

Josh Lyon :: Thesis Paper :: 2005

Intention

The intention of my thesis is to make artwork that makes the fact that it is a construction apparent, and simultaneously points to something beyond itself. This intends to both imply that all images are a construction and that they point beyond themselves to external meanings. These meanings are given to images both by the viewer and the creator of the image. Similarly, the simulacra - the simulation world of images - is a creation that points to something beyond itself. The idea of the world as an image can be taken both from Baudrillard's Simulacra theories and the Bible. Both point to an external reality aside from the image.

Images in a world made of images

When I saw the actual Sydney Opera House for the first time, it appeared to be a large glorified imitation of the 'real' key-chains and other souvenirs. The key-chains have in fact replaced the actual Opera House on this side of the world. They are what we know, they are the real. The fact that the Opera House itself was originally designed to resemble a sea shell moves us even further from any sense of original.

I want to see God. I do not think I am alone in this. There is a yearning for something else, something beyond, something external to this life evident in all of human history. Whether this yearning is present in our 'hearts'[1] or our genes[2] seems to be up for debate, but neither denies the existence of an external deity that could have created such an urge.

Or does it? There is much debate over where God is located. The Iconoclastic (from Eikonoklasmos, "Image-breaking") revolt of the 8th and 9th century saw a huge uprising against icons being used in the Church. There was much fear amongst the iconoclasts that the icons were becoming the object of worship and not the God they were supposed to represent. This was met with a rebuttal by John of Damascus who claimed the icons were not similar to pagan veneration

of objects but simply an intermediary between the worshiper and the saint: "An image is a likeness of the original with a certain difference, for it is not an exact reproduction of the original." [3] This concern of image and reproduction is still ever present today with debates over cloning and genetic modification. Science is being accused of trying to 'play God' - replicate the creative act. (Whether or not science has the 'moral right' to dabble in this area is not the matter being debated here.) The human creative act can never be the same as the divine creative act, which makes something from nothing. All we can do is make imitations or representations - never exact reproductions of the original.

Masking image

In Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, Marker points out that in Japan, censorship on television allows the broadcaster to show incredibly racy images that have black bars or sections fuzzed out. By obscuring, he says, they are actually "pointing to the absolute by hiding it." He then goes on to say that "that's what religions have always done." The beauty of this quote is that it is critical, to a certain extent, of religion obscuring God - not telling the whole story - leading on some while leaving others in the dark. And rightly so. Yet he is also highlighting something that resonates in a more positive way: that by obscuring one can actually illuminate the absolute.

A friend of mine had a profound new experience of trees after encountering Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Trees*. Something about seeing them presented in this way lent them a new power, or at least brought to light something of the size, dominance, and power that they already possessed. Obscuring the trees showed more of what they were than simply viewing another park full of trees - a sight too often seen, and therefore assumed to be already known and understood. The difficulty of this is that if all you ever knew was the wrapped trees, they would become what is assumed and taken for granted, with none of the beauty of the original ever present. This is why the work only functions when it is temporary and exhibited briefly.

Baudrillard uses this difficulty of the power of images and their potential to replace the original as the basis for his discussion of simulacra. He uses the history of the Iconoclastic debate as the basis for images as simulations replacing the original 'real' - suggesting that God (an external deity) never existed. The 'god' that does exist is the only image-god a reified deity.

It can be seen that the iconoclasts, who are often accused of despising and denying images, were in fact the ones who accorded them their actual worth, unlike the iconolaters, who saw in them only reflections and were content to venerate God at one remove. But the converse can also be said, namely that the iconolaters possessed the most modern and adventurous minds, since, underneath the idea of the apparition of God in the mirror of images, they already enacted his death and his disappearance in the epiphany of his representations (which they perhaps knew no longer represented anything, and that they were purely a game, but that this was precisely the greatest game knowing also that it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them).[4]

Baudrillard suggests that "deep down God never existed, that only the simulacra existed, even that God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum." Jumping from claiming that imitation becomes simulation which replaces the original to then claiming that there never was an original seems like too much of a leap of unfaith, and not necessarily a logical progression.

Yet, if one looks to the to the decalogue (commonly known as the ten commandments) in Old Testament, this potential of images to become simulation and replace the real is clearly stated in the first paragraph:

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery. Do not have other gods besides Me. Do not make an idol ['image' in some translations] for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. You must not bow down to them or worship them.[5]

What is being said here is not that images shall not be made, but that the image should never be allowed to replace the real. Yet if we look back even further in the biblical narrative, there is further warning against this potential.

