

Iconoclash: A Post-Secular Reading of Naro Pinosa's Instagram Collages

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Abstract**“Iconoclash: A Post-Secular Reading of Naro Pinosa's Instagram Collages”**

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This criticism thesis responds to the absence of post-secular art critical discourse that would set the foundation for a critical discussion about the proliferation of imagery that desecrates Christian symbols on image-based social media by undertaking a case study of the Instagram celebrity artist Naro Pinosa, who uses the medium of digital photo-montaging to produce iconographically-defaced collages that reference Christian imagery. A close reading of eight key images by Pinosa offers a post-secular interpretation of these works. The author draws on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to take up the position of a decoder whose beliefs and values place them in a critical relation to the dominant code of Instagram as a secular social media platform. Through this positionality, the author argues for a reading against the grain of what appears to be anti-Christian imagery.

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Introduction

Baudelaire believed that “to justify its existence, criticism should be partial, passionate, and political—that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view, but a point of view that opens up the widest horizons.” As far as I’m concerned, that well articulates the goal of theologically oriented criticism: to engage artworks from particular, even idiosyncratic, sensitivities and points of view for the sake of opening up wider and thicker interpretations of the work

—Johnathan Anderson, *On (In)Visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism*, 2011

In the opening of his groundbreaking talk on *(In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism* (2012), art critic Johnathan Anderson notes that while most secular theorists advocate for the exclusion of Christian meaning from contemporary art, a number of theologically-informed art theorists argue for an equally ostracized position: that contemporary art should stay away from the matters of religion, given the inherent antagonism that is ever present between secular and the religious world views.¹ Commenting on the pre-2000 state of affairs between these two positionalities, Anderson contends:

The textbooks of twentieth-century art history, theory, and criticism, as well as major museum collections, readily testify to the fact that the institutional art world regards Christianity as having made negligible contributions to the fine arts during the twentieth century, and unfortunately that’s a judgment I largely agree with. But the reverse is also true: for the most part, the church has little regard for

¹ Johnathan Anderson, “(In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism.” Filmed [2012]. YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIVAV7bC498>

the canon of twentieth-century art as having made contributions to the development and deepening of Christian thought. For most of the last century, the worlds of contemporary art theory and Christian theology developed into distinct cultural configurations that have been remarkably disengaged from each other, often to the point of mutual unintelligibility.²

While the rift existing between the opposing secular-religious camps is still profound, the early 2000s witnessed an emergence of a new body of post-secular scholarship that has, for the first time since 1920s, systematically addressed the lack of both an intellectually robust and theologically-informed art criticism.³ As art theory professor and art critic Mathew Milliner writes in his *Post-Secular Academia: A Present Reality* (2012), “new superstructures of post-secular [art] discourse are being swiftly erected”⁴ by a number of academics who, upon being trained in graduate, predominantly postmodern methodology courses, now choose to adopt religion as another critical dimension, complementary to the existing, mostly secular reading of contemporary art. In his predictions of the future integration of the post-secular turn into the discipline of art history, Milliner envisions that post-secularism “[will not be] the only future of art history, but is [going to be] one of them— and to foreclose this possibility would be to

² Ibid.

³ 1920’s France witnessed the emergence of the postwar French Catholic revivalism—*Renouveau Catholique*. In reconfiguring traditional Catholic thought and practice as “the ultimate expression of postwar modernity,” the French Catholic intellectual elite succeeded in establishing their view of the universe and its fundamental relatedness to God at the centre of intellectual, artistic, and literary discourse. See Stephen Schloesser *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919-1933*. (University of Toronto Press, 2005), 14; Jim Watkins, “Post-Secularism, Theology and the Arts.” *Transpositions*, accessed March 30, 2018, <http://www.transpositions.co.uk/post-secularism-theology-and-the-arts/>

⁴ Matthew J. Milliner, “Post-Secular Academia: A Present Reality,” Miliner (blog), July 5, 2012, accessed April 3, 2018, <http://www.millinerd.com/2012/04/post-secular-academia-present-reality.html>

artificially limit the interpretive dilation that critical theory and the visual culture debate of the nineties allowed.”⁵

According to post-secularism scholar Silke Horstkotte, the term "post-secular" is often used to indicate a renewed interest in religion as a social, political and cultural force, acknowledging the need for political and social engagement with religious, as well as non-faith based groups and voices. Horstkotte contends that “post-secular” can refer to the return of religion not on a social scale, but as a discursive aspect of modernity; or it can indicate a deconstructive critique of the secular, as well as of its opposite, religion, or an ambivalent discourse about secularity and religion in literature and the arts. Horstkotte argues that post-secular theory tests the boundaries between religious and non-religious explanatory frames by oscillating between them, without

⁵ Milliner quoted in Watkins, “Post-Secularism, Theology and the Arts.” The 1990’s incidents, which appeared to confirm the antagonistic relationship of contemporary art and religion came to be known as the “Culture war.” Speaking about the Culture War, a question of public funding and freedom of speech, versus censorship, cultural theorist Camille Paglia writes that though publicly funded artworks offensive to organized religion constituted only a fraction of the projects annually supported by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), conservatives, often articulated by the religious organizations like the Christian Coalition, the Moral Majority, and The American Family Association demanded for a the total abolition of the NEA. According to Paglia, conservatives were blaming the NEA’s administrators and peer-review panels for left-wing bias and anti-Americanism, often arguing against the double standard operative in the art world in regard to artists’ manipulation of religious iconography, e.g. desecration of Catholic symbols, was tolerated in American museums in ways that would never be permitted if the themes were Jewish or Muslim. Due to the conservatives lack of interest in the matters of contemporary art (which I discuss in the concluding chapter of my thesis), the Culture Wars have resulted in the shift towards decreased censorship, and the consequent proliferation of art that risks offending the sensibilities of fundamentalist Christians, and of the non-Christians who would, nevertheless, find such art offensive. Re-introduction of a more balanced, theologically-informed post-secular approach would re-open the dialogue between the opposing religious/secular camps, as well as offer a platform for recognition of a plurality of worldviews and religious beliefs; Camille Paglia, “Religion and the Arts in America,” *Arion* 50, no. 1. (Spring/Summer, 2007). 1-20. <https://www.bu.edu/arion/files/2010/03/Paglia-Religion-and-the-Art.pdf>

coming firmly down on either side, claiming that “if an explanation is given at the end, it almost invariably lies outside the confines of dogmatics and in the creative realm of bricolage religion.”⁶ This development of contemporary post-secular discourse has resulted in what Milliner describes as an “unmappable terrain” of theologically-infused criticism of contemporary art.⁷ Within this unmappable terrain, post-secular theorists have developed theology-inspired methodological tools for reading predominantly prestigious, often critically-acclaimed contemporary art that balances between celebrating and desacralizing Christian thematics.⁸ Yet surprisingly, very little attention has been paid to iconographically-defaced Christian digital imagery that proliferates the Internet in general, and image sharing social media platforms, like Instagram, in particular. For example, on a daily basis, close to a million followers worldwide are exposed to the works of

⁶ See Silke Horstkotte “Postsecular According to Whom? A Conference Recapitulation, Part 1,” *Beyond the Secular* (blog), August 25, 2017, accessed April 3, 2018, <https://besecblog.wordpress.com/2017/08/25/postsecular-according-to-whom-a-conference-recapitulation-part-1/> The most notable post-secular art theories are Robert Wuthnow’s, William Dyrness’ and W. David O. Taylor theories on the state of the religious arts in North America, Siedell’s ‘altar to the unknown god,’ Heartney’s theory of ‘incarnational consciousness’ and Jonathan Anderson’s theory on Christian impulses in modern art. For key texts see Wuthnow’s *All in Sync: How Music and Art are Revitalizing American Religion* (2003); Dyrness’ *Senses of the Soul: Art and the Visual in Christian Worship* (2008), Taylor’s *Contemporary Art and the Church: A Conversation Between Two Worlds* (2017), as well as Anderson and Dyrness’ *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses of Modernism* (2016).

