

Rabottini, Alessandro, "Love like God," *Kaleidoscope*, April 2010, pp. 70-72

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LOVE LIKE GOD



In a country where the bond between politics and religion is growing tighter, the connection between religion and art can be found in Eucharistic forms and a baroque inheritance.

Pietro Roccasalva
The Good Woman (detail), 2005
Photo: Agostino Osio

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In the last few decades, religion, along with neoliberal economics, seems to have climbed back onto the podium in the contest for global power. Many artists—from Adel Abdessemed to Mircea Cantor and Kendell Geers, to mention just a few—have noticed the ill-boding link between fanaticism and speculation, between religious fundamentalism, conservative politics and the global market.¹ In Italy, where the public dimension of religion is once again playing a leading role in the current climate of neo-conservatism as promoted by the main television channels, in a sticky entanglement of politics and the Vatican, what remains of the cultural involvement of Catholicism in the art of recent decades, in the country that for centuries saw the greatest production of art in history precisely by virtue of Church patronage?

ITALIAN MIRACLE

If in Italy, Catholicism has always been a national custom, a political habit rather than a spiritual and introspective matter, today it seems more than ever to be chiefly the obsession of a political class that invokes it constantly. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that over the last fifty years, Italian art has developed a relationship

From left:
 Michalangelo Pistoletto
È l'ora del giudizio (action,
 "Divisione e moltiplicazione
 dello specchio - L'arte assume
 la religione", Galleria
 Giorgio Persano, Turin), 1978
 Photo: P. Pellion

C'è dio? Si ci sono. (action,
 "Divisione e moltiplicazione
 dello specchio - L'arte assume
 la religione", Galleria
 Giorgio Persano, Turin), 1978
 Photo: P. Pellion



with the images of the Catholic tradition based on the power of its iconography in the media and on its political significance, prefiguring the present condition of Italian democracy as an arena in which the structure of authority as charismatic personality persists. In his most recent film, entitled *Vincere* (2009), Marco Bellocchio retraces the stages in the construction of Mussolini's personality cult during the years of Fascism, and many of the scenes are set in the cinema, the place of magical projection where the hyper-sexualized icon of the Duce was produced and distributed. In Bellocchio's movie, the parallel between Fascist Italy and Berlusconi's Italy is obvious. However if we look at the way in which Mussolini's singular mythology was shaped through images, the pervasiveness of Berlusconi's control of the media and the iconic and charismatic nature of the power of both men, then it is perhaps the opening scene of *La dolce*

vita (1960) by Federico Fellini—the one in which a statue of Christ hanging beneath a helicopter flies over Rome—that offers the most vivid image of Italy as a country always ready to believe in miracles, whether divine, political or economic. A country where power “be-falls” it like a prodigious apparition, and where religious affiliation assures legitimacy.

In Milan, a few years before *La dolce vita*, Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni had imparted a unique incisiveness to Italian modernity. Yet while Fontana's abstractionism seems to have been the final version of a form of “Eucharistic” identity of spirit and matter, bringing to a close the trajectory initiated by baroque art—i.e. the inscription of communication with the nonphysical dimension in materials and volumes—the skepticism and irony of Manzoni, who in 1961 canned his own feces, seem to revive, instead, a passion for

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relics, of whatever kind, that had never completely subsided.

Within a few years, however, the political and cultural climate had changed: the thinking of the left acquired not just intellectual but also political legitimacy, and religion became the cultural theme of a public debate increasingly marked by a polarization of positions. From this moment on, the images no longer possessed an "essential" nature: the symbolism that they embodied was no longer substantial but ideological, citational, deconstructive.

In 1977, Michelangelo Pistoletto set up a mirror in the place of the altarpiece of the church of San Sicario, initiating the series of works that would culminate in his solo exhibition the following year at Giorgio Persano's gallery in Turin, entitled "Art Takes on Religion." The emancipatory premises of this gesture are clear, just as the words used by the artist to describe them are programmatic:

At the beginning of our century, the avant-garde made art again autonomous. Art ceased to be a symbol of religious and political power, but it is still far from the people, because its autonomy regards only its aesthetic side. Now art must find an autonomy for its factual side as well. [...] "Art takes on religion" means that art actively takes possession of those structures, such as religion, which rule thought; not with a view to replacing them itself, but in order to substitute them with a different interpretative system, a system intended to enhance people's capacity to exert the functions of their own thought.²

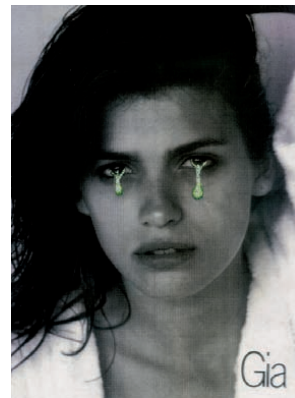
These were the years in which the debate over democracy and emancipation passed through a personal assumption of the principle of control, the years when feminists laid claim to the body as a space of self-determination, the years of Foucault's biopolitics. A subjective assertion that, in a certain sense, prepared the ground for the narcissism of the 1980s, even if the political motivations were radically different. It is no coincidence, in fact, that the endless interpretations that Luigi Ontani embarked on at the beginning of the 1970s meditated upon the desire of that period for a subjectivity capable of colonizing the domains of history and authority, prefiguring the current dimension of false narcissism, along the lines of the TV reality show, proposed by Francesco Vezzoli.