The Genesis account of the creation story tells us that we were made in the image of God.[6] 'Original Sin' as it is called, is derived from Adam and Eve taking fruit from the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The sin has nothing to do with eating a forbidden apple as such. The story recounts how they were tempted to eat the fruit and become like God. Imago Dei - people made in the image of God, trying to take the place of God. Image replacing original.

While this notion of 'original sin' - us trying to replace God - may seem unconnected to modern (or 'post-modern') reality (God is dead - what do we care?), we still constantly refer to it. For example, when it comes to issues of ethics in science we ask who has the right to 'play god'-like in the example cited earlier. In *The Age of Access* Jeremy Rifkin outlines the cultural shift from Madonna's material world to the 'Age of Access' where the cerebral is most celebrated. He points out that our godlike goal in the material age was to be omnipresent. In the age of access & information, being all-knowing is the godlike goal. "The ability to control and sell thoughts is the ultimate expression of commercial prowess." [7] All this to say that we have not lost touch with the notion that we somehow aspire to be godlike - a desire to somehow transcend the flesh to become more than what we feel we are.

Seen on a t-shirt: "God is dead" - Nietzsche / "Nietzsche is dead" - God

God is in here

When I originally embarked on this thesis project with the title of 'sacred space' I was fascinated by notions of control. It seemed to me, at the outset, that creating or naming a space as sacred was an act of control. Whoever had the capacity/authority to create such a space, held the power to simulate God. My first project, *God is in here*, points directly at this notion. The

caution tape reading 'GOD IS IN HERE' carefully outlines an empty square space. Just like Tom Friedman's The Curse,[8] simply saying the space has some unseen power, imbues it with that power. And yet, what I wanted to do by highlighting that potential, was to show, at the same time, the ridiculousness of the construct. God cannot be contained by caution tape. The external reality transcends the physical constraint and yet is present there also.

In the same way, the Old Testament portrays the Hebrew people falling into the trap of having a somewhat constrained notion of God. One can easily see how God giving them a specific site through which to access Himself could be abused and misunderstood. While the temple was really to help them approach the Divine with the utmost respect and even a holy fear (a much misunderstood term), it is easy to see how they could then come to see God as roped off and detached from reality, and also for certain people to abuse the power of having God so contained. The taped off area in God is in here measures 10x10 cubits, or fifteen square feet, which are the dimensions of the 'Holy of Holies' - the most holy place where God was thought to reside - to reference this history. At the moment of Jesus' crucifixion, the curtain in the temple[9] tore from top to bottom, signifying at once the end of a relationship with God mediated through religion and through a priest. God spilled out into the world - no longer just the God of the Jewish people, but for everyone. Religious control died that day. This is not to say that the Christian religion has not fallen into the same trap of a constrained notion of God that can be harnessed for power and control. However, the Christian religion is not necessarily the logical conclusion of what Jesus came to do or teach.[10]

Images as a reflection of God

"We see images in creation which remind us faintly of God, as when, for instance, we speak of the holy and adorable Trinity, imaged by the sun, or light, or burning rays, or by a running fountain, or a full river, or by the mind, speech, or the spirit within us, or by a rose tree, or a sprouting flower, or a sweet

fragrance."

- John of Damascus c730

Having visited a science lab at the University of Toronto, I was inspired to think about creation reflecting the Creator. We were visiting a woman who studies cells from a scientific perspective, but also makes art based on images captured through looking through the microscope. What I could not help but notice was the intricate art of the cell itself. My thin slice of leaf, under the microscope, struck me as a thing of such beauty and a reflection of the Creator of all things. It also struck me that the woman we were visiting would then make art but of such images. To again refer to people being 'Imago Dei' (made in the image of God), it makes sense that the created should be creative, as God is creative.

Whilst still in the lab and on the topic of cells and leaf parts, I noticed a collection of jars filled with various liquids on the counter top. It struck me that each jar, like a cell, makes up part of a whole, and could be used as a pixel in an image. In relation to this thought process, the image of the head of Christ as a representation of God seemed most fitting an icon to construct from pixel-jars. Constructing such an image from component parts shows it for what it is - constructed, fabricated - and yet also representing and pointing to something.