⁷ See Matthew J. Milliner, “The Unmappable Terrain of Christianity and Art,” *Millnerd* (blog), July 27, 2011, accessed March 30, 2018, <http://www.millnerd.com/2011/07/unmappable-terrain-of-christianity-and.html>; William A. Dyrness, *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life*. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011). Milliner contends that decades of cultural investment by Christian scholars have paid off, “making the output of Christian perspectives on art criticism, production and history almost unmappable.” He continues to argue that Catholic art theorists are enjoying the revival of Catholic philosophical schools of Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson, backed by the historical studies of Francesca Aran Murphy and Stephen Schloesser, and the philosophical work of John G. Trapani Jr. The Orthodox art theorists are seeing the emergence of Pavel Florensky, the 20th century art historian, theologian, priest, scientist and martyr. Protestants art scholars are also making a strong showing in the traditionally neglected aesthetic arena. William Dyrness’ historical survey of Reformed visual culture, as well as his latest work, *Poetic Theology*, both introduce the Protestant art theory into the 21st century. .

⁸ For example, Eleanor Heartney’s in-depth analysis of Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987), and Chris Ofili’s *Virgin Mary* (1996). See Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 115-18 and 142-43 in Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (2004)

Naro Pinosa and four analogous popular Instagram artists — @sainthoax, @shusaku1977, @radioshead, and @phencycldine — who create thematically and stylistically similar collaged imagery that iconographically defaces Christian symbols. Given the scale of distribution of these collages, a post-secular analysis of this popular, yet under theorized, phenomenon of digital manipulation of Christian iconography is both timely and relevant.⁹

This criticism thesis responds to the absence of post-secular art critical discourse that would set the foundation for a critical discussion about the proliferation of imagery that desecrates Christian symbols on image-based social media by undertaking a case study of the Instagram celebrity artist Naro Pinosa, who uses the medium of digital photo-montaging to produce iconographically-defaced collages that reference Christian imagery. In this case study, I undertake a close reading of eight key images by Pinosa to offer a post-secular interpretation of these works. In my approach to a post-secular interpretation of Pinosa's collages, I draw on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to take up the position of a decoder whose beliefs and values place them in a critical relation to the dominant code of Instagram as a secular social

⁹ I define iconographically defaced images as digitally manipulated imagery that is styled in a way that strips it of its original meaning. I argue that the act of defacement allows a conclusion about the original artist, the artist who defaces original imagery, original meaning, as well as new, often unexpected meaning. To understand the phenomenon of iconographic defacing see Dawn Perlmutter's *The Semiotics of Honor Killing and Ritual Murder*. Perlmutter argues that symbolically, any kind of defacement and/or mutilation are the archetypal signs of dishonour. From a strategic perspective, a defaced/mutilated victim is forever stigmatized, "a living personification of shame, and a political advertisement of who is in power." Perlmutter posits that unlike physical mutilation and defacement, iconographic defacement is not executed on human flesh. The phenomenon of 'sympathetic magic' impels the projection of power onto inanimate objects such as paintings, photographs, statues, effigies and images of sacred. Relying on the idea of sympathetic magic, it is fair to argue that by means of digital photo-montage, digital iconographic defacement of a Christian symbolic image, presents contemporary artists with a new option to "break the power of the image" in a highly stylized and expressive way. See Dawn Perlmutter, "The Semiotics of Honor Killing & Ritual Murder" *Anthropoetics*. Accessed April 3, 2018. <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1701/1701Perlmutter/>

media platform.¹⁰ Through this positionality, I argue for a reading against the grain of what appears to be anti-Christian imagery, not in order to exonerate Pinosa's work for the viewers who may take offence at the artist's decision to deface traditional Christian iconographic symbols, but in order to open up a discursive site of heterodox interpretation, which, I argue, is an essential strategy towards recognizing a plurality of world views and religious beliefs. While no analysis would be sufficient to totally exonerate this artist's provocative digital art from the potentially offensive and traumatic impact that it might have on tradition-oriented Christian fundamentalist viewers, cultural Christians who adhere to Christian values, as well as non-Christians who appreciate Christian art, I argue that a post-secular critical framework can provide the analytical tools to position Pinosa's Instagram oeuvre within historical, theological, and pop culture contexts, and thus open the possibility of an informed, context-mediated discourse about his provocative, yet symbolically rich art.

Through the post-secular framework I bring to my case study, I also address the increasing importance of Instagram as a curatorial platform. With the rise of Instagram, social media-savvy artists with striking and provocative visual imagery began to make names for themselves by curating their Instagram profiles as digital exhibitions. While such a trend quickly became an accessible tool for the artists like Pinosa to democratize the typically elitist contemporary art world, it has its limitations. For instance, due to the total absence of curatorial and interpretative support, unmediated Instagram oeuvres that defile religious symbols are likely to offend, and, in extreme cases, irreversibly traumatize devout viewers. The majority of celebrity-level Instagram

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding," in *Culture & Media Language*, edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis, 128-137, (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-38.

artists' accounts are curatorially unmediated. Predictably, the artists behind these digital productions are prone to disregarding moral considerations, as well as disrespecting viewers' ethical and religious boundaries.¹¹ As with Instagram's, and other image-based social media platforms' advanced push media content presentation algorithms, in addition to the voluntary followers, countless viewers are now constantly exposed to the aforementioned desecrating collages without their prior consent.¹² In this respect, there is an ethical as well as cultural and social need for a post-secular analysis of the trend of desecrating Christian imagery online.

The degree to which the desecration of Christian imagery can affect the viewer is discussed by art theorist Anna Marazuela Kim. She contends in *Re-enchantment and Iconoclasm in An Age of Images* (2015) that the unprecedented proliferation of images on social media has the potential to affect the viewers with great force. Kim posits that in an age of sophisticated technological and "secular" advance, much like in the old wars of religion, the new ideological wars are increasingly fought "on the ground of the image."¹³ Therefore, Kim argues, "as the archaic power of images is transformed by new technologies that hold us in thrall, images have become a

¹¹ "Something being a work of art doesn't excuse you from moral considerations..." Arthur Danto quoted in Phoebe Hoban, "How Far is Too Far?" *Art News*. July 1, 2008. Accessed March 30, 2018. <http://www.artnews.com/2008/07/01/how-far-is-too-far/>

¹² Push media refers to a media distribution model wherein pieces of content are delivered to the users with little interaction from them. Push media delivers content to end users whether they have asked for it or not. According to Instagram's official statements, their algorithm-driven feed is ordered to show the moments Instagram believes the viewer will care about the most: "ensure the best, most meaningful content would "be waiting for you when you wake up." The Guardian, "New algorithm-driven Instagram feed rolled out to the dismay of users," *Guardian News and Media Limited*, last modified June 7, 2016, accessed March 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jun/07/new-algorithm-driven-instagram-feed-rolled-out-to-the-dismay-of-users>

¹³ Anna Marazuela Kim, "Re-enchantment and Iconoclasm in an Age of Images," *The Hedgehog Review* (Fall 2015): 48-49. Accessed March 30, 2018. http://www.academia.edu/download/39649970/KIM_Re-Enchantment_and_Iconoclasm_in_Age_of_Images_THR_Nov2015.pdf.

primary weapon of terror, a form of visual terrorism.”¹⁴ By confusing boundaries, imposing grotesque carnality, and aiming at triggering an unsettling response in viewers with opposing beliefs and values, countless visually terrorizing, iconographically-defaced Instagram collages that contest the relationship between the image and the sacred intrude unbidden upon the visual field of smartphone screens of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of users. Thus, the scope of this push media intrusion that exposes both secular and religious viewers to the digitally-manipulated collages that desecrate Christian iconographic symbols is an important field of study for post-secular theory.

