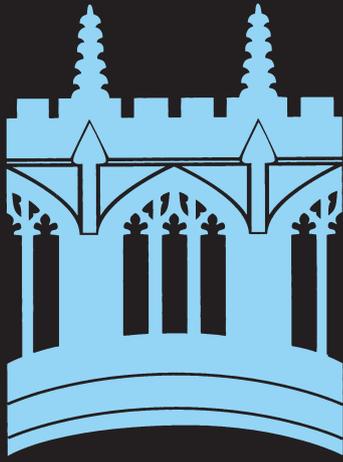


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Outside the frame: Postmodern art

by Anne Roberts

In the Western nations during the last thirty or so years art objects have come to exist that bear no resemblance to the art of former times, presenting experiences of puzzlement, disorder, and in some cases disappointment to the ordinary viewer in search of imaginative stimulation. Brandon Taylor¹

It is ironic that so many new galleries should be opening at a time when contemporary art is alien and upsetting not only to most art collectors but also to the wider public, whose lottery dreams have financed what many will see as temples to the meretricious.²

Summary

This paper focuses on the scope and characteristics of recent conceptual and installation art, looking first at the early development of this genre, and then examining four major aspects: the exploration of visual language and appropriation of images; art based on autobiography; work which deals with social and environmental issues; and finally art which appropriates religious imagery. The paper concludes with reflections on finding a Christian voice in response.

Introduction

This investigation follows Margaret Wilson's Cambridge Paper, 'The window is closed – Engaging with early to mid-twentieth-century painting' (September 2007), which ended with a discussion of Mark Rothko's abstract painting. Since the late 1960s there have been many diverse strands of artistic practice, from the realist paintings of Lucian Freud to Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* or Grayson Perry's appearances in female dress. However, underlying these developments has been a major shift in the way in which art is viewed. The very broad category of what is known as postmodernism is largely dominated by conceptual art, where the idea or concept, rather than the act of making, is the most important aspect of the work. As the artist Sol LeWitt has put it, 'the idea becomes the machine which drives the art' – so that the single crafted artwork, such as a painting or sculpture, becomes insufficient to contain everything the artist wishes to say. Instead, ideas may be conveyed in terms of installation, performance – or even, as with the 2010 Turner Prize winner, Susan Philipsz, as an experience of pure sound. This paper therefore focuses on recent conceptual and installation art, looking both at its early development and a number of its key aspects. (See footnotes for links to works discussed but not illustrated.)

We should not be surprised if contemporary artistic practice reflects elements found more generally in a largely post-Christian society. Most obviously, the lack of a 'Christian voice' is evident, both in artists' approach to their work, and in the discussion which is given space in the media. The widespread blurring of moral and cultural boundaries in society is reflected in many artists' recycling, adaptation and subversion of visual images, which can be accessed from worldwide sources. Our visual experience in daily life is characterised by increasing exposure to extremes and to juxtaposed imagery in films, television and the internet. Today's 'high-definition' media can become more vivid than reality. These visual trends can skew not only our perception of creation but also our expectations of original works of art.

Teaching methods in schools and art colleges are often driven by what is presented in major exhibitions, so that there is now a generation of artists who have never known anything other than a postmodern approach to their studio work. There is no longer any assumption that a fine art student will practise painting, whether figurative or abstract, although this is still acknowledged as a valid option. The work is seen primarily as an exploration of ideas, rather than an object to be appreciated for its craftsmanship or skill. Thus the viewer becomes a participant in a discourse, rather than a 'consumer'. A visit to an exhibition means a visual and mental workout.

¹ *Contemporary Art: Art Since 1970*, Laurence King Publishing, 2005.

² Editorial, *Financial Times*, 28 December 1999, p.10.

Many art students today are required to read authors such as Roland Barthes, whose article 'The Death of the Author', written in 1968, has been hugely influential in the visual arts.³ Barthes saw the conventional idea of the author (or artist) as tyrannical, 'enclosing' the meaning of the work according to one person's intentions. Instead, looking back to earlier linguistic analysis, he proposed the idea of a 'text', examining language as a web of mutually dependent 'signifiers', whose meanings shift as each reader/viewer brings a fresh context to the work. As Charles Harrison and Paul Wood have written, 'the process of establishing a meaning becomes...the product of a variety of shifting interchanges rather than the divination of the semantic heart of the work. The work...loses its pre-eminence and steps down into a field of interactions, all conceived of as more or less equal moment.'⁴