While I saw God reflected in the cells of a slice of leaf, others see the face of Jesus or Mary in a burnt fish- stick or grilled cheese sandwich, both of which have sold for huge prices on e-Bay. Is there a difference between my seeing the reflection of God in a leaf cell and seeing the face of Christ on a fish-stick? This was also a question I wanted to provoke in this piece. Do you see God only because you are looking for God? Because looking for God is instilled in you (by humans) or because it is installed in you (by God)? Because looking for God is a part of our genetic code? Because the Creator's fingerprints are all over creation?

The piece is titled *Reified Deity* and consists of 100 small glass jars that each contain dyed liquid, sitting on a light table or light source so as to vaguely reference stain-glass. It is an

image of a face made using each jar as a pixel, with the colours ranging from clear liquid, through yellow and orange, to red. These colours are used tonally to define the face, as a spectrum of light to dark. The face is that of a bearded individual with long hair which closely resembles a popular conception of the image of the face of Jesus.

The piece also has a scientific aesthetic due to the bottles and the light table. Science is to some extent the new religion and definer of truth - it holds a monopoly even on the concept of truth as that which can be quantified. Yet it is precisely through letting science define 'truth' that God is excluded as scientifically unquantifiable. Belief in science however does not exclude belief in God, just as belief in God does not exclude belief in science. On the contrary, science deepens our understanding of the complexity of that which is created by God and therefore can deepen our understanding of God. This piece positions itself in the centre of the debate, showing God even in the act of scientific quantification.

Communion Video Installation

"It's the feeble 'definition' of TV which condemns its spectator to rearranging the few points retained into a kind of abstract work. He participates suddenly in the creation of a reality that was only just presented to him in dots: the television watcher is in the position of an individual who is asked to project his own fantasies on inkblots that are not supposed to represent anything. TV is a perpetual Rorschach test. And furthermore: The TV image requires each instant that we 'close' the spaces in the mesh by a convulsive sensuous participation that is profoundly kinetic and tactile."

- Jean Baudrillard

The image on a TV screen does not exist. It is present in physical form only as a brief successive flash of dots of light on the front of the television itself as an object. It is present yet immaterial, visible yet intangible. The television object points beyond itself to something that exists outside of itself, and that only exists at the moment of perception, the process of which

pieces an image of the thing that it points to together. However, what is shown is not real. It stands in for 'real' but is not even really an image.

What is communion? Christians look to Christ as an example and yet recognize our own inability to live up to that example. By the ritual of taking in the bread and the wine, we are declaring that we need God to sustain us - that we cannot live without Him. In addition, we are taking in a representation of flesh - not actual flesh - to show that we can only live like Christ if He lives in us and through us. In addition, the bread and wine are shared - it is not and cannot be a private ceremony. As the story is told, it is a communal act - the transformation of each individual as part of a whole. As much as these things explain elements of the metaphors contained in the ritual, none of them really begin to describe the thing that comes from such a simple gesture. Neither does simple bread and wine really tell the story of Christ in full - these objects are transcended and something supernatural occurs both in the moment and in the long term, just as the story of the death of a man called Jesus does not on its own bring intimacy between humanity and God.

The communion piece consists of the image of bread and wine intercut with shots of the wine dripping out of the bread. This would be played on twelve television sets which are set in a half circle on a complete circle of floor rugs. The images would be slightly out of synch with one another yet show the same footage at the same speed. The transitions between each shot are slow fades in and out so that the whole thing has a rhythmic quality. The twelve televisions represent the twelve disciples at the last supper. It is a number often used biblically to represent a collection of individuals and therefore all of humanity.

The image of bleeding bread came to me when pondering the mystery of communion. That bread and wine could represent Jesus' death which in itself represents a greater narrative is a compelling story to try and tell. It is also an essential story to tell when trying to unlock the trap of the image world. Bread 'bleeding' grape juice does not resolve in reality - it is an image and a

fantastical thing. By taking the metaphor so literally, I hope to point back to the thing beyond the metaphor. The trap of religion is getting stuck in the metaphor and forgetting that to which it refers. The metaphor becomes dangerous and exploitable - nothing but hollow religion - the moment the we lost track of the referent.