In relation to this field of study, the first decade of the 2000s witnessed numerous post-secular art theorists setting on a journey of reconciling the “typically culturally estranged [academic] wings”¹⁵ of art and Christian theology. A case in point is the prominent art theorist James Elkins. In his 2004 book *Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* he argued that the rigorous analysis offered by the postmodern and contemporary critical methods made it close to impossible to seriously consider Christianity as an additional legitimate axis of meaning.¹⁶ Then in 2008 he published the edited volume *Re-Enchantment* with David Morgan in which he embraced post-secular theory.¹⁷ In this way, he becomes emblematic of how new post-secular art theorists are incorporating Christian theology into the core of their rigorous critical inquiry,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Anderson, “(In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism.”

¹⁶ James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*. Psychology Press, 2004.

¹⁷ James Elkins and David Morgan, *Re-Enchantment (The Art Seminar)*. Routledge, 2009.

addressing the question of what would it look like for Christianity to provide the primary questions, concerns, and points of reference for a critical engagement with contemporary art?¹⁸

The range of answers to this complex question has produced a variety of distinct theories that, in addition to being shaped by different denominational traditions (Catholic, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist), offered a tremendous variation in the degree of criticality, as well as in the balance of dogma-centred thought to spirituality-centred thought. Comprising of tradition and spirituality, any organized religion, including Christianity, revolves around two axes of meaning: a judgement-oriented, tradition- and dogma-focused mode of experiencing the world, as well as a mercy-oriented, spirituality-focused way of perceiving the experience of life. It can be argued that this two-fold approach finds its reflection in the new structures of the post-secular art discourse. While numerous art theorists—from William Dyrness and Mathew Milliner, to W. David O. Taylor—have adopted a more tradition-focused and theologically-rigorous perspective for the development of new methodological tools for the post-secular reading of contemporary art, their peers who are inspired by the spirituality-centred aspect of Christianity—such as Eleanor Heartney, and Daniel Siedell—have been working on the production of post-secular apologist interpretative frameworks that focus on the spiritual aspects of Christianity.¹⁹

While dogma-centred and spirituality-centred frameworks are complementary, only the combination of both would allow for an emergence of a fully exhaustive post-secular art-critical

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ For key texts by Milliner, Dyrness and Taylor see footnotes 6 and 7. Heartney's and Siedell's key texts are Heartney, *Postcodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (2004) and Siedell, *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art (Cultural Exegesis)* (2008).

framework for the analysis of the many contemporary artistic productions that reference Christianity from artworks that make overt religious references, to artworks created by artists of religious faith, and, finally, to artworks that deal with subjects of interest to a Christian tradition.²⁰ It is my contention that if one is to engage in a meaningful discussion on transgressive art that manipulates Christian symbolism in a way that is likely to offend believers, and, if the goal of such a discussion is not a mere rejection of this art as blasphemous, but, as Danto has argued, a potential of raising the discourse to a new level of “healing understanding,”²¹ then a more generous spirituality-centred, post-secular framework is the more applicable to the analysis of the defacement of Christian art on Instagram.

In this respect, I draw on two critical Christian spirituality-centred post secular theories for my analysis of appropriated and defaced religious imagery on Instagram: Eleanor Heartney’s *incarnational spirit*, and Daniel Siedell’s *altar to the unknown god*. Despite being created with the intention of being used for the analysis of material non-digital art, the two theoretical approaches offer post-secular vocabulary that is flexible enough to be applied to a discussion of the proliferation of digital collages that manipulate and deface Christian imagery in the digital space of Instagram. Both theories revolve around a more charitable spiritual understanding of transgressive art, one that exemplifies how art that aims at defacing, and, as a consequence, desecrating Christian symbols, appears antagonistic to Christian values when taken at a face

²⁰ Anderson, “(In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism.”

²¹ Artur Danto, editorial review in Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination*, (Silver Hollow Press, 2018), i.

value, yet, proves to be as constructive, as it is destructive, when its many complex elements are considered in the further analysis.

As French constructivist scholar Bruno Latour has argued in his *An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto'* (2010), the hand that defaces and destroys the venerable symbol does so with the belief that a utopian order lies behind or beyond the structures it shatters.²² Latour explains that contrary to iconoclasm—when the hand that destroys has a clear knowledge of what is happening in the act of destruction and of its motivations—*iconoclash* is “what happens when there is uncertainty about the exact role of the hand in the production of a mediator.”²³ Thus, iconoclash art continually and infinitely questions and negates the violent act of defacement, suggesting the individual must see past the fetish of destruction—the fetish of a hand with a hammer that is “ready to expose, to denounce, to debunk, to show up, to disappoint, to disenchant, to dispel one’s illusions, to let the air out”—in order to see how the constructive, and not destructive hand that holds the hammer is “a cautious and careful hand, palm turned as if to catch, to elicit, to educe, to welcome, to generate, to entertain, to maintain, to collect truth and sanctity.”²⁴

This thesis utilizes both Heartney’s and Siedell’s spirituality-centred post-secular theories as tools for highlighting the potential *iconoclash* impulses of Instagram collages: collages that, one might argue, deface the symbols of the very religious tradition that both Heartney and Siedell

²² Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010), 475.

²³ Bruno Latour, "What is Iconoclash? Or is there a world behind the image wars?." (2002), 16. <http://mediacultures.net/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10002/599/84-ICONOCLASH-GB.pdf?sequence=1>

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

take inspiration from. Upon identifying the constructive elements of Latourian iconoclasm as they manifest themselves in photo-montaged defacing of Christian iconography, I critically evaluate both the advantages and the limitations of using the theoretical approaches of Heartney and Siedel. To this end, in the discussion that follows in Chapters One and Two I focus on a close examination of Heartney's and Siedel's theories with a particular attention to the definition of two key concepts: Heartney's incarnational spirit and Siedel's altar to the unknown god.

Through applying these theoretical concepts to a case study of Naro Pinosa's Instagram account, with a specific focus on seven of his images, I demonstrate that while both methodological frameworks were originally intended for the analysis of non-digital transgressive art that, directly or indirectly, references Christian thematics, and/or utilizes Christian iconography, they can also be used as a foundation for a new interpretative framework for the analysis of digital collages of iconographic defacement that proliferate in the digital space of the Internet.

By way of conclusion, I analyse the potential benefits, as well as possible problems that could occur as a result of integrating these two spirituality-centred theories into a new, post-secular curatorial approach. This curatorial approach would offer a revisionist framing for the above-mentioned Instagram oeuvres: a framing with proper historical, theological, and pop culture contexts that would, I believe, open the possibility for both an informed secular as well as an informed post-secular discourse about such art. In so doing, I contend that Christian-spirituality-centred analysis can establish the initial foundation for a digital curatorial intervention which, I argue, provides a partial, but not fully encompassing, response to the potential problem of the viewers' perception of such art as an anti-Christian and anti-religious art mockery, due to the offensive and traumatizing effects defaced collages might have on tradition-oriented

fundamentalist Christians, sympathetic cultural Christians, as well as non-Christian viewers who find such imagery distasteful. By acknowledging the theological limitations of Hearney and Siedell's methodological frameworks, as well as limitations presented by the original intent of these methodologies to analyse non-digital art, I reflect on how spirituality-centred analysis can function as a tool for the mediation of the potential scandal of iconographically-defaced collages that, no matter how provocative, represent what Max Ernst referred to as "the coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance."²⁵

²⁵ Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting and Other Writings by the Artist and His Friends*, (New York: Wittenborn, 1948), 13.

Chapter One: Eleanor Heartney: Incarnational Consciousness and the Debasing of a Christian Symbol in the Provocative Digital Collages of Naro Pinosa

Though the Catholicism of these [transgressive] artists manifests itself in unique and often startlingly divergent ways, each is grounded in some way in the body, its processes, its pleasures, and its pains. By bringing the body into the equation, they all acknowledge a continuum between the spirit and physical worlds, and hence between the supposedly distinct world of the sacred and profane.

— Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*

An art theorist, a contributing editor to *Art in America* and *Artpress*, and the author of a controversial collection of essays titled *Postmodern Heretics: Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (2004), Eleanor Heartney undertakes a post-secular, spirituality-centred analysis of the presence of, what she argues to be, Catholic imagination in modern, postmodern, and contemporary transgressive art. Heartney highlights the trend in which artists who were raised in Catholic environments are prone to creating artworks that are perceived as sacrilegious, blasphemous, and often, openly pornographic.²⁶ Heartney suggests that there must be something about the Catholic faith in general, as well as Catholic aesthetic tradition in particular, that pushes artists who are practicing Catholics, as well as those who abandoned the Catholic tradition, toward the corporeal and often transgressive representation of the body in their art.

