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The Gospel
A C C O R D I N G T O
EVERGON

Porn, Cynicism and the Aesthetics of Christianity

PASSION

One can readily surmise from the title: this will not be a text about (just) sex. Indeed, in a time in which the Supreme Pontiff's political leanings vis-à-vis homosexuality and gender issues (not to mention aesthetics) are increasingly alarming in their self-proclaimed rectitude, I believe that Evergon's highly sexualized photographic works can afford those in custody of the Holy See (men who are unfortunately often estranged from contemporary art) something wholesome in their insight into the nature of Christianity as such. In a sense, the images you see printed in these pages — the rectal ones included — are resplendently Christian.

Undoubtedly, one of the most cherished visual tropes employed in the modern period to denote the singularity of an artist's suffering — his passion — is the figure of the artist as Christ.¹ Artists as varied in intention and aesthetic allegiance as Dürer, Malevich, Samuel Palmer, Gilbert & George, Robert Mapplethorpe and Andy Warhol have clothed — oftentimes with an ironic inflection — their artistic subjectivities with the poses, sartorial conventions and iconographic traditions associated with canonical events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth as related in the Gospels or in works selected from the history of art. Here, the Christ is akin to other performative figures, such as the acrobat, the clown, the dandy and the bohemian labourer, whom artists have not ceased to refashion as a means of sustaining a critical meditation on the status of artistic identity itself.²





RIGHT: *Self in Yellow*, from the series: *Chez Moi*, 55 inches x 44 inches, 2005

FOLLOWING: [p.12] *Homage to Raphael: Jupiter Kissing Cupid or The Harmony Lesson*, from the series: *XXX/L*, 60 inches x 44 inches, Inkjet, 2006
[p.13] *Homage to Geromes and Pygmalion or Cello-izing*, from the series: *XXX/L*, 60 inches x 44 inches, Inkjet, 2006

Unabashedly, the originality of Evergon's series "XXX/L" (whose title refers to the fact of male tumescence as much as it does to the artist's body) perhaps lies in the manner in which the artist addresses the pornographic underpinnings of the orthodox Christian experience by revisiting scenes of the Passion that are mediated by illicit images of men having sex with men culled from the Internet. Elements of "XXX/L" (begun in 2005) evoke, simultaneously, the Pietà, the Deposition, the Resurrection and well-ploughed mature entertainment sites of such ilk as Billy Perv's Great Gallery of Twinks.

Notwithstanding the series' status as a meta-discourse on Christianity, as per above, I posit that Evergon's recent production ought to be read as a *form of religion* (or at least a performance of spiritual proportions), if only because it broaches the question of the contemporaneity of the *Christian nature of Western art* by insisting on the photographic image — be it fleshy and lewd to some — as a species of incarnation, in the theological sense of the term. To understand this, one ought to read "XXX/L" in light of some pictorial strategies previously deployed in the on-going series "Chez-moi/Domestic Content" (begun in 2004).

Let me proceed with the following circumlocutory interrogation in order to cut straight into the heart of the matter: is art historian James Elkins correct when he posits, ". . . art that sets out to convey spiritual values goes against the grain of the history of modernism"? According to Elkins (and to most contemporary art-historical scholarship undertaken within academic circles), the history of modern art, at least from early-nineteenth-century romanticism onwards, is the history of the progressive secularization of culture and of the radical, if not absolute and irrevocable, segregation of art and spirituality

— two spheres of human agency that were inextricably bound up in variegated ways since Antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages." In fact, the historical discontinuity that engendered modern culture now fosters what is considered by some to be the central condition of postmodern art: it thrives beyond the sphere of the spiritual. As Elkins judiciously points out, most academic endeavours to interpret and value fine art rely on objective criteria (such as formal properties, notions of historical innovation or aesthetic contribution, etc.) that foreclose the very possibility of the reception of aesthetic products based on their spiritual content, if only because such content cannot be transmitted and debated through shared channels of communication. Here, in keeping with the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein, it follows that aesthetic sense is ineffable. Thereby, the fact remains beyond dispute: *merely subjective* experience cannot form the basis of communicative efforts whose very feasibility is, in every case, conditioned by faith — be it ever so slight — in the possibility of consensus. Ultimately, concepts, not feelings, form the conditions of possibility of reasoned discourse on the arts.

