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## **God or the Gallery?**

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**Preface:** *The following essay will seek to place current artistic misfortune in historical context; but a totalizing, other-marginalizing final art historical meta-narrative will not be attempted. It will also point out some foibles of contemporary art; but I have no wish to resurrect Hitler's 1937 "degenerate art" show.*

### **The *Post*-postmodern Moment**

Anything but postmodernity. That would be my suggestion for the shortest conceivable analysis of the state of contemporary art. Jerry Saltz, senior art critic for the Village Voice has recently written that ours "is a time when modernism is history and postmodernist rhetoric feels played out." Performance Art theorist RosaLee Goldberg recently began a forum at NYU by promising if she used the term postmodern someone could throw something at her. The popular MacArthur prize-winning author Dave Hickey lamented in an interview that in the field of art, "Deconstructionists are already out of date, talking about stuff that is already over now." Yve Alain Bois of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, one of the four theorists who wrote the weighty tome, *Art Since 1900*, declared at a Princeton conference this year that "in the 70's, everyone claimed to have been the first to use the term postmodernism; now everyone claims to have been the first to have dropped it." Or take the recent remarks of another *Art Since 1900* author, Princeton's Hal Foster, who summed up the state of contemporary art in this way: "We are swamped by the double wake of modernism and postmodernism, So - surprise! - art practice, history, and museum are again in crisis."

Postmodernism in art is, if these thinkers are at all representative, over. And what is next? Nobody knows. Everyone knows. What's more, the art world today has been sufficiently fragmented that there may not be a monolithic "what's next" to be charted in a progressive art historical narrative. The words of Thomas Fisher describing late twentieth century architecture can also be applied to contemporary art:

The idea of a universal or international style has lost credibility... So we are left with no dominant style and no sense of where such a style and no sense of where such a style might even come from.

The "What's next?" question may then be a dead end. A much more interesting question is "What happened?" The gift our post-postmodern moment gives us the inestimable advantage of hindsight, for the owl of Minerva, Hegel remarked, flies only at dusk. The twilight of postmodernity enables us to see clearly what the movement actually accomplished, and failed to accomplish. Rather than hold the postmodern in inscrutable

awe, we can now plainly its effects. Doing so requires an absurdly brief art-historical overview of the last five-hundred years.

### A Narrative Sketch

"In a distant past," writes Yale art historian Robert Nelson, "art and religion were inseparable, but with the rise of the artist during the Renaissance and the increasing secularization of society more generally, art and religion began to diverge." Giorgio Vasari, the Italian humanist whose delightful *Lives of the Artists* reads like a secularized *Golden Legend*, is considered by many to be the first art historian. While Michelangelo's sonnets repeatedly betray his thoughts on art's purpose - To awaken desire for the even greater beauty of God - Vasari's biography of Michelangelo neatly reverses the equation. Extolling the Sistine Chapel, Vasari explains "The Last Judgment must be recognized as the great exemplar of the grand manner of painting, directly inspired by God and enabling mankind to see..." The terror of the final Day of Judgment? The hope of the resurrection? Not exactly. Instead Vasari saw the purpose of Michelangelo's Last Judgment in "...Enabling mankind to see the fateful results when an artist of sublime intellect infused with divine grace and knowledge appears on earth."

One could be forgiven for protesting that the Last Judgment was about Judgment, not genius, but Vasari's method caught on. And while religious subject matter was slow to be completely abandoned, long before its extinction, Passions and Pietas had ceased to be avenues for religious devotion, instead serving as convenient carriers of artistic flair.

The eighteenth century saw the coining of the term "aesthetics" and the birth of the museum, intellectual and institutional developments permitting art's survival apart from religion entirely. Soon after, explains Larry Shiner in *The Invention of Art*, "the nineteenth century transformed fine art itself into a reified 'Art,' an independent and privileged realm of spirit, truth, and creativity." Art had earned its capital "A," and the individuation from its Christian parental matrix was complete.

Then the carousing really began. Art's nineteenth century ambitions spilled into the twentieth where painting, now so highly exalted, naturally discovered its most appropriate subject: Paint. Taking an impressionist landscape and multiplying a square inch of it to the size of an entire canvass is not an unhelpful explanation modern art's development. "Art for art's sake" perfectly fulfilled. "The message of modern art, abstract or not," declared chief modern critic Clement Greenberg, "is precisely that means are content." Content that could now replace what Greenberg called the erroneous "myths of religion."