Foregrounding the central role of the material body for traditional Catholic aesthetics, Heartney offers a distinctly apologist and radically queer explanation of how Catholic aesthetics has

²⁶ Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 175-77

inspired a generation of queer body-centric postmodern artists who were raised in a Catholic tradition. Heartney's philosophical detailing of queerness as it reveals itself through the provocative depictions of body in the work of contemporary Catholic artists centres on works whose aesthetic choices revolve around the thematics of sexuality and morbidity. Heartney's analysis thus produces a radically open interpretation of what she terms the "incarnational consciousness" in Catholic-inspired art, that is, the relationship between Catholicism's approach to the body and the physically provocative art work that Catholicism's fleshly orientation and the tremendous carnality of the Catholic imagination seem to inspire. By drawing attention to the "ritualistic" nature of the Catholic tradition, and the subsequent "romantic[ization] of the pain of flesh,"²⁷ that many works refer to, Heartney connects the Catholic aesthetic obsession with the body to corporeal sacramental practices that came into being through the concept of Incarnation.²⁸ Catholic doctrines from the Incarnation of Jesus (an invisible God becomes visible in the flesh) to the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary, and, most importantly, the Eucharist, solidify the role played by physical body in the Mass, and, by extension, in the drama of Salvation.

Moving away from the discussion on the economy of the body in transgressive art by Catholic artists, Heartney takes a decisive spirituality-driven and politically-liberal stance regarding transgressive art that references incarnational consciousness through overt or implied references to Catholic iconography. She contends that her theory allows for an expansion of the set of strict

²⁷ Kiki Smith quoted in Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 9.

²⁸ Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 9-11.

religious art criteria advocated by more fundamentalist tradition-oriented Catholics. She further supports her argument by stating that Jesus felt far more comfortable in the company of social outcasts and “perverts” than with the self-proclaimed righteousness of learned churchmen.²⁹ Contrasting her views to the more dogma-centred traditional views on the veneration of Christian symbols, Heartney expands on the importance of acknowledging and legitimizing the often transgressive art that proclaims social gospel through what she claims to be an anti-utopian vision of Christianity.³⁰ Justifying her reasoning behind the need for a more spiritual, and a less dogma-centred approach, Heartney writes:

In a society where belief is forever being challenged by secular scepticism, where knowledge of the oppressive history of religion coexists with recognition of its liberating potential, and where body and spirit exist in tumultuous relationship, such [transgressive] reactions are all valid responses to the challenge of faith in a secular age. Works by artists like these reveal that far from being adversaries, art and religion are inextricably linked together, joined by an Incarnational consciousness that entrenches both. Without taking the complexities explored here into account, we will fail to understand the deepest aspects of both Catholic spirituality and contemporary art.³¹

Heartney believes that Catholicism encourages a multilayered view of the world, a view that tends to persist even if an individual has discarded the Church's orthodox doctrine. It is thus logical to conclude that for many contemporary artists who were not raised Catholic, yet grew up in environments saturated with Catholic symbolism, the residual effect of the incarnational spirit

²⁹ Bawer quoted in Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 177

³⁰ Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 176

³¹ *Ibid.*, 178.

would still inspire or reinforce the focus on the body and its processes, on sexuality, carnal desire, transgression and death in their art. Following Heartney's lead, I also propose that with most contemporary Western art taking its roots in Catholic iconography, it is plausible to assume that Catholic incarnational consciousness would manifest itself in the works of many contemporary artists from countries with a Catholic tradition. In turn, I draw and expand on Heartney's analysis of the impulses of the incarnational consciousness present in the works of artists like Robert Mapplethorpe, and Joel-Peter Witkin in my analysis of Naro Pinosa's work. In so doing, I examine how Pinosa's Spanish heritage—being raised in a country with a strong Catholic tradition—can be seen to inspire his digital and online works, testifying to the strong presence of Catholic-inspired incarnational consciousness on Instagram.

In the artist's own words, "Naro Pinosa is fiction, lie ... A game about reality, where your only tool is your head and your imagination. It does not take a script, although he would like... Just play with images."³² In this play of images, many of Pinosa's collages utilize the shapes of human bodies contrasted with the shapes of traditional iconographic motifs, often creating a powerful narrative when the two are fused together. Among other themes, Pinosa appropriates traditional Christian imagery and photomontages it with the contemporary, often Not Safe for

³² James Alexander Dunphy, "Naro Pinosa: No Script, Just Play," *Gypsy Ninja*. Last modified April 20, 2016, http://sidleecollective.com/en/Articles/2016/0428_Nari-Pinosa

Work (NSFW) photographs in an absurd manner.³³ By mixing the traditional, the old, and the contemporary with a number of visual puns, Pinosa's collages challenge his viewers' perception and invite them to question their boundaries in regards to what is the acceptable degree of intermixing of religion and sexuality.

While formal and iconographical interpretations are central to analysing impact of residual Catholicism in Naro Pinosa's art, the artist's own perception of religion assists in positioning his work within a post-secular framework. In an interview with Bill Harris, a journalist from the *Sid Lee* art collective, when asked if he is poking fun at specific ideas or establishments with his work when he adds gay images to religious scenes, Pinosa states: "Religious "imagería" also has sex. Religion is probably the biggest lie and hypocrisy of all time. God, Allah, Muhammad ... enough lies. Ourselves. The best religion is sexual."³⁴

Pinosa's style of answering provocative questions on religion and sexuality is reminiscent to that of his fellow provocateur Robert Mapplethorpe. In his writings on religious impulses in Mapplethorpe's work, art critic Arthur Danto reminds us that being asked what was sacred to him, Mapplethorpe once replied, "sex": an answer which Danto insists must be taken completely

³³ Not Safe for Work (NSFW) is an Internet slang or shorthand tag used in email, videos, and on interactive discussion areas (such as Internet forums, blogs, or community websites) to mark URLs or hyperlinks which contain nudity, intense sexuality, profanity, violence/gore or other disturbing subject matter, which the viewer may not wish to be seen accessing in a public or formal environment including a workplace or school. See Attwood, "Not suitable for work? Teaching and researching the sexually explicit," *Sexualities*. Last modified September 28, 2009, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1363460709340366>

³⁴ Bill Harris, "Offensive Yet Beautiful NSFW Collages," *Sid Lee Collective*. Last modified June 14, 2017, <https://gypsy.ninja/offensive-yet-beautiful-nsfw-collages/>

seriously.³⁵ Building upon Danto's analysis of Mapplethorpe's emphasis on sexuality, Heartney contends that for many transgressive artists who find their inspiration in the symbolism of Catholic body-centredness of incarnational consciousness, sexuality is so sacred that they allow it to subsume their reputation, their art and life.³⁶ Considering both Pinosa's open pronouncements on the central role of sex, as well as the aesthetic implications through which his beliefs manifest themselves in his work, the viewer arrives at what Danto calls "the radical collapse of the spiritual and corporeal realms,"³⁷ which Heartney would argue is the ecstatic essence of the incarnational consciousness-inspired work. Extending Heartney's analytical framework, it can be argued that in addition to the formal iconographic defacing of symbolic visual imagery, more tradition-oriented Christian Instagram users might find it difficult to tolerate Naro Pinosa's incorporation of Jesus, Mary, angels and the saints into the celebration of sadomasochistic (S&M) sexual practices which embrace physical pain, submission and degradation, as well as the subsequent thematic suggestion of "the states of quasi-religious ecstasy" that his subjects appear to achieve.³⁸

Heartney suggests, that over the centuries, a number of factors have tended to undermine recognition of the ecstatic, sexual side of religion—factors that may affect the more fundamentalist Christian Instagram viewers exposed to Pinosa's works. In the context of North

³⁵ Danto quoted in Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 85.