Before addressing the nub of the issue as I construe it, I will make one preliminary assumption which, I presume, will not seem contentious. Namely, Evergon's works partake in the history of modernism to which Elkins refers, above. As well, the following is a corollary to such a claim: by virtue of their photographic nature, Evergon's works adhere to the shattering of the aura, which notion Walter Benjamin famously characterizes in his "Work of Art" essay as the property of artworks that have their basis in cult.* (Or, to put it in terms more familiar to Elkins's art-historical parlance, one could assert that Evergon's artistic productions contribute





to the secularization of aesthetics in which contemporary art indelibly assists.)

This being noted, I would like to reflect for a moment on the nature and scope of Evergon's recent photographs, which appear to delve into the arena of spiritual matters in more ways than one. My thoughts are guided by a fundamental intuition according to which I impute a spiritual content to these images, notwithstanding the fact that they remain thoroughly secular, cultural products. In this way, Evergon's two recent, interrelated photographic series, "Chez-moi/Domestic Content" and "XXX/L," both contest the usual antagonism that is understood to underpin contemporary art vis-à-vis issues of spirituality. It is my contention that these series address key issues relative to the spiritual content of art, thereby rendering emphatically more complex customary accounts of modernism and post-modernism as ostensibly secular phenomena. Put otherwise, Evergon's *simultaneously* spiritual and secular photographs discredit the theory according to which "spiritual art goes against the grain of modernism." Key to understanding what we could term, provisionally, Evergon's "deconstruction of Christianity" are the issues of pornography, Cynicism and the orthodox Christian theology underpinning the incarnation."

CYNICISM AS A MODALITY OF PRESENCE

Many have asked: is Evergon's art cynical? Certainly not, maintains the artist in a recent conversation in which he considers such an interpretation to be founded on a gross misunderstanding. But since one must look beyond the author's authorized discourse in order to seek public answers to public

questions, one can legitimately claim that there is a form of cynicism that transpires in most, if not all, of Evergon's corpus. Such a position has been promoted by the curators of the recent contemporary art biennial in Quebec City, whose theme in 2005 was formulated as an interrogation addressed at contemporary art at large: "Cynismes?" In fact, the crux of the matter lies in how one defines cynicism. It would obviously be contentious to decry Evergon's works for promoting a cold and calculated form of cynicism in which a spirit of absolute relativism fosters a politics of nihilism. This would work against the very foundations of the artist's practice, which, for over thirty years, has harboured multiple identities in order to transgress heterosexist norms and to create a space for discourse on/with the other, be he or she gay or not. On the basis of this ethics, which has manifested itself as an affirmative political activism (in the guise of aesthetic products that image diverse desiring bodies or personal fantasies made public), one must, in the final analysis, foreclose such a definition of "cynicism" — which is contrary to the word's semantic lineage in any case. It would seem that our contemporary meaning and concept of cynicism are at odds with what was once denoted by this term.

Evergon's visual arts practice has always worked against the grain of censorship; it has frontally embraced the sensible and sensual aspects of reality. It is, for this very reason, cynical. Classical antiquity abounded in jugglers of the rational kind who preferred to preserve the self-containment of discursive thought at the price of sacrificing the singularities of matter. The system of their logic brought them to proclaim such ill-conceived truths as: "There is no such thing as movement; movement is an illusion." This closed-circuit rationalism was brought to

the attention of Antisthenes, the spiritual father of the Cynics, who did not even bother to formulate a rational refutation to such a claim. In fact, "he got up on his feet and began to walk, convinced that a *factual demonstration was much more compelling than any other form of verbal repartee.*"⁴⁰

It is uncanny how strong are the resemblances between the original Cynicism of Greek Antiquity (which is associated with the likes of Antisthenes, Diogenes and their innumerable disciples) and Evergon's artistic project, for the latter has always sought out modes of sexual transgression, embraced heuristic methods, made use of self-irony, averted straitlaced social codes and, most recently with the series "Chez-moi/Domestic Content," brought to the fore the sheer demonstrability of "that which is."

