rendition of an angel.'<sup>10</sup> *Angel* gained widespread popularity during its brief tenure at St. Paul's, but her use of the emoticon seemed designed to appeal to a specific audience able to recognise the unorthodox language it applied. Alison Watt's painting, *Still*, in Old St. Paul's Church, Edinburgh, depicting folds of white fabric, a cross negatively formed by the gap between the four canvases, seems to indicate a closer correlation with the proposed criteria, yet retains sufficient mystery in its silent presence within the church to confound all but the most indirect and allusive of interpretations. Perhaps it is Stephen Cox's *St. Anselm's Altar* in Canterbury Cathedral, the joint winner with *Angel*, which represents the most conventional tradition for ecclesiastical art. Aesthetically pleasing and fitting to its liturgical purpose, if its many symbolic nuances are not obvious, its liturgical role certainly is.

### **Non-Christian art and artists**

Clearly a concrete effect of the issue at stake here is the impact it has upon the choice of artists selected to produce work for the church. A characteristic scenario of ecclesiastical installations nowadays is that artists are selected who openly profess no form of Christian belief. This is deemed no bar to their ability to produce work appropriate to a sacred environment. Père Marie-Alain Couturier is usually called upon as an early defender of employing non-believing artists for the church, a risky agenda realised above all in the commission of works for the church at Assy. Piety, he felt, was no replacement for artistic vision, and among those chosen for Assy were confirmed atheists like Richier, Communists such as Léger, Lurçat and Braque, and Jews such as Chagall and Lipchitz. This lack of concern for the religious persuasion of the chosen artists extended even to employing some who had been openly hostile towards the Catholic Church.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Moffatt, L. 'Rose Finn-Kelsey's Angel at St. Paul's, Bow Common.' *Art and Christianity* 39. 2004: 4

<sup>11</sup> This tendency has been taken to an extreme by the art theorist Thierry de Duve who claimed that 'the only convincing religious work in modernism was done by non-believers,' a narrow assessment that denigrates the achievements of artists like Rouault, also included at Assy (de Duve, T., cited in Elkins, J. and Morgan, D. eds. *Re-Enchantment*. New York and London: Routledge. 2009: 173). One of our more contemporary initiators of ecclesiastical commissions is Canon Bill Hall of Durham Cathedral. His trust of artists extends to choosing those whom he considers the best artists, regardless of their personal convictions of faith. He too believes that piety does not automatically guarantee insight, and indeed that it often leads to second-rate work. In his view, a genuinely

Not everyone agrees with this line of thought of course. Others have reversed Couturier's argument, stipulating that sacred or religious art *must* demonstrate sacramental values before being considered for its aesthetic or affective qualities. This would seem to imply that art is only ever a material means to a sacramental end. Thus, the quality of the artist is of less importance than their religiously-motivated purpose. Even if we decry this extreme, a more incisive criticism of Couturier's attitude comes from the art historian Meyer Schapiro who raised the legitimate objection that the lack of a personally-felt religious sensitivity on the part of the artists at Assy meant that

[t]hey followed their own sense of what was appropriate and produced a whole that has impressed visitors as no more than a museum, an episode in modern art rather than as a church building that owes its unity to a single governing thought, to a program of decoration rooted in a living tradition of consistent religious thinking and art.<sup>12</sup>

Although we might understand the reasoning behind Couturier's disavowal of the absolute necessity for Christian artists, and at the same time concede that Schapiro's criticisms, whether true or not of Assy, could certainly be applied to a number of cathedral-based exhibitions of recent years, rightly or wrongly the balance has of late been weighted far more against those who would insist on the confessional artist. The shortlist for Chichester Cathedral's proposed, now possibly aborted, new sculpture commission was typical in this respect.