In many ways this reflects our daily experience in a fallen world, where life is full of 'loose ends' and ideal resolutions are often unattainable. The Christian art historian and photographer John Walford has discussed this incompleteness in relation to the disjunction of his photographic images: 'If art is to be true to life, it should reflect that reality of irresolution in both its form and content. However, I do believe that God, in His wisdom, sees and knows how all things interrelate and find their ultimate meaning and resolution. In that, I part company with most so-called post-modernists.'⁵

Early postmodernism

The 1960s was a time of crisis for modernism. Up to this point, histories of modern art generally focused on the visual qualities of the work, outlining a 'heroic' progression from imitative representation towards abstraction and purity of form. This was presented as a universal development, where alternative views such as, for example, feminism, were largely unrecognised. However, the advent of Pop Art, with its cheerfully rebellious importation of commercial imagery and mixed media, cut right across this approach, and was deplored by many as a retrograde step, and descent into kitsch.

In an early article, the American art critic Clement Greenberg had thundered against kitsch as a debased art for the urbanised proletariat and the enemy of true culture: '...vicarious experience and faked sensations...the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times'.⁶ Christian writers, such as Calvin Seerveld and others, have also expanded on this view of kitsch as trivialising and cheapening human emotions. However, it does not follow that a utopian form of pure abstract art is the necessary alternative.

Greenberg (1909–94), the most influential writer on modernism of his generation, is best known as the champion of abstract expressionism and a close friend of artists such as Jackson Pollock in the 1940s and 50s. For Greenberg, avant-garde modernism represented what was truly alive and significant in contemporary culture, whereas other alternatives were very much the debased rearguard. At the height of his career he exercised an authoritative influence on students, artists, and also collectors of contemporary art. A collection of his writings, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, published in 1961, quickly became required reading for art students of the period.

In London, a major shift from the views typified by Greenberg's writings can be encapsulated in two events, both generated from within St Martin's School of Art. The first occurred in 1966, when John Latham, then a lecturer at St Martin's, borrowed a copy of Greenberg's *Art and Culture* from the college library and conducted a 'demolition event' – inviting

his students to ceremonially destroy Greenberg's work by chewing up and spitting out the pages. The resulting pulp, distilled into a liquid, was later returned to the library in response to an overdue notice. Latham was immediately dismissed – but, significantly, his documentation of the event, including the liquid, is now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In a second landmark gesture against the precepts of modernism, a twenty-two-year-old sculpture student, Richard Long, while hitchhiking to St Martin's from his home in Bristol, stopped in a Wiltshire field, where he walked up and down, creating a straight line. His black and white photographs, presented as the record of a three-dimensional work of art, have become as famous as Latham's book demolition. Not only was Long – now one of Britain's best-known artists – engaging with the landscape in a totally new way, but also his action opened up a connection between site-specific art and performance.



Richard Long (b. 1945) *A Line Made by Walking*, Photograph, 1967.
© Richard Long. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2011. Photo: © Tate, London, 2011⁷

Appropriated imagery and visual language

Barthes's ideas on the death of the author are probably most clearly demonstrated in the work of the German artist Martin Kippenberger (1953–97), sometimes called 'Deutschland's Andy Warhol', and the subject of a major retrospective at Tate Modern in 2006. Kippenberger's early career coincided with the period of punk rock, when pop music and film were associated with dissidence and revolt. A hyperactive personality, Kippenberger was constantly on the move, both in life and in art, questioning artistic conventions, and appropriating images from his changing locations. His borrowings from figurative and abstract painting as well as commercial art are like a deliberate negation of any personal style.

In 1981 he initiated a series of paintings under the title *Dear Painter, paint for me*, where a commercial artist was engaged to produce a series of precise enlargements from very ordinary snapshot photographs.

3 See Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodernism*, Tate Publishing, 2001, pp.10–11.

4 Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory 1900–2000*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p.971.

5 E. John Walford, *An Art Historian's Sideways Glance*, Piquant Editions, 2009, pp.15–16.

6 Quoted in Harrison and Wood op. cit. p.543.

7 ARTIST ROOMS Acquired jointly with the National Galleries of Scotland through The d'Offay Donation with assistance from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Art Fund 2008.