There are several fragments relative to the life of Diogenes that could exemplify this rapprochement. Two are most compelling: 1) the story of the toilets; and 2) the account of urine. Here they are: "Someone reproached Diogenes for frequenting infamous places; to which the philosopher answered: 'The sun may well enter into the toilets without getting soiled!'"⁴¹ In the same vein, Diogenes was noted for claiming: "There was also a time when I could not control my urge to piss. But not anymore!"⁴² One should recall here that Evergon has toured the toilets of the world while seeking to document their invisible poetry, as he has also performed the famous *Manneken Pis* statuette found in Brussels. By virtue of his shameless corporeal irony, one can arguably assert that the figure of the artist from which most of Evergon's practice draws its referential parameters is more akin to the "cynical philosopher" than to the "romantic" or the "bohemian" figures that have informed much modernist and postmodernist art practice. Moreover, beyond such

playful resemblances that stem mainly from the sensationalistic strains of ancient Cynicism (that is, from the movement's critical function, which manifests itself in the public inversion of private codes), Evergon spearheads a rehabilitation of the spirit of the teachings of Antisthenes in so far as the artist embraces the ineffable.

The series "Chez-moi/Domestic Content," which is being "presented" here for the first time in a periodical, employs an aesthetics of sheer demonstration — that is, a *literalist* mode of imaging — that perverts the fixities of concepts that are designed to codify the real. The series itself is the culmination of a long process of collecting by means of which Evergon has amassed hundreds of exotic objects, erotic trinkets and theatrical props that were sometimes destined to be used in his large, baroque mises-en-scène done on Polaroid. The fact that these objects, whose original function was ancillary, are now the fully-fledged protagonists of finished works signals a shift in the artist's practice: we are now in the presence of a simplified aesthetics that seeks both to frame and objectify the artist's daily life, and to give tangible form to the fictional performance whose name is Evergon (another pure "demonstration"). This new approach to photography (as a form of indexical pointing) is a *plastic manifestation of Evergon's self-fashioning practice*, which has been ongoing in his life as art. With this innovation, both the visual works and the lived performance fuse in a coherent aesthetic programme which, far from being solipsistic (because based on the artist's personal life) turns out to emblemize the politics of otherness that has guided the artist's artistic dialogue since its inception. Moreover, these sheer presentations of objects, although based on photography's power to disclose meaning without writing, are not to be read

as an idealized language that would be located beyond grammar and words. Much to the contrary, these works make use of formal tensions and significant visual relations that give rise to figurative wit, reflections on vanity, on the passing of time, and on nostalgia. Much in the spirit of Evergon's humour that can only be experienced in person, these works convey meaning by *embodying a language of objects*. Therein lies Evergon's cynicism, which, while rejecting all forms of strict Platonic conceptualism, professes its faith in the sensual life of things and in the complexity of material signification. This cynicism ultimately leads, in "XXX/L," to an original and insightful understanding of the aesthetics that underpin orthodox Christianity.

**" . . . HERE I STAND.
I'M YOUR MAN "**

From a historical point of view, there are at least two principal strategies adopted by artists who address issues of spirituality: the fragment and the trace. The former comprises the kernel of the romantic theory of art as an expressive fragment whose very lack alludes to the "absolute" or the sublime that lies beyond representation. The latter has recently been espoused, albeit in a more or less secular manner, by Roland Barthes in his theory of photography, according to which the photograph *qua* trace reveals the presence of that-which-has-been (i.e., his mother; see *Camera Lucida*, 1981). It can be argued that Evergon's work does neither, even if he incessantly photographs his octogenarian mother. *Evergon's is a cynical spirituality*. For if it has become clear that Christianity has always depended on the embodiment of scripture in visual form, in some very serious sense, the "logos made flesh" is the history of art. As philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy

has shown in some of his recent work on the deconstruction of Christianity, faith in Christ is somehow inextricably bound up with faith in the power of images; images as supplementary to Christian doctrine are in effect the tangible manifestation of its central tenets. Thus, Christianity itself would be unthinkable without the history of Western art whose fruition it paralleled. In the final analysis, the very logic of that religion *is structurally analogous* to the internal logic of images. Evergon's most "religious" work then, "XXX/L," embraces this issue, in as much as the pathos of suffering is conveyed by means of a practice of photographic "facing."