Surprisingly perhaps, something akin to Schapiro's position was upheld by the art critic Peter Fuller, an avowed atheist whose harsh reviews of early church-based exhibitions like *Prophecy and Vision* (1982) and *The Journey* (1990) were yet tempered with a genuine belief that a flourishing religion, faithful to its soteriological and christological foundations, is alone capable of producing spiritually-fulfilling art. 'Aesthetic experience,' he claimed, 'was greatly diminished if it became divorced from the idea of the spiritual.'<sup>13</sup> By which, as he makes clear in his *Images of God*, he means religiously spiritual, albeit a broader vision of the religious than many might espouse.<sup>14</sup> In his conclusion to *Real Presences*, George Steiner went further,

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visionary non-believing artist may open up wider avenues of thought and experience, in often unexpected ways (see Cooper, R. 'Exploring Common Ground: Aspects of Canon Bill Hall's Work in the Visual Arts.' *Art and Christianity* 26. 2001: 2-3).

<sup>12</sup> Schapiro, M. 'Church Art: Religious Imagination and the Artist.' In *Worldview in Painting - Art and Society: Selected Papers*. New York: George Braziller. 1999 (1963): 186

<sup>13</sup> Fuller, P. 1990. 'Peter Fuller's Journey.' *Modern Painters* 3 (3): 47

<sup>14</sup> Fuller, P. 1990 (1982). *Images of God: The Consolations of Lost Illusions*. London: The Hogarth Press: 187-193

predicting dire implications for creativity where a God-shaped hole signifies above all the loss of a religious sensibility. 'What I affirm', writes Steiner,

is the intuition that where God's presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where his absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming weight, certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable.<sup>15</sup>

Both Fuller and Steiner appear to be forging a middle way through this debate, taking a standpoint perhaps best captured by the nineteenth century biologist T. H. Huxley who once declared that 'a deep sense of religion' can be compatible with 'an entire absence of theology.'<sup>16</sup> Huxley could find no basis for the claims of theology but recognised the experiential validity of religious feeling as his contemporary William James also adduced.<sup>17</sup> Religion in this sense might best be understood through the words of an artist who has played no small part in the history of modern art and the church:

Artists, in a way, are religious anyway. They have to be; if by religion one means believing that life has some significance, and some meaning, which is what I think it has. An artist could not work without believing that.<sup>18</sup>

These words of Henry Moore, cited in one of Lord Harries' earlier lectures, clearly bridge the gap between those who profess no orthodox religious faith and yet whose works possess some innate spiritual quality or profound spiritual significance, as Harries puts it. Harries cites Mark Wallinger, Antony Gormley, Bill Viola and Anselm Kiefer. A good many others could be added to this list.

For those of us with no desire to dispense with theology in the name of some kind of religiously or spiritually inflected art, the question then comes down to what we really mean by 'Christian' when it comes to art. Must the artist be a Christian? Must the art depict Christian themes? Many

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<sup>15</sup> Steiner, G. *Real Presences*. London: Faber and Faber. 1989: 229

<sup>16</sup> Huxley, T. H., cited in introduction to Carlyle, T. *Sartor Resartus*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books. 2002 (1898): xxi

<sup>17</sup> Of course the danger with this way of thinking is summed up by two recent publications by Alain de Botton and Simon Critchley. Isn't this simply 'religion for atheists' or 'faith for the faithless' as these two contemporary, openly atheist, philosophers have proposed, attempting to reclaim some perceived vital social, political or moral ground whilst abandoning theology - what the ebullient philosopher Slavoj Zizek, himself no stranger to religious debate, would no doubt call 'decaffeinated religion'? If so, it does not augur well for our hopes for thinking theologically about modern art.

<sup>18</sup> Moore, H., cited by Harries, R. *Christian Faith and Modern Art: Post World War II Optimism*. Gresham College, London. 18/01/12