Martin Kippenberger, *Ohne Titel* (aus der Serie *Leiber Maler, male mir*)
Untitled (from the series *Dear Painter, paint for me*) 1981.
 Acrylic on canvas, 240 x 300 cm.
 © Estate Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

In 1989–90, Kippenberger gave the idea of the death of the author a further twist with an installation entitled *Heavy Burschi* (*Heavy Guy*) which he spoke of as ‘a kind of double kitsch’.⁸ The title itself is borrowed from American movies. In this work, his studio assistant, Merlin Carpenter, was asked to make a series of painted copies from reproductions of his works. The works themselves are appropriations of graphic imagery borrowed from popular sources such as film posters and press photographs of celebrities. Dissatisfied with the results, Kippenberger had the ‘original’ copies destroyed and placed in a skip, while photographs of the series were shown on the gallery walls.



Martin Kippenberger, *Heavy Burschi*, 1989/90.
 Installation view, Martin Kippenberger, K21, Düsseldorf 2006.
 © Estate Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

Autobiographical art

While artists like Kippenberger were preoccupied with visual language, other forms of conceptual and installation art are predominantly autobiographical and confessional. Such works are not only a stubborn denial of the ‘death of the author’, but also open up important questions about the Christian view of man. Like someone whose gaze is restricted to a mirror, these artists are absorbed with their own identity and experience. In some cases, the artist can literally become central to the work, as a participant.

In England, possibly the most famous examples are Tracey Emin’s *My Bed*⁹ and *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*, both shown in 1999 at Tate Britain’s annual Turner Prize exhibition. To some it appeared that contemporary art had finally struck a chord which made it accessible to the general public. Over a

decade later, *My Bed* is still very difficult to assess – there has been much discussion about whether we are looking at sheer effrontery, or disillusion and self-loathing. Others have ennobled it with a more profound, universal meaning: Emin’s unmade bed, with its soiled sheets, worn underwear, cigarette ends and empty bottles ‘graphically illustrates themes of loss, sickness, fertility, copulation, conception and death – almost the whole of human life has its locus in this place’,¹⁰ while a reviewer of the Royal Academy’s 1997 *Sensation* exhibition complained that ‘For 1,000 years art has been one of our great civilising forces. Today, pickled sheep and soiled beds threaten to make barbarians of us all.’¹¹

My Bed records an episode where the artist had spent several days in deep depression over a failed love affair. Her bleak revelation of private despair, trapped in the seamy underside of personal experience, lacks any suggestion of hope, or that, in God, no human being or situation is beyond redemption. Nevertheless, works such as these have made Emin a wealthy member of Britain’s art establishment, and one is tempted to question whether this is a cry for help, or a calculated commercial act.

Social and environmental issues

A third category of work, to which Christians can perhaps relate more readily, is outward-looking, and deals with issues in society. Its motivation often has much in common with the commands in the first two chapters of Genesis, for man to cultivate and care for God’s creation. Here the most influential pioneering figure is Joseph Beuys (1921–86), who in 1980 became one of the founding members of the Green Party (*Die Grünen*) in Germany. Despite a strongly egotistical element to the legends which have grown up about him, the theme of Western man’s relationship to nature and to his environment was central throughout his artistic career.

Beuys first came to prominence in an era of peace marches and idealistic movements in the late 60s, and his personal charisma has sometimes been compared to figures such as Bob Dylan in the United States. As a young man, following membership of the Hitler Youth movement, Beuys served with the Luftwaffe in the Second World War. According to his own account, which may have been somewhat embellished,¹² when his plane was shot down over the Crimean front in 1944 killing his fellow pilot, he was discovered in the snow and rescued by the nomadic Tartars, who saved his life by insulating his body using animal fats enclosed in felt. These symbolic healing elements of felt and fat were to become part of a personal mythology in Beuys’s work.

Beuys described many of his performance works as ‘social sculptures’,¹³ the most famous of which was recorded on film in 1974. Its title, *I like America and America Likes Me*, was ironic, as Beuys strongly disapproved of American actions in Vietnam, and had refused to visit the USA until the war was over. This ‘Action’, as Beuys called his performances, also highlighted the damage which Beuys felt that white settlers had inflicted on native American culture.