Piet Mondrian agreed, announcing "Art advances where religion once led." Wassily Kandinsky preached art's "Opposition to a materialist world: the supraterrrestrial, the pursuit of a *raison d'être*, theosophy, astrology, the search for a reality above our all-too-narrow terrestrial sphere." Mark Rothko's chapel, with the octagonal design of a Byzantine church and triptychs recalling Catholic altarpieces, offered an unhurried refuge

where viewers could surrender to the flat forms guaranteed to, in Rothko's words, "destroy illusion and reveal truth."

By mid-century, the climate would permit André Malraux to declare,

Once a mere collection, the art museum is by way of becoming a sort of shrine, the only one of the modern age... True, a Braque still-life is not a sacred object; nevertheless, though not a Byzantine miniature, it, too, belongs to another world and it is hallowed by its association with a vague deity known as Art, as the miniature was hallowed by its association with Christ Pantocrator.

But in the second half of the twentieth century, high-flying art's wing-wax began to melt. The new religion bred its host of postmodern infidels. Pop art intentionally mocked the hallowed status of the painted canvas. The exaltation of the *object d'art* had already been met with the triumph of the everyday object in Marcel Duchamp's "fountain," which saw its delayed American counterpart in Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes and Campbell's Soup cans. The modernist lamb of painterly purity was prey to a new generation of critics that descended upon it like wolves. They left a carcass and little else. And for this, we have postmodernity to thank.

It is for this reason that critic Donald Kuspit refers to contemporary art as the "God that lost faith in itself." That "vague Deity known as Art" could not withstand the acid of postmodern thought. Perhaps one of the earliest to see this situation was Jacques Barzun in his 1973 Mellon Lectures entitled *The Use and Abuse of Art*. Art, Barzun claimed, is unable

to reach the divine center from which redemption comes, and is punished for its presumption... Art cannot be 'a way of life' because... it lacks a theology or even a popular mythology of its own; it has no bible, no ritual, and no sanctions for behavior. We are called to enjoy but we are not enjoined.

Art as religion has failed. The *Zeitgeist* is wonderfully expressed by the Marxist art historian T.J. Clark, who "I want nothing to do with this Leftist claptrap of art as a substitute religion." From a Christian perspective – it seems rather obvious to suggest – the death of art as religion has positive consequences. The elimination of art as a rival permits art's rehabilitation as friend. Postmodernism has therefore provided a valuable service. "Part of the point of postmodernity in the strange providence of God," once remarked N.T. Wright, "is to preach the Fall to arrogant modernity."

### **Contemporary Foibles**

Now, however, the Fall is perhaps the *only* thing known with certainty by contemporary art. A scan of today's art scene will be enough to show the limitation of any service postmodernism can provide, and perhaps why the art world is so eager to move beyond it. Consider the recent case of a German art expert being successfully fooled into mistaking the painting of Banghi for the work of the twentieth century expressionist Ernst Wilhelm

Nay; or the over \$25,000 paid at auction for a series of paintings by the London artist Congo. By dropping their surnames, Banghi and Congo are not modeling themselves after the hugely successful Hristo Yavashev, whom the art world knows as *Christo*. Banghi and Congo are chimpanzees.

Or consider the latest string of contemporary art's janitorial confrontations. First, a dirty bathtub in one of Joseph Beuys' installations was scrubbed clean by dutiful gallery staff. Then Damian Hirst's exhibit of used ash-trays, half-filled coffee cups, beer empties and newspapers was gathered up by a sexton who mistook the art for the remains of art world festivities. Most recently, Gustave Metzger's "Auto-destructive art" was understandably taken curbside, seeing it was a literally a bag of trash. On the positive side, the series of episodes shows artists increasingly willing to cooperate with museum and gallery staff. Beuys demanded scrubbing, Hirst gathering, while Metzger's art was all bagged up and ready to go.

And though it would certainly be uncharitable to dismiss the contemporary art scene as excrement, nor can it be forgotten that Piero Manzoni's 1961 *Merda d'artista*, being a canned supply of said artist's excrement, was recently purchased by the Tate Gallery in London with £22,300 of government funds.