commentators have argued the pros and cons of such axiomatic approaches to church-based art and yet, as might be expected, no definitive answer has been forthcoming. Could we say, for example, that art is Christian when it shows a concern for the politically dispossessed, disenfranchised, and distraught that is the mainstay of Doris Salcedo's work? If so, then her installation in Liverpool's Anglican cathedral in 1999 might be considered Christian regardless of her own beliefs. These sculptures, employing her signature amalgam of domestic furniture disconcertingly spliced together and sealed with concrete, stand in solemn testimony to the political violence of her native Colombia and as mute witnesses for the disappeared and done-away-with. Is art Christian when it conveys an experience of empathy, reflecting our desire to love and be loved? If so, then Tracey Emin's neon *For You*, also at Liverpool, could qualify as Christian, whatever the religious standing of the artist. Is art Christian when it encourages an attitude of quiet contemplation within a sacred context? If so, then we might vouchsafe Gormley's *Sound II* in Winchester Cathedral crypt as Christian. Is art Christian when it focuses on ordinary members of one's society and gives them a place of prominence in the sacred centre of a community? If so, then 'Conflux' could arguably be seen as a work that extols qualities of redemption, forgiveness, acceptance, forbearance, selflessness and loving kindness, which our letter-writer proposes as the core elements of any genuinely Christian art. The argument continues to be made, with considerable justification I believe, that an insistence on Christian art and artists is limiting where expressions of spiritual experience are concerned, or rather, to keep to the specifics of our terms, regarding definitions of what it means for art to be Christian.

In *The Guardian's* 'Comment is Free' last year, a number of writers responded to a related but rather different question: 'do we need faith to see religious art?' Adrienne Chaplin, with whom some of you may be familiar, responded by reference to David Mach, a self-confessed non-believing artist who currently has this crucifixion piece in Southwark Cathedral. Her text counters the assumption that religious art is necessarily made by religious believers:

Works like Mach's challenge the assumption that only artists of faith can produce religious art. Indeed, it can sometimes be the artist without faith who does the better job, unencumbered by expectations of conforming to the standard interpretations of either the church or the history of art.<sup>19</sup>

Personally, I suspect that Mach's religious works are unlikely to have the kind of long-term religious significance of a Henry Moore, Jacob Epstein or

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<sup>19</sup> Chaplin, A. 'Not all religious art is made by believers.' *The Guardian*. 23/09/11

Graham Sutherland. They rely upon too great an attachment to our contemporary times and contemporary culture. Nevertheless, Chaplin draws our attention back to this issue, which has been such a cause of contention for the church over the years.

Let me, finally, draw your attention to another work which has, in fact, only lately come to *my* attention, one that *has* successfully embedded itself in its ecclesiastical space and seems likely to continue to maintain a significant presence there, but is again by an openly non-Christian artist. Despite having been erroneously described as 'a deeply devout Anglican' by *The Tablet*, the artist in question, Guy Reid, informed me that he would in fact describe himself as an agnostic. Reid's carved limewood statue for St Matthew's, Westminster, is a small but striking work - about 18" in height - and stands on a tall, square column, behind which 'rises a high, flat, stone back, so that, taken as a whole, the impression is one of enthronement and elevation.'<sup>20</sup> It is a controversial work, for several reasons, but primarily for the fact that Reid's Madonna is entirely naked, as a result of which it was subject to some extraordinarily harsh critical judgements in certain elements of the Catholic press (alongside its defenders from such unlikely quarters as *The Financial Times* and *New Statesman*<sup>21</sup>). For its critics Reid's Madonna was an affront to both aesthetic and liturgical values. Castigated in *The Catholic Herald* as 'disgusting' and 'offensive', the author of one defamatory article thought it 'so profane as to be almost blasphemous.'<sup>22</sup> Yet when I went to see the work for myself I was deeply impressed by its sensitivity both to the space and its devotional purpose, as well as by its skilful craftsmanship. According to Father Philip Chester, the current incumbent of St Matthew's, following a period of acclimatisation to its unconventional nature, Reid's *Madonna and Child* has been warmly accommodated by the local congregation. For Chester and his congregation the artist's lack of personal belief did not preclude his ability to produce a work capable of great religious sensitivity, sacramental efficacy, and theological insight.