What I have been describing as the sheer presentations of "Chez-moi/Domestic Content," — the series' rehabilitation in aesthetic form of the ethics of Cynicism — is the springboard for a reflection on passion, aging, sexuality and physical beauty that prevails in the "XXX/L" series. In this latter project, both form and content seek to convey a meaningful experience that nonetheless lies beyond words. In this way, the middle-grey background in both series, which allegorizes the photographic medium as such, is in the service of an aesthetics that seeks to proffer pathos more than its "representation."

By means of its explicit references to Christian iconography, "XXX/L" does not merely exhaust its embrace of spirituality. In fact, these works are constructed in such a way as to overstep such a superficial reading (which remains within the confines of a theory of citation). Much in the spirit of the thought of Nancy, Evergon's series directly problematizes the issue of "presence"; these photographs are less about an aesthetics of appropriation than about the act of imaging itself understood as a mode of incarnation that "touches" the viewer in its singular, material way. Here, two subjects — a beholder



confronted by the flesh of pathos made present — encounter one another (one could almost say that they come to *visit* each other) in a site that allegorizes intersubjectivity.

Nancy's analysis is as eloquent as it is compelling. I quote a passage at length:

Christian painting is not a representation of Christian subject matter. Much to the contrary, it is Christianity, or something of Christianity, made into painting or as painting, becoming painting: pregnant with painting, giving birth to it while announcing itself within it, as [painting]— and, moreover, as what is at stake in the history, that still persists today, of what we call "art."¹

Ultimately, as Nancy is keen to point out just a few pages later, images in the Western tradition do not cease to exclaim: "this is my body." Moreover, as they proffer this existence as flesh, they also concede that beyond their incarnation there lies no presence at all (be it godly or motherly); they simply point to the very secular site of our own finite existence (of which the joys and sorrows of being in the world are the decisive parameters).

Let it be noted that deconstruction in this case discloses the logic of exclusion that segregates the spiritual from the aesthetic experience of modernism in general. It shows to what extent modernism's (and, by extension, postmodernism's) refusal of spiritual categories of interpretation consists in an eloquent disavowal of that upon which most, if not all, aesthetic discourse originally rests: the pathos of embodiment that is incumbent upon all objects which our culture deems successful "works of art."² As Nancy contends, if Christianity has always tacitly depended on the image, the

reverse is also true: the history of art — its oftentimes sexually secular modernist and postmodernist variants included — is unthinkable without the theology and culture of the Christian religion. Here, "the spiritual" is a constitutional element of contemporary art practice — sexed as it may be — as Evergon's work emphatically illustrates.

NOTES:

i. Please note that I am intentionally using the male gender when describing the modern artist's self-fashioning strategies, in keeping with recent feminist scholarship, which considers artistic subjectivity to consist in a historically gendered activity. See Amelia Jones, "Clothes Make the Man": The Male Artist as a Performative Function,' *The Oxford Art Journal* 18 no. 2 (1995): 18-32.

ii. See Jean Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* (Geneva: Les Éditions d'Art Albert Skira S. A. / Paris: Flammarion, 1970).

iii. James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 20.

iv. Some historians, such as Elkins, trace the inception of this process of secularization to Renaissance forms of humanism.

v. See Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217-51.

vi. Deconstructive practice usually thrives in maintaining the tension between the elements of a binary opposition as one attempts to exclude the other. Thus, a deconstruction of Christianity does not consist in the refutation of the spiritual, but in the analysis of its presence in forms of culture that claim to have done away with it irrevocably.

vii. Léonce Paquet, *Les cyniques grecs: Fragments et témoignages* (Ottawa: Éditions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1975), 56. My emphasis.

viii. *Ibid.*, 86.

ix. *Ibid.*, 81.

x. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Visitation (de la peinture chrétienne)* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), 44.

xi. I am using the verb "incumbent" — which in normal circumstances is reserved solely for the agency of persons — to denote the particular agency of works of art, which act as persons in Western culture.