³⁶ Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 84.

³⁷ Danto quoted in Eleanor Heartney, "Postmodern Heretics: Critical Issues," 3, <https://nbrokaw.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/postmodern-heretics.doc>

³⁸ Eleanor Heartney, "Postmodern Heretics: Critical Issues," 3, <https://nbrokaw.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/postmodern-heretics.doc>

America, she blames a Puritan colonialist heritage, arguing that American fundamentalist Protestants, have managed to impose a definition of morality which leaves no room for Catholic Incarnational theology which “celebrates the body and emphasizes the physical and sexual aspects of human experience.”³⁹ Heartney then juxtaposes this American Puritanism to the Catholic body-centred tradition, and proceeds to say that Catholicism, with its emphasis on and legitimization of the corporeal realm, allows for the free manifestation of the ecstatic essence of many works by the artists who grew up exposed to Catholic art.

Pinosa’s collages clearly radiate the artist’s interest in this erotic aspect of Christian art. The materiality and carnality of many sexually-suggestive Pinosa’s collages can be understood as an embodiment of Heartney’s concept of the perseverance of *Catholic incarnational consciousness* — the consciousness that “reveals the contours of a world saturated with desire.”⁴⁰

For all its profusion, repetitive iconographical evidence establishes Pinosa's interest in body-centred Christian iconography. To this end, I focus on three of Pinosa’s collages that offer a productive space for post-secular critical exploration of both erotic impulses in Christian art, as well as religious and spiritual impulses in digital art that often aims at desecrating traditional Christian iconography. Two of the original artworks, Jose Maria Ruiz Monte’s *Christ of Mercy*, and Roberto Ferri’s *Deposition of the Dead Body of Christ*, depict the moment from Christ’s passions, and the deposition of his dead body right after it was taken down from the cross. The third, William Bouguereau’s *Our Lady of Sorrows*, represents the Pieta. Pinosa’s photo-montaged

³⁹ Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 22.

⁴⁰ Daniel A. Siedell, *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art*, (Baker Academic, 2008), 90.

iterations of the original works overtly sexualize the figure of Christ through the references to S&M sexual practices, which, if one follows Heartney's logic, are evidence of an incarnational consciousness that is highly eroticized, yet deeply metaphysical.

Jose Maria Ruiz Monte's *Christ of Mercy* is a sculpture in the round depicting the moment after Jesus's sham trials and subsequent flogging, and before he was crucified.⁴¹ The painted wooden sculpture iconographically represents the moment when the Roman soldiers "twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on His head. They put a staff in His right hand and knelt in front of Him and mocked Him. 'Hail, king of the Jews!' they said".⁴² Here was the "King of the Jews" being beaten, spit upon, and insulted by presumably low-level Roman soldiers. On a symbolical level, the crown of thorns was the culmination of their mockery, taking a symbol of royalty and majesty, a crown, and turning it into something painful and degrading.

Pinosa's appropriation of Monte's work (fig.1) focuses on a close-up fragmentary view of Monte's sculpture— Christ's bleeding face. In his collage, Pinosa pastes over a photographic image of a close-up shot of the face with a bleeding nose and a mouth full of blood. His perfect alignment of the Christ's features of Monte's sculpture with photographic fragment removes an aesthetic distance inherent in the original sculpture, further emphasizing the carnality of Jesus.

The caption Pinosa chooses for this collage intensifies his emphasis on carnality: *Si no comiereis*

⁴¹ Not much information is available in English on the oeuvre of Jose Maria Ruiz Monte. Promoting his work, primarily through Instagram, this contemporary Christian sculptor has gained recognition in his native Spain (which explains Pinosa's familiarity with Monte's oeuvre and his further appropriation of the iconography from many of Monte's hyper-expressive sculptures).

⁴² Matthew 27:29.

la carne del Hijo del hombre, y bebiereis su sangre, no tendréis vida en vosotros ... A direct reference to John 6:53, the caption translates: If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, you will not have life in you. By offering both an aestheticized and the realistic representation of the flesh and blood of Christ, as well as by providing the context of the carnality of the Son of Man through the caption, Pinosa yet again exemplifies Heartney's concept of incarnational consciousness.

One aspect that stands out in Pinosa's rendering of the collage is that the photographed close up that he chooses is that of a man or a woman with a septum nose piercing. While this body decoration makes the image of Jesus more relatable to the contemporary viewer, it also alludes to an aesthetic tradition started by artists like Joel-Peter Witkin— a self-declared practicing Catholic, and a favourite of Heartney. Instead of flawless physiques, Witkin preferred models who were pierced, dressed in BDSM garments, scarified, and tattooed. It is through these references to bodily modifications that Witkin alluded to self-flagellation as an imitation of Christ's flagellation and crucifixion.⁴³ Thus, the element of provocation in Pinosa's choice of fragments lies in the fact that through his collaging, he enacts an aesthetic transformation, simultaneously lifting what is seen as dirty, profane, and unworthy into the realm of spirit, all while giving the spiritual a human face, a face of a "sinner."⁴⁴

⁴³ Witkin, "Revolt Against the Mystical," 49-63.

⁴⁴ Heartney, "Postmodern Heretics: Critical Issues," 1.

Similar in theme and imagery to Pinosa's appropriation of Monte is his iteration of Roberto Ferri's *Deposition of the Dead Body of Christ* (fig.2), a neo-Romantic painting that portrays the dead body of Christ upon being taken down from the cross. In Ferri's painting, the physical depiction of the body is realistic. Every physical feature of death is portrayed in detail, alluding to the idea of morbidity of the flesh. The body of Christ has the marks of the crucifixion; the viewer's eye is drawn to the wound in Christ's right side, where the spear has penetrated. Pinosa does not excise a fragment from the painting, he fully appropriates it and adds a BDSM chest harness. In relation to Heartney's theoretical framework of incarnational consciousness, Pinosa's emphasis on sadomasochistic eroticism can be read as a mutation of the great Christian mystics' ecstatic submission to Christ. This is a condition that Heartney suggests is nowhere better exemplified than in Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture of the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647), where the saint's expression is one of orgasmic bliss as the angel's golden spear is about to pierce her heart.⁴⁵ As in the case with the collage that appropriates Monte's work, Pinosa's sadomasochistic representation of Christ embodies a distorted reflection of the Catholic belief that mortification of the flesh purifies the soul, which as Heartney argues is "a point driven home repeatedly in the early years of the Catholic Church when gruesome accounts of the sufferings of the martyrs were circulated as a means of unifying the faithful."⁴⁶ With this point in mind, Pinosa's photo-montaged version of the *Deposition of the Dead Body of Christ*, with its pasting

⁴⁵ Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 2.

⁴⁶ Heartney, "Postmodern Heretics: Critical Issues," 2.

over of BDSM paraphernalia, acquires the unexpected echoes of the art and literature of both Christian martyrdom and self-imposed body-focused penance.⁴⁷

Another of Pinosa's collages that experiments with themes of religion and homosexuality is Pinosa's digitally-manipulated iteration of William Bouguereau's 1876 painting *Our Lady of Sorrows (Pieta)* (fig.3). The original artwork depicts a powerful and emotional scene: Mary, clad in black, holds her Son. Christ's breathless body lies limply against hers. Dead Christ is recently removed from the cross. Mary's red-rimmed weeping eyes are full of deep sorrow for her innocent son. In both Bouguereau's original, and Pinosa's iteration of *Our Lady of Sorrows (Pieta)*, Mary's eyes both mourn and accuse, yet she accuses not with anger, but with sorrow—the sorrow of a mother who grieves her child laying down his life for her other children. Leaving Mary's grieving face within the frame of his collage, Pinosa's re-rendering of the image mixes Bouguereau's *Pieta* with a suggestive fragment, most likely appropriated from gay porn. In this way, Pinosa follows the aesthetic precedent once set by an ex-Catholic Mapplethorpe, who self-consciously challenged the Catholic Church's contested views on homosexuality by photographing himself with devil horns, as well as merging iconography from Christian art with imagery from gay pornography.⁴⁸