Accordingly, Beuys had himself flown to New York, and transported to the René Block Gallery in an ambulance so that his feet did not touch American soil. Here he was placed in a cage with a wild coyote and filmed for three days, creating a strange presence wrapped in a felt blanket, with gloves and a shepherd’s crook. He later explained that he wanted to focus on nothing of America other than the coyote, which had been a potent symbol to the American Indians. Beuys designed his Action as a ‘reckoning’ with the coyote which had been debased by settlers who regarded it as a pest to be exterminated. Each day, fifty copies of *The Wall Street Journal* – symbolic of the tyranny of money and power in

10 Virginia Button, *The Turner Prize: Twenty Years*, London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997, p.156.

11 *Daily Mail* review of the *Sensation* exhibition at the Royal Academy, September 1997.

12 See Julian Spalding, *The Eclipse of Art*, London: Prestel, 2003, pp.76–77.

13 Carin Kuoni, *Joseph Beuys in America*, NY: Four Walls and Eight Windows Publications, 1990, p.9.

8 D. Krystof and J. Morgan (Eds) *Martin Kippenberger*. London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2006, p.20.

9 www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/artpages/tracey_emin_my_bed.htm

modern America – were delivered to the cage, which the coyote acknowledged by urinating on them. The Action was completed when Beuys was returned to the airport, again without communicating with anyone, or touching American soil.

Although his belief in the primeval powers of animals smacks of New Age philosophy, Beuys was convinced that art could be a means of engendering environmental and social change. In 1982, he had embarked on a major landscape project, entitled *7,000 Oaks*, which were to be planted in the central German town of Kassel. The city had been exceptionally heavily bombed in the Second World War, but is now better known for hosting the Documenta, an important five-yearly exhibition of international contemporary art. Beuys's tree-planting was planned as part of the 1982 Documenta. A block of basalt, an ancient volcanic rock, was placed beside each tree, contrasting the earth's ancient energy with this statement of renewal. Beuys subsequently developed this idea as an installation, entitled *The End of the Twentieth Century*, shown in a major exhibition at Tate Modern in 2005. Here, the basalt slabs lie scattered haphazardly, like ancient fallen ruins. Each is drilled with a conical hole, which is lined with felt and filled with insulating clay, suggesting the possibility of healing at the end of a destructive century.



Joseph Beuys, *The End of the Twentieth Century*, 1983–5.
© DACS 2011. Photo: © Tate, London, 2011

Beuys's interests in ecology are still very much alive in the work of younger generations. A well-known example is the 2005 Turner Prize winner Simon Starling, who has since worked and taught in Germany and Scandinavia as well as in the UK. His *Shedboatshed*, like many of his works, was the result of a journey, very much in the tradition of Beuys's 'social sculptures'. Starling describes his working method as 'the physical manifestation of a thought process'. In this case he dismantled a wooden shed, turned the materials into a boat which he sailed down the Rhine to Basel, where he reconstructed the original shed. Despite derogatory comments in the press, including comparisons with sheds from B&Q, the resurrected shed was seen as the artist's comment on mass production and capitalism.



Simon Starling (b. 1967) *Shedboatshed (Mobile Architecture No.2)*, 2005.
400 x 600 x 400 cm. © Kunstmuseum Basel.
Photo: © Kunstmuseum Basel, Martin Bühler

Spiritual and religious themes

When postmodern artists stray into the territory of religion they can provoke serious accusations of desecration and blasphemy. Their wholesale appropriation and juxtaposition of images militate against any tradition where icons or religious artworks are to be venerated. In 1996 these issues erupted over an early work by Chris Ofili (b. 1968), who, like Tracey Emin, has gone on to be celebrated as one of Britain's major artists. *The Holy Virgin Mary*¹⁴ is a painting in acrylic and resin, decorated with map pins, glitter and, most famously, elephant dung.

Born in Manchester to Nigerian parents, Ofili received a Catholic education, which has given him a familiarity with Bible narratives and images. He has recalled how, as an altar boy, he regularly heard the Bible read in church, so that the stories have stayed with him 'although they're completely remixed in my head'.¹⁵ The tradition of the Black Madonna or *Vierge Noire* goes back to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries in Europe, as well as in Africa itself. However, in portraying Mary as a black woman, Ofili draws on very different sources, using a flat decorative style which combines elements of both African art and contemporary urban graffiti.