But if Ontani's homosexual subject, who dons the guise of St. Sebastian or St. Luke, is one that upsets official iconography—at least as much as the bodies of *Salo*, or the *120 Days of Sodom* by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975) insinuate into the dimen-

sion of pleasure not just the root of individual emancipation but also, and above all, the root of totalitarian rule—Vezzoli's homosexual subject appears to be an organic part of today's television-obsessed and Berlusconi Italy and its climate that recalls the late Roman empire. Vezzoli's subject seems to have internalized the true nature of homophobia, which is certainly not exclusive to Italy or Catholicism—just as Vezzoli's work is Italian *and* international—and who takes the homosexual back to where we had left him in Fascist times. His relationship with celebrity is not, in fact, Warholian—there is neither indifference, nor a politics of equivalence, where everything exists on the same plane—but Viscontian and decadent. He does what a homosexual is allowed to do for the purposes of entertainment: amuse the heterosexual audience and reassure the gay one about its "natural" continuity with the world of glamour.

THE HOLY HYPERREAL

The baroque was the last period—and the most radical, at least from this point of view—in which Catholicism was able to give expression to an exuberant and inventive visual identity. By the beginning of the 18th century, in fact, Catholicism was no longer capable of stimulating the imagination, and had become a matter of common sense, of moderation, no longer a question of ethics but of banal, everyday morality, a pious religion without drama or contrasting shades, as if after Caravaggio and Bernini it had lost its sex appeal. The mix of extreme realism and obviously theatrical staging used by the baroque, its eye for spectacle and temporary decorations, the cosmetic treatment of corpses and even the concept of representation that the baroque developed, as a miracle which brings everything to the surface, are elements that return in almost cyclical fashion in Italian art. One can think of a few punctual—but all extremely iconic—examples like *Lo spirato* (The Expired) by Luciano Fabro, realized between 1968 and 1973, the *Laughing Madonna* by Gino De Dominicis of 1973 and the numerous sculptures by Maurizio Cattelan (1960) in wax, latex and fabrics that, over the years, have involved figures like Hitler, John Paul II and John F. Kennedy. Fabro's sculpture is inspired by the hyperrealistic marble drapery of the *Veiled Christ* (1753) carved by Giuseppe Sammartino (1720–93), while De Dominicis's *Madonna* in reality only exists as a photograph of a destroyed sculpture, and works like Cattelan's *La nona ora* (The Ninth Hour, 1999), *Him* (2001) and *Now* (2004) are the "materialization" of images that are familiar to us as photographs. All these examples seem



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to respond to an economy of apparition and the miraculous, where the terms of the "prodigious" equation between the impossibility of an event and its actual occurrence are replaced by the transitory relationship that each of them establishes between photographic image, sculpture, illusion and hyperrealism.

But if Cattelan's *The Ninth Hour* appears to combine baroque sculpture with the global marketing of symbols of Catholicism, such as Madonna's *Like a Prayer* (where it was the statue of a saint that came to life), in recent years it is probably the work of Pietro Roccasalva that expresses in a more emblematic way—once again, through recourse to the concept of icon—a form of dissimulation and ambiguity that is cultural, political and above all contemporary. A multitude of iconographies, pre-Christina as well as contemporary, are packed into Roccasalva's work: many of his images seem almost archaic in the way they make reference to Byzantine painting. His *tableaux vivants* appear to reformulate certain medieval mystery plays, while his complex installations are reminiscent of baroque temporary decorations for festivals. Once again, it seems to be no accident that one of the most innovative and unusual members of the latest generation of Italian artists speaks of the present in such an oblique manner, drawing on the instruments of rhetoric, narration and the ideological revamping of the past to talk about the Italy of today, about its ethical schizophrenia, its euphoric relationship with television, its political abnormality and the wait for yet another miracle.

AUTHOR

Alessandro Rabottini is an art critic and Chief Curator at GAmEC – Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Bergamo, Italy, where he has curated solo exhibitions of work by Sterling Ruby, Tris Vonna-Michell, Victor Man, Marcello Maloberti and Mungo Thomson, among others. As an art critic, he is a frequent contributor to international magazines such as *Frieze*, *Modern Painters*, *Flash Art* and *MAP*.

FOOTNOTES

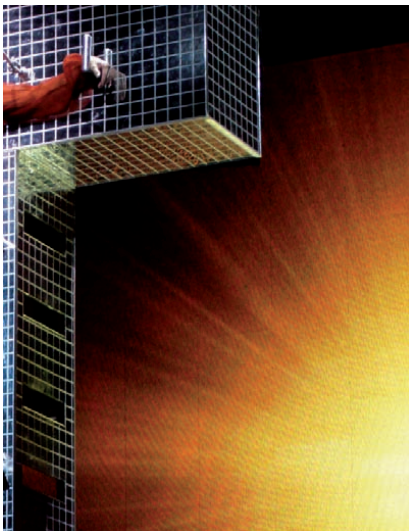
1. Not counting the innumerable examples of those who, mindful of the legacy of Andy Warhol as taken up by Jeff Koons, have drawn attention to the close relationship between consumerism and ecstasy.

2. Michelangelo Pistoletto, "Art Takes on Religion," in *Divisione e moltiplicazione dello specchio – L'arte assume la religione*, ex. cat (Turin: Gallery Giorgio Persano, 1978).

Previous page, from top:
Francesco Vezzoli
Hommage to Francesco Scavullo:
Gia (Before & After), detail, 2002
Courtesy: Giò Marconi, Milan

Maurizio Cattelan *Untitled*,
2008 Photo: Zeno Zotti

Madonna during
the "Confession Tour", 2006



Luigi Ontani
San Sebastiano JaiPurano
Courtesy: Galleria Lorcan O'Neill, Rome