I make no pretense that the communion piece is resolved, or tells this story in completion. We are so used to the world of television image that it is very hard to see past something so familiar especially one that makes such familiar references. Part of the meaning which is very easy to overlook is that what is shown on the screen is a contained image - only existing on the screen and at the moment of perception and being transmitted from somewhere external. What I was trying to communicate was something of that Christ-in-us idea, and how perceiving a person living with Christ inside them, you can piece together a picture of God - an partial image. Not a perfect one by any means, but one that is constantly being renewed and refreshed. However, we are so caught in the familiarity of the television apparatus that it is quite hard to see it for what those meanings and equally hard for the artist to expose them.

Projected Light

In the same way we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another.

- Romans 12:5

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of darkness, a light has dawned.

- Isaiah 9:2

A light shone in the darkness, yet the darkness did not overcome it.

- John 1:5

Do everything without grumbling and arguing, so that you may be blameless and pure, children of God who are faultless in a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine like stars in the world.

- Philippians 2:14-15

Shine like Stars may answer some of these concerns. The piece consists of an image of Christ crucified made of points of light - holes cut in cardboard sitting on an overhead projector. It is a construction in the same way the bottled *Christ/Reified Deity* piece is a construction. An image made of component parts. Similar to what I was trying to do with the TV installation piece, this piece is not even an image. It is projected light that is perceived as an image. Of course, every visible image is reflected light or a reflection of projected light from some light source - this piece simply intends to make that apparatus more apparent.

I would like to show this piece projected near another version of *God is in here* except with regular striped caution tape that has no text on it, in the shape of a cross. Just as the temple could not contain God, so the cross was not the end of Jesus. Baudrillard suggests that "It is through the death [murdered by the image] of God that religions emerge." I would counter that with "It is through the death of the true Image of God - Jesus (fully man yet fully God) - that religion dies." And yet it is not just 'religion' that dies but sin - image replacing God, in whatever context.

How is this possible, that we could somehow transcend the trap of the simulacra? The way out of the 'image world' is to reconnect with the Real. The Matrix Trilogy bases the majority of its philosophical construction on Baudrillard (although he claims it is based on a misunderstanding of his work). They point to a need to escape the image-world they call the Matrix. They play some games with religious imagery and allegory but ultimately, Neo befriends the machines. This points to a need for the Christlike figure and yet concedes that humans ultimately cannot make that transcendent leap alone. Even Baudrillard's own critique only stands as a 'critique' and not just pointing out the obvious if he appeals to some sort of potential way out of the immediate image-reality.[11]

We are children of God, made in the image of God. We are now called the "body of Christ" told to "shine like stars" so that the world can see God. And is this an escape from

reality - from the earth? Far from it. It has nothing to do with escaping earth, but escaping a reality that is only based in simulation. This is about connecting with a greater sense of Real here and now. I make no pretense that I have some secret knowledge of my own or the Christian religion has gotten it right through the years. I am not blind to the evils done in God's name. I am not proud of religious wars or any of the other wrongs committed in the name of Love. I am also not in a place of judgement - we all see images and to some extent, we all believe them because we see that there are reflections of truth in so many places. But to see some images as false and some as true based on our own perception is to ignore the greater truth to which they point. Without which there would be no truth at all. And what do I hope to contribute to this? A little reflection of light - a tiny pinprick that glows a little bit in the dark and points, as part of a whole collection of little lights, to the greater truth.

Postscript

This paper is not intended to be a complete gospel in and of itself. I recognize the incompleteness of many of the arguments and theological ideas dabbled with here. I am no theologian, only a humble artist. I am however a child of God and like I stated at the beginning, want to see God. This is my best attempt at present to discuss a little of how I am slowly learning, with the help of God, to see.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.

- 1 Corinthians 13:12

Endnotes (not yet properly formatted)

1. "God has set eternity in the hearts of men, yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end." Ecclesiastes 3:11
2. *Is God in our Genes?* Jeffrey Kluger, Time Magazine
3. *In Defense of Icons*, John of Damascus c.730
<www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/johndam-icons.html>
4. *Simulation and Simulacra*, Baudrillard,
<<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard/ baudrillard-simulacra-and-simulations.html>>
5. Exodus 20:1-6
6. Genesis 1:26
7. *The Age of Access*, Jeremy Rifkin. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001
8. Tom Friedman
9. The curtain divided most of the rest of the temple from the 'holy of holies' where only the priest/mediator between us and God could go to face God, once a year, under strict rules.
10. Bruxy Cavey *The Irreligious Christ*
11. *Subverting the Mechanisms of Control: Baudrillard and The Matrix Trilogy*, 2003 Jim Rovira, Drew University