As a student, Ofili visited Zimbabwe on an Arts Council grant, and while on safari became intrigued by the way in which trackers could estimate the closeness of animals by the freshness of their dung. Accordingly he arrived home with dried dung in his luggage, and began experimenting with applying it to his paintings. In interviews, Ofili has been dismissive about suggestions that this was a way of exploring his African roots – but described it as 'a productive collision' (reminiscent of Dada in the 1920s) of the inherent unpleasantness of the material and the decorative quality of the paint.¹⁶ Ofili also used lumps of dried, chemically treated and varnished dung at ground level as a support to his large paintings which were shown without frames, resting informally against the gallery walls.

However, when applied to a religious subject, this approach took on very different connotations of disrespect and blasphemy. There was a huge reaction when the work was shown at the Brooklyn Museum, at a time when Rudy Giuliani, an Italian Catholic who had once considered entering the priesthood, was Mayor of New York. Giuliani publicly threatened to withdraw the museum's funding, on the grounds that 'you can't do things which desecrate the most personal and deeply held views of people in society.' Although the treatment of Catholic images may not generally be a major concern to Christians of other denominations, Ofili's work reveals an underlying lack of understanding of or respect for the things of God, and 'the fear of the Lord [as] the beginning of wisdom'.¹⁷

Some aspects of Ofili's work raise the question of at what point believing Christians should directly oppose what is being presented. In 2005, the Tate raised £600,000 to purchase his most ambitious installation, entitled *The Upper Room*.¹⁸ At the time, there was considerable controversy about the funding, but not it seems about the content of the work. The title immediately associates it with the Last Supper – an event which is central to the church's remembrance of Christ as Saviour, and a subject with a long history in European religious painting – as Ofili himself has acknowledged. The room itself, designed by his friend the architect David Adjaye, is approached via a darkened corridor, which introduces a change of tempo from the outside gallery, replicating the experience of entering a church. This leads into a long rectangular space, constructed in walnut wood, and very beautifully lit, with a central row of benches or tables.

However, the twelve paintings which flank the walls, propped on their lumps of elephant dung, are all transferred from an iden-

14 www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/aipe/chris_ofili.htm

15 Judith Nesbitt, (Ed.) *Chris Ofili*, London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2010, p.99.

16 Quoted in Judith Nesbitt (Ed.) op. cit. p.10.

17 Ps. 111:10.

18 www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/Ofili/

tical template of a rhesus macaque monkey (venerated in Hinduism) holding a chalice, each rendered in a different colourway. These began as a development from a previous series, *Monkey Magic*, derived from an early Andy Warhol drawing, and the idea of an 'upper room' only suggested itself when Ofili had completed a series of twelve. At the head is a thirteenth larger painting in gold, with one elephant dung eye, placed higher on the wall, towards which the others all face.

The Tate catalogue notes the ambiguity of the presentation: 'for all its Christian symbolism, *The Upper Room* emanates an occult mystery...this [is] an ecumenical, collective invitation to transcendence through the senses and the imagination.'¹⁹ According to the Tate website, 'with this work Ofili raises questions about relationships between civilisation and untamed nature, between the religious and the secular.' It has also been suggested that the work explores our resistance to multiculturalism, and the divides opened up by the tragedy of 7/7, the 2005 London suicide bombings.²⁰

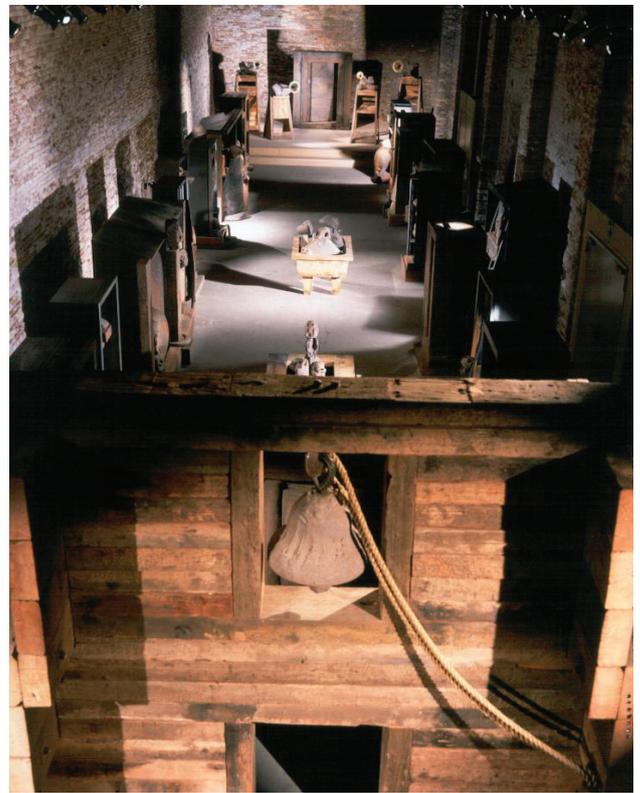
In medieval times, the monkey was sometimes used as a symbol of the devil, often with reference to paganism or heresy. There are other sinister connotations which Ofili may not have considered – for example, in propaganda posters issued under Hitler's Third Reich, Jews and coloured peoples were sometimes represented as apes. For Christians the inclusion of the chalice in such a context is especially repugnant. Jesus himself blessed the wine at the Last Supper as 'My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins' (Matthew 26:28). Thus, although Ofili is seeking to create the atmosphere of a place of worship, he has apparently failed to understand that this combination of imagery renders Christian worship impossible.