The situation is such that one might expect anytime now a major film release lampooning the art world and exposing its motivating misanthropy; which, with the 2006 film "Art School Confidential" we already have.

More seriously, consider the 2005 exhibit at the *Centre Pompidou* temple to contemporary art in Paris, where after visiting rooms dedicated to "Disfigurement Art" and "Violent Procedures," came the "Pathos/Death" room. Here, perhaps in an outreach gesture to English-speaking tourists, there was a translation of the gallery label:

Haunted by the existential distress of man with no hope of a life beyond, these works are loaded with suffering, mourning and death.

It is one thing for gruesome distress to be depicted, as for example in Grünewald's famed Isenheim Altarpiece, within the context of eventual redemption, but quite another when the only context is a hopeless void. And without even using the gender-neutral pronoun?

Clearly enough, and despite some important exceptions, postmodernity has traumatized art, and we are told to be patient. Just as a lab's botched experiments are justified by the next medical breakthrough, so we are urged to show patience with art world experimentation; genius could be just around the corner. And though there are some important exceptions to the scenario just described, one imagines that a culture able to sustain genius is gone. The state is perhaps best related by returning to critic Donald Kuspit in his excellent book, *The End of Art*. Painting, he explains.

no longer wishes to plunge into the depth - it doesn't believe there is any depth in life, and wouldn't be able to endure the pressure of its depth if it believed life had

any... to be postmodern [in art] means to lose all interest in immortality as well as modernity, giving up belief in both.

One solution to the resulting mayhem, wryly offered by art historian Michael Ann Holly in the pages of *October*, is to “preserve the chaos of contemporary theory [about art]... even if the intellectual fracas sometimes feels like hell.” Art then, is more than simply dead. Art, if its reigning academic custodians are to be heeded, is in hell, or what art historian Leo Steinberg called oblivion, which he described as “the price paid by the modern world for its massive historical retreat from the mythical ground of Christianity.”

### **Christian Predicament and Opportunity**

What a perfect entrée, we might imagine, for Christians into the world of art. The post-postmodern situation is seeking a new way forward, art is in “hell,” and Christians, whose track record in inspiring artists of significance is nothing to sniff at – can just step right in. This is – surprise! – not a welcome idea. One could, however, suggest that the fragmentation ethos would permit Christians to be not *the* new direction, but at least *a* new direction. But even this is not allowed.

Despite its deflated ambitions to *be* a religion, contemporary art today has by no means shed its long held prejudice *against* religion. Certainly a dizzying array of religion and art exhibits have made their way around museum circuits in the last decade. And fresh academic interest in religion, assures continued publication on art and religion in years to come. But this is not to be confused with a lifting of the art world boycott on traditional religious themes. The Chicago Art Institute’s James Elkins, puts it plainly. As if to inaugurate a new academicism to rival Sir Joshua Reynolds, Elkins lays out what I take are the only clearly defined “art rules” discernible in the post-postmodern milieu:

To fit in the art world, work with a religious theme has to fulfill several criteria. It has to demonstrate the artist has second thoughts about religion... ambiguity and self-critique have to be integral to the work. And it follows that irony must pervade the art, must be the air it breathes.

And so, the storms of postmodernity assailed the modern edifice of art, stripping it of all but an unexamined and rock solid foundation - a prejudice against religion without scarequotes. To the extent that Elkins descriptions are accurate, Christians who make religious art are forced to choose between God or the Gallery.<sup>1</sup>

But just as the failure of modern art can be viewed positively from a Christian perspective, I’d like to suggest that the scenario laid out by Elkins can be viewed positively as well. As it did for the people of Israel, exile leads to opportunity. Our time away from the gallery, at least from the trendiest ones, might lead Christians to consider to what extent they have conspired with the now fallen, or at least wounded, God of Art,

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Elkins and contemporary art’s attitude towards religion, see my essay “Transgressive Art” in the December 2007 issue of *First Things*.

who claimed to mediate that “independent and privileged realm of spirit, truth, and creativity.” To what extent have Christians, seeking so engage the art world – if biblical language can be permitted – been conspiring with a foreign god?

Consider the remarkable efforts in the last century to marry high culture and Christian faith, motivated to a significant extent by the menacing bogey of kitsch: the ubiquitous blond-hair blue-eyed Christ icon of Warner Sallman. A strong dose of high art seemed the only way to send this miserable offender of taste back from whence he came.

