

FOR GOD'S SAKE! Domenico Quaranta

“God Always Uses the Latest Technology.”

In the little town in northern Italy where I live, which is economically prosperous, culturally sleepy, religiously bigotted and politically conservative, there is a small but interesting “Museum of Art and Spirituality”. It presents part of the collection of contemporary art that belonged to Giovanni Battista Montini, a.k.a. Pope Paul VI, an illustrious local man and possibly the last Catholic pope to believe that contemporary art could convey a religious message. After a brief look at the collection, it is easy to agree that Pope Paul’s faith in art, was, as they say, blind. While alongside a few daubs, he managed to collect a number of undisputed masterpieces, by artists including Sironi, Morandi, De Chirico, Chagall, Kokoschka, Dalí, Matisse, Manzù and Giacometti, in this art it is difficult to find the populace-educating power of Medieval and Renaissance art, or the astounding emotional impact of Baroque art. None of these works has the catalyzing power of an icon. Contemporary art alters the rhetoric of religious art, learns its stylistic approaches and tackles it from a secular point of view. At times it conveys a private form of spirituality, not necessarily linked to any religion. And often, when it tackles official religions, it does so in a provocative, iconoclastic way: take Martin Kippenberger’s crucified frog, for instance, or the cross submerged in the urine of Andres Serrano, or Maurizio Cattelan’s *Nona ora*, or the Virgin Mary blackened with elephant dung by Chris Ofili, or Vanessa Beecroft’s recent *Madonnas*. All of these works are undoubtedly imbued with their own form of “sacredness”, yet they would hardly be hung in a church.

Even post-colonial art, which takes account of local traditions and therefore often deals with the powerful influence of religion, seems more intent on critiquing this influence than exploring its depths. In the contemporary art world, only video – in some instances - seems to have taken up the legacy of great religious art: take Bill Viola, for example, whose works have also been shown in cathedrals. We could explore the extent to which this is connected to the fluid magic of the electronic image, and more in general the ability demonstrated by the mass media in conveying the religious message, and recuperating the role of “biblia pauperum” once played by the great fresco cycles.

While sects and religions have had a hold over radio and television frequencies for some time, the film industry, from *The Ten Commandments* (1956) to *The Passion of The Christ* (2004), has accomplished what art has no longer been able to for around two centuries. But it has been above all with the appearance of the phenomenon euphemistically dubbed “the clash of civilizations” that we have become aware of the extraordinary readiness and skill shown by religions of all kinds in exploiting the media. The papal decree declaring the validity of a blessing received during a live radio programme (1967) came around the same time as Nam June Paik’s first legendary video (*Café Gogo, Blecker Street*, 1965, featuring the Pope), and the same recognition was accorded to blessings on the internet in 1995, when most of the political world had not yet even acknowledged its existence. On another front, the videos of Palestinian kamikazes have done much more for the development of “tactical media” than the Seattle movement. “God Always Uses the Latest Technology”, I once read on a Christian website. Holy wars are now waged as much in virtual worlds as real ones, and in video games such as *Under Ash* and *Kuma War* as much as with car bombs and air raids. We look to technology to confirm myth and miracle, from the Turin Shroud, to the blood of St. Gennaro, to the tears of the Virgin Mary; while the Catholic backing for Mel Gibson’s blockbuster is common knowledge, as is the way in which Opus Dei adroitly used the media to turn *The Da Vinci Code*’s bumbling but best-selling attack to its own advantage.

As I write there is an exhibition regarding this very theme – the skilful use of the media made by sects and religions - being staged. Entitled “Media Religion”, it is hosted by the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe (curated by Boris Groys and Peter Weibel). The press release goes as follows: “Video has become the chosen media for religious propaganda as it can be produced and distributed particularly fast thanks to today’s technology. [...] The exhibition “Media Religion” aims to demonstrate the medial aspect of religion based on current examples of religious propaganda and individual works by contemporary artists. Shown, among others, will be confession videos by religiously inspired terrorists, religious propaganda television series, and documentaries about current sects and religious groups. The artistic works juxtaposing the documentary material arise

for the most part from the same context as the religious movements that they refer to. The relationship of most of the artists to religious rituals, images, and texts from their own culture is neither affirmative nor critical but instead, blasphemous. In this way, a critical analysis of the respective religious iconography is possible, as well as its crossover into modern culture.”

If the religious – when not cultural – use of the media has had a hand in bringing religion to the centre of artists’ attention, the ramifications of religion in the information society are, if possible, even more complex and fascinating. Whether we like it or not, spirituality has shaped the evolution of the media, and has in turn been greatly influenced by it.

Two of the most effective technological era brands – the Big Brother symbol and the Second Life logo - are patently inspired by the divine eye, and more generally, religious iconography appears to be almost an obligatory reference for many communications and media companies, especially stateside. High tech gadgets are increasingly aspiring, with undisputed success, to the status of fetish object. Without any great qualms we have replaced rosary beads and holy images with iPods and iPhones, and prayer books (even in the form of Mao Tse Tung’s little red book) with Notebooks. Total immersion in videogame playing, even from the postural point of view, resembles a new form of prayer or religious ecstasy, and search engines have acquired the status of oracles. “It’s true – I read it on Google”, is an often-heard mantra that sounds like an act of faith. If religion is (or was) the opium of the people, in the 90s it was banal to say the same of television, and now of Youtube.