The *Pieta*, as a key iconographic image of Western art history, emphasizes the corporeality of human existence, conveys the eternal ideas of mammalian support and intimacy, and embodies

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 84.

the concepts of pain, shame, grief and pity.⁴⁹ The Pieta has been regarded, by both believers and unbelievers, as an elegy to the majesty of the human form and the body as a site of intense vulnerability. In turn, Pinosa incorporates a photographic image of a naked male torso into the image of the painting to represent two bodies in the one body of Christ. Pinosa plays with the idea of vulnerability by the means of a digital intervention. A photo fragment the artist uses to defile the original depicts an athletic male torso. This torso is grabbed by a hand of another man, whose lap the torso is lying on touched it in an erotically suggestive way. Thus Pinosa pastes a sexual image into a non-sexual context of Pieta. While the sexually suggestive fragment pasted onto the iconic image of the Pieta can be seen to have a strong blasphemous connotation and can be offensive to Christians and sympathizers of Christian culture if taken at face value, it can also be interpreted as an image that will initiate the contemplative process on the acceptance of sexuality and gender diversity for the viewer when analysed through the lens of Heartney's post-secular perspective on incarnational consciousness in Catholic art that functions on an emotional level.

When I look at Pinosa's version of the Pieta, all I can think about is hearing the devastating news of the Orlando shooting. On June 12, 2016, a 29-year-old Omar Mateen killed forty nine people and wounded fifty three others in a terrorist attack inside *Pulse*, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. For three harrowing hours, as the killer carried out his rampage, the victims hid in bathrooms, in air-conditioning vents, and under tables. Helpless, trapped, shocked and scared, they texted their loved ones, pleading for help. One person whose story has really touched

⁴⁹ Gertrud Schiller, "Iconography of Christian Art, vol. ii," tr. J. Seligman (London, Lund Humphries, 1972), 179-181, figs 622-39

peoples' hearts is that of Eddie Jamoldroy Justice, a 30-year-old accountant, who sought shelter in the bathroom, where he texted his mom. Justice was among the forty nine who did not survive the attack. A thread of Justice's last texts was made public by his grieving mother:

— “*Mommy I love you*”

— “*In club they shooting.*”

— “*Trapp in bathroom.*”

— “*Pulse. Downtown. Call police.*”

— “*I’m gonna die.*”

— “*Call them mommy. Now.*”

— “*He’s coming. I’m gonna die.*”

— “*He’s a terror.*”⁵⁰

Sharing his reflections inspired by the timeless motive of Pieta, Domenico Bettinelli, an ex-editor of the *Catholic World Report* writes, “As I pray [...], I think about my own role in the Passion, my own sins piled atop the towering pile of humanity’s debts paid by the Savior, the eyes of my Blessed Mother haunt me, accusing me in her gentle way, of every iota of pain they added to the suffering of Christ upon the Cross.”⁵¹ No mother should have to bury her child.

⁵⁰ Athena Yenke, “Orlando Shooting: Read Text Messages Mom Received from Son Trapped in Bathroom,” *Morning News USA*, June 13, 2016, <https://www.morningnewsusa.com/orlando-shooting-read-text-messages-mom-received-son-trapped-bathroom-2382634.html>

⁵¹ Domenico Bettinelli, “A Mother Who Weeps: Our Lady In Bouguereau’s Pieta,” *BETTNET.com*, March 25, 2013, <http://www.bettnet.com/a-mother-who-weep-our-lady-in-bouguereaus-pieta/>

Pinosa's iteration of the Pieta succeeds at reminding us that nobody, Christian or not, has a right to condemn the other for their sexuality, be it to judgement or to death.

Pinosa chooses to focus on the drama of the Pieta and makes an aesthetic decision to crop out the figures of the weeping angels that are positioned in an arc above Mary and Jesus. Symbolically, the arc of angels in their colourful garments represents a rainbow, thus Bouguereau's intent was to evoke the rainbow covenant with Noah, which Christ fulfilled, reminding us that rather than wipe us out to wipe out sin, God instead sent His Son to pay the price.⁵² The beauty of symbolism lies in the fact that while it manifests itself differently in different historical contexts: it never completely disappears from our sight. While the symbolic representation of a rainbow does not appear in Pinosa's manipulated collage, for those viewers who are aware of its original symbolism—as well as for the many who are not aware of it, yet know about the rainbow as a symbol of gay Pride—this collage gains a new, unexpected post-secular dimension: Christ's message of love and unconditional acceptance.

It can be concluded from Heartney's writings that she is aware of how strange her project will sound to more conservative Catholic readers. Being a spirituality-centred, post-secular writer, she builds a case for public understanding of controversial queer and morbid Catholic-inspired art that is often considered blasphemous or transgressive. She does this by arguing that “deep veins of Catholic spirituality inform the very art that religious conservatives love to hate.”⁵³ Yet,

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Maureen Mullarkey, “Art-Smart Catholicism,” *Studio Matters: Notes & Commentary*. September, 2004, <http://www.maureenmullarkey.com/essays/athey.html>

I believe, the main valid critical response that comes from the conservative post-secular scholars is that the unintended message of Heartney's works is that "arts are mission territory, to be approached with as much charity and cunning."⁵⁴ While stretching the definitions of *Catholicism* and *Catholic art*, Heartney's theory does overlook the artists' often anti-Catholic intents, presenting their oeuvres as an alternative practice of Catholicism.

In a similar vein, it can be concluded from numerous interviews with Pinosa that the motivation behind his urge to create iconographically-defaced digital imagery that manipulates the meaning of Christian symbols does not represent his alternative practice of Christian faith, but is focused on a mere defacing of the image. Many of his less provocative collages lead us to the conclusion of a conflicting *iconoclash* tendency in Pinosa's perception of Christianity in general, and of Catholic iconography in particular. Thus, as viewers, we may be poised to analyse the defaced Instagram collages more deeply—if also more counterintuitively—as we increase our awareness of the artist's context, as well as of the intended meaning of the Catholic symbols he seeks to deface in his oeuvre.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Chapter Two: Iconographically-Defaced Digital Collages as the Icons of Doubt: Analysing Naro Pinosa's art through the Post-Secular Perspective of David Siedell

... symbolism is vulnerable to misinterpretation, [...] signifiers mean different things to people of different levels of awareness and experience.

— Tobias Churton, *Gnostic Mysteries of Sex: Sophia the Wild One and Erotic Christianity*, 2015

In 2008, Daniel Siedell, an ex-chief curator of the Sheldon Museum of Art (1996-2007), post-secular art theorist and Modern and Contemporary Art History professor at the University of Nebraska, published *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art*. Siedell's post-secular approach to contemporary art in this book is highly welcoming to secular contemporary art. Similar to Heartney's incarnational consciousness theory, Siedell's theory includes a strong spiritual component. Yet, even more tradition-oriented critics like Milliner believe that Siedell's *God in the Gallery's* spiritual generosity is better balanced with doctrinal requirements to religious and sacramental art than Heartney's spirituality-driven incarnational consciousness approach is. Siedell builds his theoretical model for the Christian approach to contemporary art (including art that proliferates with anti-Christian sentiments) on the premise of the biblical account of St. Paul's visit to the Areopagus in Acts 17.⁵⁵ In this story, rather than denigrate the Athenians as idolaters for their altar to an unknown god, Paul argues this altar in reality points to the true God:

⁵⁵ Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 11.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”⁵⁶

Siedell’s vision is thus based on the idea of a redeemed universe, where all things are under the authority of God, including artworks that attempt to undermine the idea of the existence of such a God.

Additionally, Siedell’s post-secular hermeneutic approach to contemporary art, which analyses contemporary art through the sacramental and incarnational lens of the icon— is a perspective that was affirmed by the Second Council of Nicea.⁵⁷ Siedell thus contends that any artwork, be it modern, postmodern, or contemporary, is akin to the icon, as it is more than just a material object that communicates information, and thus it invites its viewers to contemplate its true cosmic meaning, independent of the artist’s intention, or the viewers’ conclusions about what a given artwork represents. The very act of contemplation, Siedell argues, is connected to the divine. Siedell then notes that the communion between the supplicant and the divine through an incarnational image comes from Christ himself. He writes:

⁵⁶ Acts 17:22-23.