The other side to this issue of the non-believing artist is of course the presence of apparently non-sacramental art within the sacred environment. A number of prominent ecclesiastical rows over works of art expose another side to this question of what may or may not qualify as Christian. Charges of ugliness, inappropriateness, sacrilege, and worse, raised against certain works, expose a blindness to other potential modalities of the sacred, and to

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<sup>20</sup> Boss, S. 'The Naked Madonna.' *The Tablet*. 17/02/01

<sup>21</sup> Vernon, M. 'The Disappearing Madonna.' *The Financial Times*. 08/01/05 and Vernon, M. 'Defrocking.' *New Statesman*. 05/02/01

<sup>22</sup> Brindley, B. 'Charterhouse Chronicle.' *Catholic Herald*. January 2001. The writer described the figure's strong, possibly Polynesian features, as 'ugly' and compared the work to the kind of Aryan social realism favoured by the Nazis.

the possibility that religious art may come from unlikely and unexpected sources. This potential for the vilification of certain forms of art as entirely irreligious was played out in a particularly interesting case in Australia. This was the *Crisis, Catharsis and Contemplation* exhibition in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, in 2006. From the slides that I have seen, and through discussions with the curator, David Rastas, and others connected with the project, it appeared to have been a well-conceived, well-curated and sensitively handled event. And yet it occasioned an extraordinary outburst of vitriol, including a to-and-fro of critical attack and praise in the press, the former pursued with a punitive fervour that echoed the controversy around Assy some half a century earlier. The curator was spat upon, received death threats, was placed on an email list for pro-lifers (entirely unrelated to the exhibition but provoking further email abuse), and at least one of the works was attacked and destroyed beyond repair. Critically, the event had the support of Rosemary Crumlin, among others, a highly respected figure within the field of art and religion, not only in Australia, but internationally. She assured me that there was nothing in the show that merited the degree of backlash it received. She believes it was simply the presence of unconventional art and contemporary media that sparked the controversy.

### **The situated void**

Is it then the case that criticisms of a God-shaped hole in contemporary art are not in fact borne out by the evidence of the works we have discussed? Or do we come at this question from the wrong direction entirely? In conclusion, I would like to suggest that Doig's disavowal of a God-shaped hole in modern art masks a fundamental misperception on his part. As we have noted, the notion of the void draws attention to a thorny problem which has frequently troubled critics of secularisation – the idea that it results in a God-shaped hole – for which the French philosopher Alain Badiou may have provided an incisively perceptive answer. In order to capitalise on this possibility we must briefly familiarise ourselves with Badiou's philosophical schema. This operates according to just four contexts of truth for philosophy: science, politics, art and love (but emphatically not religion). In other words, philosophical truth requires a set of conditions, whether political, scientific, amorous or artistic, within which an understanding of that truth may be satisfactorily expressed. Each of these fields of discourse has its own specified language, traditions, history, practices and theory. The environment in which these instituted forms of knowledge are operative as recognised fields of reference is what Badiou calls their 'situation,' meaning the already existing world in which they have meaning. A situation may be a coherent political structure, a well-defined set of scientific laws, legitimate forms of sexuality, a canon of artistic works, even (pushing the bounds of Badiou's conditions further than he would go) an adequate and persuasive theology. Periodically,

within these established parameters something internal to the situation emerges, something with no proper place and making no sense within it. This is what Badiou calls an 'event.' It is his term for something that bears no relation to whatever is assumed to belong, by common consent, to the recognised values, parameters or conditions of a situation as it is, yet appears from within it, as its unrecognised, illegible or supplementary aspect.

Thus, according to Badiou's vision of the world, any genuine philosophical work operates by a subtractive gesture. It makes holes in sense, interrupting the circulation of meaning or, as he puts it, it 'names the void inasmuch as it names the not-known of the situation.'<sup>23</sup> Whilst a situation retains its apparent consistency this void remains out of sight, or better said, unavailable to sight. It is only with the appearance of an event that the unknown void becomes apparent. Sticking with Badiou's terminology, in an ecclesiastical environment art can uphold and sustain the unity or consistency of situated knowledge, meaning whatever can be named or counted as belonging to it. Alternatively, it can plumb the unknown for its resources, meaning art can operate out of the void of a situation and its recognised epistemologies. If working within the situation implies an art of orthodoxy, of patronage, tradition and convention, from which, it must be said, truly remarkable art and architecture has been achieved, the situated void refers to whatever remains, from the perspective of the church and church-goers, illegible within ecclesiastical parameters: whatever seems foreign to the situation, whatever cannot be encompassed within it, whatever fails to be recognised, counted as belonging, or named within it, and yet appears from or forces an opening within it.