“God games” are one of the most successful videogame genres, and together with the satellite vision made popular by GPS systems and Google Earth, they show how much we enjoy having an omniscient, commanding view of the world. What the Greeks regarded as the sin of hubris is commonplace for us, almost mundane, as is another divine prerogative man has granted himself: that of taking on different forms and using these to operate in different worlds. Like in the past, this projection of the divine ego is known as an avatar, but unlike in the past, it is now a possibility open to any acne-ridden adolescent. For today’s teenagers, “virtual life” is a fact of life, but often it is also, like in the film *eXsistenZ* (1999) by David Cronenberg (also present at Pixxelpoint) a collective cult, a religion. The fact that it is not yet possible to risk one’s ‘real’ life (unlike in the film), is a mere detail. Technology also violates our privacy like only God used to be able to; thus while we are increasingly unwilling to attend confession, we find it easier and easier to lay our souls bare on social networks. While our computers are not yet as powerful as HAL 9000, the arrogant superbrain in *2001 A Space Odyssey*, we get the impression that this is not far off. In any case, a few years back we were sufficiently advanced to direct our millennial angst at an improbable “millennium bug”, and more recently, at a highly technological particle accelerator, which ended up getting jammed on its first run.

I am writing this article on my Macbook, on a slow, clunky train which was probably last renovated at the beginning of the 90s. It is called Freccia della Versilia – Arrow of Versilia. Opposite me there is a girl in pointed shoes and ripped jeans painting her nails and replying to sporadic messages on her Blackberry. When this secular ritual is interrupted, she takes a tiny pamphlet out of her bag – about 5 cm across, and with few pages. On the cover there is a Madonna and child image, but a few details reveal that this prayer book is not the stuff of Catholic orthodoxy. To the side of me there are two other girls. One has an open copy of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* by Arthur C. Danto, while the other, who is wearing Timberlands and a Palestinian keffiyeh, is holding a sheaf of notes. But instead of reading, the girls are talking about nirvana, *The Celestine Prophecy* and finalism, mixing philosophy, mysticism and new age. Then they stop, and the one reading Danto gets out an iPod. I swear. May god strike me down if I am not speaking the truth. If I had looked around the train earlier, I might not have written what I have. But the fact that the bag of a 20-something can contain a Blackberry, a prayer book, *The Celestine Prophecy* and an iPod is not really a contradiction, when it comes down to it. The future is here, and at least in this part of the world it is distributed pretty well, but it coexists with a past which is unwilling to bow out. The strange times we live in are the children of both syncretisms and synchronies.

Contemporary art often raises these issues – technological fetishism, the oracular nature of the

internet, the fideistic attitude with which we use the media, and the “evangelizing” approach of those who produce them. It often adopts a critical stance, but also looks to the media as an authentic vehicle for spirituality. When I began working on *For God's Sake!*, the show was basically a tag cloud, a cluster of key words: hi-tech fetishism, technology mysticism, Millennium Bug, HAL 9000, *Brainstorm*, Big Brother, *Truman Show*, surveillance, dataveillance, privacy, oracle, rituality, avatar, community, social networks etc. I had a few phrases and a few works in mind, but I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do. On the other hand I knew exactly what I didn't want to do: I didn't want to stage an exhibition which attributed one single meaning to the term “religion”; I didn't want to put on an exhibition of religious art, or profanity, but rather mix saints and heretics, worshippers and blasphemers. I wanted to move away from cyberpunk mysticism, techno-hippies, data-gloves and virtual reality gurus, but also the lavish effects of audio visual work, the facile attraction of electromagnetism and the other tricks much beloved by Teslans. What I was particularly interested in was exploring the relationship that develops between our spiritual lives, both individual and collective, and the gadgets we use on a daily basis; understanding how these worm their way into our imaginations, and how they exploit and enrich our symbols and metaphors, and also understanding where faith takes shelter in a world where nothing seems private, a world which has transferred the “style” of the sacred to consumer goods, and which has submerged silence under an unprecedented information overload.

The works gradually fleshed out the framework I had sketched, enriching it and often surprising me. The power of some of the images astounded me: the evocative Via Crucis of shadows imagined by Markus Kison, the dance of satellites orchestrated by Janez Janša, or Briant Dameron's traveller, who seeks confirmation of his existence in an empty screen. I was surprised to witness the appearance of various issues I had not considered, like the exploration of the prescriptive, authoritarian nature of certain artistic languages and styles: from the tutorials collected and examined by Petros Moris to the Powerpoint style parodied by Clemens Kogler. I was even more surprised to discover, in some works, how needs, rituals, and even the sacraments of faith can find support and mediation in the community aspects of digital technologies, and that this in no undermines their original purity. The fact that a few of these works adopt an ironic approach does not make this new dimension of rituality less interesting.

One project with an extremely serious theoretical premise is *Mission Eternity*, an ambitious work in progress by the Swiss collective etoy. *Mission Eternity* describes itself as “a digital cult of the dead”, and entails digital archiving and data conservation, and the social dimension of peer to peer networks; it blends technology and ancient rites, with a modernized version of the Chinese joss paper tradition which bestows shares in the etoy.corporation, rather than money, on the deceased. *Meditation for Avatars*, by the German artists Ute Hoerner and Mathias Antlfinger, involves a series of networked client - computers with the work installed on them, to give rise to a kind of collective meditation. Participants perform a mantra then send it to the other users online. This creates a community of computers in meditation, generating a field of positive energy that the artists reckon is transferred to the users. Vice versa, the *Empathy Box* by the Italian collective Io/cose establishes a community of users united by empathy through their shared perception of pain – pain caused by an electric shock generated by the device and transmitted through the human chain. Lastly, *Confession 2.0* by Cristiano Poian and Paolo Tonon explores the connection between the drastic drop in confession attendance and the digital soul-baring typical of social networks, by means of a high-tech confessional that makes our confessions public, transforming us into “successful sinners”.

All of these works deploy the rites, sacraments, idols and fetishes of a spirituality currently renewing itself in line with the anthropological mutation in progress. As has always happened, for the greater glory of God.

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