⁵⁷ The Second Council of Nicaea (A.D.787) is recognized as the last of the first seven ecumenical councils by the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The Second Council of Nicaea was prompted not by a doctrine about the nature of Jesus but by the iconoclastic controversy. This controversy began in the eighth century. The Council was gathered to decide if it was right to make painted or sculptured representations of Jesus and the saints, and direct homage to such images? The defenders of image worship (also referred to as iconophiles), claimed that if Jesus was really a man, it was logical that he could be depicted in visible form. Iconophiles thus argued that in Jesus, God had shown Himself in visible form, and therefore if the making of images was wrong, this was denying the Incarnation. See Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1693.

This aesthetic economy [of the icon] rests first and foremost on the cosmic implications of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, which did not merely or only effect our salvation, it renewed all of creation, bringing the creation itself, to quote St. Athanasius, into the eternal triune relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁵⁸

By the incarnation of God in Christ, the material realm we inhabit was sanctified and baptized, a direct challenge to the philosophy of the Greeks who saw the material world as base.⁵⁹ In turn, icons, which are images of the transcendent, are likewise baptized. For Siedell, thus, contemporary art is like the icon. Elaborating on this comparison, he argues that one does not simply read a religious sculpture or painting like a theology book and walk away with new data. Rather, one communes with the work in an act of contemplation, and, as all works (including the ones that aim at desecrating Christian symbolism) are altars to the *unknown god*, one may look upon God through even the most blasphemous works.⁶⁰

While Catholic spirituality-entrenched Heartney openly calls for subversion of tradition, a more balanced theologically and spirituality-focused Siedell defines religious imagery as “dogma in paint”, and calls for acceptance (as indicated by the sub-title of the book, *A Christian Embrace of Modern Art*).⁶¹ Unlike Heartney, who develops her theory on the premise of the Catholic doctrine of religious art (or, at least, her spirituality-centred understanding of the doctrine), Siedell’s

⁵⁸ Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 31.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 31.

⁶¹ Ibid.

approach is more ecumenical in nature.⁶² Siedell explains: “I moved outside the operative Reformed worldview framework, which I found too limiting, toward the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions of the faith, to bring a more robust aesthetic, sacramental, and liturgical mindfulness to modern and contemporary art.”⁶³ In later commentary to the book, he states that in addition to studying both Catholic and Orthodox icons through the lens of the respective aesthetic traditions, it is in the Lutheran moral tradition that he found a true inspiration for his theory. Siedell writes:

What I discovered is a Luther whose thought offers fertile ground for a desperately needed re-evaluation of evangelical approaches to art and culture, from his understanding of the distinctions between the letter and the spirit; law and gospel; theology of the cross and theology of glory; the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world; the human being as simultaneously sinner and saint; God hidden and revealed; and nature and grace. In addition, in his revolutionary understanding of vocation, the radically unfree will, and emphasis on the sacramental nature of the preached Word, Luther opens up space to think freely and creatively about modern art, without expectations for what art should look like. For Luther, it is not what we see, but what we hear from paintings, as we live and feel the pressure of life and the strained relationships with our neighbor. That is how we are confronted by paintings, not in the seminar room but in the trenches.⁶⁴

⁶² Ecumenical- representing a number of different Christian churches.

⁶³ Daniel A. Siedell, “Luther, Evangelicals, and Modern Art,” *Patheos*, September 25, 2018, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/cultivare/2012/09/luther-evangelicals-and-modern-art/>

⁶⁴ Matthew Milliner, “Painting and St. Paul,” *First Things*, October 16, 2008, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2008/10/painting-and-st-paul>

Siedell's ecumenical effort aims at bridging the religious-secular divide in contemporary art. He has mastered numerous Christian aesthetic traditions sufficiently to fathom the often-underestimated extent of their hospitality to those outside of those traditions. Thus, making references to cosmology in addition to strictly doctrinal vision of multiple Christian aesthetic traditions, Siedell succeeds in addressing a wide audience, so long as that audience has respect for spirituality.

That being said, Siedell's perspective requires symbolic vision and poetic imagination. Similar to Latour's concept of iconoclasm, it aims at recognizing the constructive, unifying, and even conciliatory potential in art that often aims to destroy, deface and defile. As does Latour, Siedell proposes that an exploration of the economy of the icon is impossible without paying proper attention to *iconoclasm*. He then explains the concept of iconoclasm, noting that in a historical context, iconoclasm was an organized movement against images used in worship that began during the eighth century in Constantinople. Even though this movement was defeated by the church in 847, it lingered, and reemerged with the vengeance in the West during the Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century.⁶⁵ Since then, Siedell argues, "cultures, communities, and institutions are *simultaneously* iconoclastic and iconophilic. Contradicting the Greek philosophical views that assumed that materiality must be abandoned and transcended 'in order to achieve communion with God or participate in his divine nature'," ⁶⁶ Siedell contends that the material world as we experience it in the contemporary moment is the very means by which

⁶⁵ Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 31

⁶⁶ Ibid., 31; See also, 2 Peter 1:4. Emphasis in original.

divine transcendence can be experienced. It is thus no wonder that throughout history, iconophiles from St. John to Martin Luther mockingly undermined those who defaced, defiled and debased religious symbolism as super-spiritual “heavenly prophets.”⁶⁷ I speculate that it is this unconscious desire to transcend the material representation of the Christian symbol that drives artists like Pinosa to iconographically deface the icons, and that it is the overwhelming metaphorical, and profoundly significant contemplative iconoclasm potential that “baptizes” Pinosa’s creations. His collages thus refuse the viewers’ impulse to project the pure anti-Christian meaning and invite the beholders to inquire into the new, most likely, unconsciously transcendental symbolism of the artist’s digitally manipulated collages.

While Heartney’s theory is unquestionably relevant for the discussion of Pinosa’s queer collages that incorporate elements of Christian iconography and pornographic imagery, Siedell’s theory becomes relevant when we turn our attention away from Naro Pinosa’s scandalous and sexually explicit collages, towards less provocative artworks. I would argue that it is through these collages that, consciously or unconsciously, Pinosa’s drive for reconciliation of the sacred and the profane becomes apparent to virtually any viewer, but particularly to those who are theologically-informed, and metaphorically-inclined. Cosmic symbolism manifests itself in the materiality of these Pinosa collages. It thus becomes apparent to any careful observer, that Pinosa’s relationship with God, or at least a Christian articulation of the phenomenon of God, goes beyond his comments on God being the biggest lie in history— the case might be made that the relationship is more complex than the artist would like to admit.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Pinosa's Instagram account reverberates with the profundity and banality, seriousness and silliness of his posts. Looking at his collages almost daily for more than nine months made me realize that, as Siedell argues, out of something as seemingly banal as an Instagram collage, "something of meaning and significance will emerge."⁶⁸ In this sense, Pinosa's collages, which encompass a tension between the destructive and the constructive impulses behind his aesthetics, are a perfect representation of both Siedell's altar to the unknown god, as well as Latour's iconoclasm. Instead of reaching his aim of ridiculing the idea of the sacred as it is articulated by the Christian doctrine and the respective iconography, his collages provide a source of tension: his self-proclaimed identity of an anti-Christian artist does not cohere with what is commonly assumed about the pure anti-Christian satirist, in that his occasional collages that do not carry any anti-Christian connotations have a profound theological meaning that is obvious to anyone who is even vaguely familiar with the basic premises of Christianity.

The two collages: *Untitled #1* (fig.4), and *[Abri mi herida, te extrañaba ...]* (fig.5) demonstrate how despite Pinosa's overt anti-God statement, his work manifests a strong spiritual, and, it could be argued, religious impulse that manifests itself through the artist's hardly subversive appropriation of the visual language of Christian iconography. *Untitled #1* is a collage that depicts Madonna and the child, a digitally manipulated rendering of a fragment of the 1899's *Virgin of the Lilies*, a realist painting by William Bouguereau, who, similarly to Pinosa, was more known for his explicit nudes, and less known for the paintings that could be used for religious purposes.