The only comparable major installation by a British artist which uses religious imagery is a late work by Sir Anthony Caro, a contemporary and friend of Clement Greenberg. Caro, now internationally acclaimed as the most important British sculptor since Henry Moore, met Greenberg in 1959, and through him the American abstract sculptor David Smith. As a result, Caro's work underwent a radical change: abandoning figurative modelling, he began to make abstract constructions in welded steel. However, more recently, Caro has returned to the interpretation of narrative and meaning, starting with his series of *The Trojans*, shown in 1994, inspired by Homer's *Iliad*, which contains graphic descriptions of violent battles and killings.

These ideas are applied to recent social and political history in Caro's *The Last Judgement*, an installation of twenty-five sculptures, constructed in stone, wood, concrete, brass and steel. The project was conceived as a response to the multiple atrocities of the twentieth century, and first shown in the concluding year of the millennium, at the 1999 Venice Biennale.



Sir Anthony Caro (b. 1924) *The Last Judgement*, 1996/1999
© Barford Sculptures Ltd.



Sir Anthony Caro *The Last Judgement*, 1996/1999.
© Barford Sculptures Ltd.

Here, the scene is set by the entrance via a wooden bell tower. Just as the bell in Donne's poem 'tolls for thee', it is as if the artist, like a preacher, demands a personal identification with what we are about to see. The lighting is stark and sombre, and each individual sculpture is linked to themes such as greed, envy, torture and imprisonment. While some refer to traitorous biblical characters such as Judas and Salome, others derive from classical literature – for example, Charon, horrible guardian of the abyss in Virgil's *Aeneid*, who ferries the dead. Towards the far end are a few small indications of hope, in themes such as Jacob's ladder from the Old Testament, or the Elysian Fields, again from the *Aeneid*. All the time one's focus returns to the climax of the piece, where the door of heaven, only slightly open, is flanked by the four trumpets.

Like Ofili, Caro draws his ideas together by using a central biblical theme with a long history in terms of religious art. Wall paintings of the Last Judgement, or 'Dooms' as they were known, were a common sight in medieval churches. However, these were balanced, in wall paintings and altarpieces, by representations of the salvation of those made righteous in Christ. Here, Caro's focus is almost entirely on the 'Doom' – the horrors of man's inhumanity to man. Hope is a fragile possibility, rather than the 'good hope' of grace, and the power and sovereignty of God's salvation are entirely absent.

Conclusions – finding a Christian voice

We have seen that major museums today are like 'cultural power-houses' which shape public perceptions. Even if we do not visit exhibitions, many ideas are speedily picked up by advertisers and graphic designers whose work we see all around us, as images become instantly available via the internet. Thus, artists' imagery can be constantly recycled, as digital communication embeds contemporary art into our visual culture. However, this is not all one-way traffic. The internet has provided commentators and artists throughout the world with increasing opportunities to register their responses, opening up a fast-developing process of communication. It is encouraging that although Christians may not generally enjoy a 'seat at the table' in the higher world of cultural politics, there are now significant new possibilities for dialogue.

¹⁹ Tate catalogue, p.18.

²⁰ Augustus Casely-Hayford, Review in *Art Quarterly*, Winter 2005, pp.27–29.

Even so, the museum can still be seen as a ‘temple’ where fine art is placed on a false pedestal. Despite the supposed death of the author, the threadbare Romantic concept of the artist-genius lingers on in contemporary guise. It is possible to make an idol of originality, but when continual innovation becomes the measure of success, the pressure on the artist can become a reverse form of tyranny.