The founding director of Manhattan’s Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr Jr., sought to marry his committed Presbyterian faith with his equally committed taste for European modernism. His ally was Paul Tillich, undoubtedly a creative theologian, but one who used art to fill what was lacking in his Christology. The efforts of Barr, Tillich, and many more culminated in the National Council of Churches’ Commission on Art, aimed to counter the “saccharine and effeminate images” that “corrupt the religious feelings of children and nourish the complacency and sentimentality of their elders.”

This noteworthy movement, carried on by Jane and John Dillenberger, was sadly tied to the unhappy trajectory of the NCC. It may also be guilty of seeing in abstract art an ally to faith, when it was in fact a rival. As one art historian has succinctly conveyed, “No Theosophy, no modern art.”

The proliferation of Christianity and art organizations and publications today have various agendas, but, one wonders, is the kind of cultural collaboration once enjoyed by Barr and Tillich the high water mark towards which some of them desperately aspire? I would suggest instead that we learn from the failures of the 1950’s Protestant alliance with high art, not seek to resume it.<sup>2</sup> The engagement of those Christians was vital, but parasitic; and their host organism – high modernism – is dead. Instead, Christians carry with them their own warrant for the practice of art, one that was firmly in place long before “art” existed in the first place. These uniquely Christian sanctions are ones which Barr and Tillich probably did not consider (they did not have to), but they loom large in Christian history. Images in worship are vindicated by that rarest and most precious of endorsements, an ecumenical council, specifically Nicaea II in 787. Less overtly religious art is justified by simple imitation of the Creator whose image we share, or as a way of - to borrow the title of Jeremy Begbie’s fine book - *Voicing Creation’s Praise*. Inspired by these perennial warrants, much noteworthy art is currently being produced by Christians everywhere. The art world is largely not paying attention; but so what? Do we really need the consent of a gallery to do this? Do not most churches have walls?

Christian artists in this post-postmodern situation are not unlike early fourth century Christians. We can playfully consider James Elkins to be an Emperor Diocletian of sorts,

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<sup>2</sup> It was not only Protestantism that enjoyed this moment of attention from the world of art. The fusion of Catholicism and modernism culminated when the 1952 and 56 the Mellon lectures - the art scholar’s equivalent to the Nobel prize – were both given by serious Thomists, namely Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson.

that great last persecutor of Christianity. Of course the Christian movement thrived under Diocletian and despite him, and Christians were even purified because of him. We should persist in our art making despite Elkins, as the early Christians persisted in their worship despite Diocletians' decree. But the temptation is to make the necessary compromise, to become disgruntled and the disaffected and the skeptical, is strong. The art world would love nothing more than one more disaffected "Christian" artist who would run to the warmth of a trendy Chelsea gallery like that one martyr of Sebaste who ran to the warm bathhouse instead of freezing with his other 39 brothers for their Christian faith, only to be replaced by a pagan soldier who threw off his garments, proclaimed himself a follower of Christ, and joined them to die on the frozen lake.<sup>3</sup>

We should hear the art world's confused rhetoric and call the bluff. Thanks to postmodernism, art has lost its bid to replace religion; having never attempted such a replacement, Christian art is largely immune to this critique. Now we toil under Diocletian, but should we persist in our art making, and refuse the temptations of kitsch, perhaps there will soon be a need for a critical equivalent of Constantine, who realized that the only way he could hold his empire together was by legalizing Christianity - there were just too many Christians. If, under the current conditions, Christian artists put God first and the Gallery second, then perhaps the struggling art world may soon have no choice but to acknowledge artists of faith. We may soon hear the equivalent of 313's edict of Milan from the pages of *Art Forum*, which sounds as likely to us as the notion of a "Christian Emperor" must have sounded to a beleaguered underground believer in the year 312. But in the meantime we best enjoy our exile. Now the temptations are clear. Should Christians artists once again achieve acceptance, then the temptations would be of a much more insidious sort.

**Afterword:** None of this is to suggest engagement of the art world is unnecessary. A winsome strategy for such encounters is suggested in the paper of Professor John Walford also given in this session, which this paper is meant to accompany.

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<sup>3</sup> An outlandish analogy to be sure, but I have in mind a wonderful early Christian icon, which can be seen by Google image-searching "40 martyrs of Sebaste."