Badiou adds weight to the idea that art generates its own truth or access to truth, an idea often employed in support of art in churches. Badiou's contention is that truths are specific to particular conditions, the inference being that art offers a singular access to meaning or experience, irreducible to other realms of truth. In other words, the truth peculiar to art may be found nowhere else than in and through art. Of course, it is not possible to claim that every art event of note is an 'event' in Badiou's terms, but it may be that those that do present the viewer with the unconventional and unexpected contribute in some small way to reworking the situation of ecclesiastical art and are important to us for doing so.

Here, then, is where we find our secular artist and his or her unconventional works of art, often, though not always, working at the margins of the situated void. Badiou would no doubt argue that, if there is indeed a God-shaped hole in contemporary art, it is exactly this void or hole that makes meaningful art, and indeed philosophy, possible, not only within secular culture but also within the culture of the church. Indeed, we could

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<sup>23</sup> Badiou, A. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. London & New York: Verso. 2001: 69

argue that the artists mentioned above attempted to tap the riches of that void, articulating a visual, expressive language that was to some extent illegible within the religious iconography of its time.

There are good reasons for supporting such a view. If the history of ecclesiastical art has unfolded within what we could call a series of representations of the pivotal Christian event of divine incarnation (and its prior or consequential events), the event itself is strictly inimical to representation. Badiou's philosophy holds that an event perpetually withdraws, distancing itself from any form of representation, and therefore, in the context of our discussion, the art that remains (almost the entirety of Christian representative art) is merely a shadow play, a vacancy temporarily filled with hollow representations, or a series of content-less attempts to bring objectively closer by pictorial means what can only ever be known as subjective experience, encounter, or revelation. As Caravaggio's depiction of Paul's encounter with Christ clearly shows, in not showing, the event itself remains categorically outside the frame.

From the perspective of the God-shaped hole thesis, what is usually signified is the absence, loss or lack of reference to God in a secular culture overshadowed by the Nietzschean proclamation of God's death. However, from Badiou's perspective we could argue the exact opposite to be the case. Wouldn't it be true to say that it is the unrepresentability of God that is itself the hole or void that artists over the centuries have attempted to fill with art (hence the iconoclastic destruction of images as idolatrous)? When some decry a God-shaped hole in today's Western culture, and imagine that a renewed dedication to religious belief will plug this gap, are they not forgetting that God is precisely the name of this void? A God-shaped hole testifies precisely to the eventual existence of God, whose presence, as the ultimate Real, can only be felt as the not-known in contemporary culture, as a hole puncturing reality. Against the assumption that God is the shape that fills the void, in strictly Badiouian terms it would be better to say that God is the very site of the void. And in fact Doig gets closer to this idea when he refers to the God-shaped hole central to the Non-Realist theological worldview: the radical unknowability of God as wholly other.

For Badiou it is the void that makes meaningful philosophy possible, finding one of its outlets in his hopes for art. Art, he states, 'operates outside the framework of the recognisably existing. It renders visible this putative non-existence.'<sup>24</sup> In other words, although it appears in material form, any art worth the name operates out of what Badiou refers to as 'the situated void,' meaning whatever remains invisible to, or unthought within, the milieu in which it appears. Here the void of the God-shaped hole is turned to Badiou's

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<sup>24</sup> See his *Manifesto of Affirmationist Art* in Badiou, A. and Winter, C. *Polemics*. London: Verso. 2006: 133-148

materialist conception of one of the four conditions of truth: the creative potential of art. Rather than a state of affairs to be lamented, therefore, this vacuum at the centre of contemporary Western culture, this veritable absence of God, is in effect the site of the Real, where artist and theologian find themselves on common ground.

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