The Bible portrays God as a craftsman of unsurpassed skill, imagination and visual creativity, and tells us that humankind has been made in his image. However, it never speaks of visual art in terms of originality or self-expression. In the Old Testament, the only detailed references concern specific tasks: firstly God’s directions to create beautiful objects for the tabernacle,²¹ and later Solomon’s commission to Hiram for the temple.²² Here, excellence in craftsmanship is linked to wisdom and the infilling of the Spirit. Outside this context, the only references to crafts or materials are linked to the making of idols.²³ Although Jesus exhorted all his followers to maximise their talents, the New Testament gives no more instruction about making art than for growing tomatoes or driving a car. Artists have freedom to develop a visual language which effectively conveys their ideas. Artistic practice has reflected ongoing cultural changes throughout the generations – whether that means painting a medieval fresco or recreating an unmade bed.

However, our own generation is often alienated by works which museums place before us, some of which may be too disturbing for many Christians to contemplate. Despite our familiarity with the high-definition world of popular culture we can be taken unawares by the power of visual images (a power emphasised in the biblical account of the Fall). Issues in society which are regularly debated in the media can become much more shocking when made visual on a very large scale. For example, a visit to a Gilbert and George exhibition can have a far more direct impact than reading an article about gay relationships.

But a distinctive critical engagement is still crucial. In a previous Cambridge Paper, John Coffey has argued that ‘Salt and light are effective because they are at odds with their environment and present within it.’²⁴ This presence becomes especially important when, in a solo exhibition, the artist’s worldview is all-prevailing. Financial support, glossy catalogues and scholarly articles combine to exclude alternative possibilities, giving the chosen work a cumulative power which can be very daunting to anyone seeking to marshal their arguments.

Although the visual language may be challenging, we should bear in mind that conceptual artists are still dealing with deep issues which are crucial to our thinking about man in God’s world: the search for spirituality, a sense of identity, the role of the

artist, and our relationship to creation. Even within an increasingly secularised society, there are major artists making direct or oblique reference to biblical themes. Thus the church has much to say that is relevant and important for a new generation of practitioners.

In Athens, the apostle Paul encountered the most sophisticated minds of his day in the context of pagan art from a world-dominating culture.²⁵ The statues representing Roman and Greek deities which he saw would have looked very different to the sanitised examples displayed in museums today. Reconstructions show that many were garishly coloured, and often aggressive or erotic. Some, like the gold-plated statue of Athena in the Parthenon, were on an enormous scale; others represented Roman emperors as gods. All would have been highly offensive to Paul’s Jewish background, where idolatrous carved images were forbidden. But although he was ‘greatly distressed to see the city full of idols’ he tells his hearers that he had walked round and examined them carefully.²⁶ Without disparaging in any way the artists’ aesthetic achievements, he uses critical observation to gain a hearing for the gospel.

In a highly visual society, non-verbal communication in daily life, often driven by postmodern art, is immensely – sometimes insidiously – powerful. At the same time, artists are responding to a media-driven world with few guidelines or boundaries. Even the modernist concept of overturning conventions loses its meaning when anything is possible. Thus artists who wield a great deal of influence frequently operate within a moral and spiritual vacuum.

However, it should not be the role of the church to be judgemental or simply to hark back to older methods of working. Rather, Christians should acknowledge that today’s artistic practice has its own rich possibilities, and be ‘on board, sailing with the winds of innovation’.²⁷ This does not imply an uncritical acceptance of novelty for its own sake, but rather, imaginative encouragement of new skills and creative endeavour where these are put to positive use. Engaging with the art of a new generation can become the first step in establishing a meaningful dialogue. Like Paul, we may then be able to invite others to reassess their beliefs in the light of what they see.

25 Acts 17:16ff.

26 Acts 17:23.

27 E. John Walford: quoted in *An Art Historian’s Sideways Glance*, Piquant Editions, 2009, p.9.

21 Ex. 31:1–11.

22 1 Kgs 7:13ff.

23 This is more fully discussed in Margaret Wilson, ‘A Window upon the world: Engaging with painting’, *Cambridge Papers*, Vol. 11, No. 3, September 2002.

24 John Coffey, ‘Engaging with Cinema’, in *Christianity in a Changing World*, Chapter 24, Marshall Pickering, 2000, p.329.

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Next issue: Equality laws