⁶⁸ Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 67.

Bouguereau's original painting portrays Mary clothed in black robe, seated at the throne—a pose favoured in Catholic iconography since the fifteenth century—her eyes cast downward, as if she is presenting her son to the world and willing herself to fade to the background as Jesus becomes the sole focus of attention. Mary's black robe creates a strong contrast when set against the ornamented floral background. So does a pair of luminescent golden halos around both Mary's and Jesus' heads. Jesus is held by His mother, while His arms are stretched out in a pose that foreshadows the crucifixion. White lilies are placed around the throne to symbolize chastity and purity.

Pinosa's collage is an unusual appropriation of a canonical Catholic icon and its use. He removes the Virgin and her child out of the context of both the throne and the floral background so that the figures of Mary and Christ seem to either hover or emerge out of a pitch-black background that makes Mary's silhouettes practically indistinguishable from the rest of the black negative space of the background. Both figures appear illuminated. Two delicious-looking pink glazed rainbow sprinkled donuts are pasted over Madonna's and Jesus' faces. The appeal of this “sweet” collage is demonstrated by the over 3,500 followers who have “liked” the post on Instagram.

This “sweet” Pinosa collage reminds me of a similar institutional art world incident that happened to a controversial Cosimo Cavallaro's piece *My Sweet Lord*. When in 2006, Italian-Canadian artist Cavallaro attempted to exhibit a statue of a life-sized chocolate sculpture of an anatomically correct naked crucified Jesus in the gallery of Manhattan's prestigious Roger Smith Hotel, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights launched a boycott against the hotel,

which was dropped when the hotel cancelled the exhibition of Cavallaro statue.⁶⁹ While the exhibition curator Matt Semler condemned the Catholic League for its passé views, and lack of tolerance for artistic expression, calling the Catholic League's move "a Catholic fatwa,"⁷⁰ the two official reasons given by the Catholic League for the boycott were that unlike the typical portrayal of crucified Jesus, the artwork did not include a loincloth, and that the show was scheduled during Holy Week.⁷¹

In the wake of the boycott, the artist who was himself raised Catholic appeared stunned and confused, stating that he genuinely expected the public exhibit to proceed without a problem. "There is nothing offensive about this,"⁷² Cavallaro said of his controversial confectionary work. The artist links the euphoria of eating chocolate to his own pleasant memories of church rituals, and recall his family's belief that their prayers saved his critically injured father.⁷³ "If my intentions were to offend, if I did do something wrong, I wouldn't be doing this. But I didn't do

⁶⁹ The Guardian, "Catholic Fury at Chocolate Jesus," *Guardian News and Media Limited*, last modified March 30, 2007, accessed March 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2007/mar/30/art.usa>

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ For most Christians, Holy Week is most sacred time of the year, for it commemorates the last week of Jesus Christ's life on earth. Holy Week are the seven days leading up to the great Easter Feast. According to Cooper, J.C. *Dictionary of Christianity* (1996), Easter Sunday, which immediately follows Holy Week and begins with the Easter Vigil, is the great feast day of the Christian liturgical year: on this day the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is celebrated. Cavallaro's Sweet Jesus was originally scheduled to go on view on Easter Sunday, but protests from Catholic activists caused that show to be cancelled. The second time around, the exhibition went forward undisturbed by controversy, presumably because it opened during the Catholic Church calendar's ordinary time, Nov. 1, 2007.

⁷² Cavallaro in Gabe Falcon, "My Sweet Lord," *Anderson Cooper 360°* (blog), accessed April 4, 2018, <http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/anderson.cooper.360/blog/2007/10/my-sweet-lord.html>

⁷³ Julia Morton, "Sweetness Is Light," *ArtNet*, accessed March 31, 2018, <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/morton/morton11-20-07.asp>

anything wrong.”⁷⁴ Cavallaro, who allegedly received death threats before the show was canceled, ended up noting that the vast majority of his mail was in support of the artwork. "I got a lot of positive mail from people in the Catholic Church, people studying theology, people in monasteries— all kinds of letters and e-mails of support," he said.⁷⁵

The first time I saw Pinosa’s iconographically defaced *Virgin of the Lilies* collage, the thought that crossed my mind is the exact same thought that I, and many of the Catholics who expressed their support to Cavallaro had during the scandal— Psalm 34:8— “Taste and see that the Lord is good.”⁷⁶ Psalm 34, *The Treasury of David*, teaches:

"O taste and see." Make a trial, an inward, experimental trial of the goodness of God. You cannot see except by tasting for yourself; but if you taste you shall see, for this, like Jonathan's honey, enlightens the eyes. "That the Lord is good." You can only know this really and personally by experience. There is the banquet with its oxen and fatlings; its fat things full of marrow, and wines on the lees well refined; but their sweetness will be all unknown to you except you make the blessings of grace your own, by a living, inward, vital participation in them. "Blessed is the man that trusteth in him." Faith is the soul's taste; they who test the Lord by their confidence always find him good, and they become themselves blessed.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Cavallaro in Gabe Falcon, “My Sweet Lord,” *Anderson Cooper 360°* (blog), accessed April 4, 2018, <http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/anderson.cooper.360/blog/2007/10/my-sweet-lord.html>

⁷⁵ Associated Press, “Oh sweet Jesus! Chocolate sculpture is back,” *Today*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.today.com/popculture/oh-sweet-jesus-chocolate-sculpture-back-1C9418606>

⁷⁶ Psalm 34:8.

⁷⁷ Psalm 34:8.

Just as Cavallari's does in *My Sweet Lord*, so Pinosa reiterates the metaphorical connection to the concept of the sweetness of the Lord by using the imagery of perfectly fresh, delicious (as opposed to rotten and inedible) donuts. The metaphor is clear, even though the reference to the allegorical sweetness of both Mary and Jesus is not the kind of a metaphor expected of a satirist like Pinosa. Thus again, the impulse of iconoclasm made itself manifest through a conscious or unconscious doubt. Siedell, in discussing Enrique Martinez Celaya's *Thing and Deception* (1997), another provocative confectionary depiction, this time of a gigantic chocolate Easter bunny, writes:

The enigmatic power of *Thing and Deception* has to do in large part with the fact that the painting internalizes, works over, and re-presents the most fundamental of tensions in art and religion [...] it affirms and negates interpretation, it invites yet frustrates free associations; it attracts and repels. It seems simultaneously banal and profound. This painting is the icon of doubt. But the doubt is not outright scepticism, for doubt has belief as its constant companion. As the father of a boy with convulsion declares to Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."⁷⁸

Inspired by Siedell's argument, I would argue that it is fair to conclude that Pinosa's iconographically-defaced *Virgin of the Lilies* represents just that—an icon of doubt.

Pinosa's rendering of a fragment of Bernardo Strozzi's 1620's painting *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* is another example of an icon of doubt. The original artwork captures the moment when Thomas, one of the twelve apostles, declares that he would only believe in resurrected Christ if

⁷⁸ Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 52; Mark 9:24.

he could touch his wounds. Appearing for the second time to the apostles, Christ spoke to Thomas, saying: “Reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless but believing.”⁷⁹ For his collage, Pinosa crops the Strozzi’s original, zooming on a tensely concentrated fragment with only two figures placed in close proximity against a black background. The focus is on Saint Thomas’ right hand that is guided by Christ, as the doubter prods the wound with his finger. Pinosa replaces the graphic representation of the wound with an image of a galaxy in the deep space. The iconoclasm cosmic reference serves to destabilize the meaning of the wound, as well remind the believers of its significance. Fascinated by the tangible phenomenon of Christ’s resurrected body, Thomas pushes his finger into the deep space of the cosmic wound, a physical evidence of Jesus’ existence as a man in Thomas’ corporeal world, although no longer of it.

I found lack of the erotic inference in Pinosa’s piece to be particularly interesting. In his article “The “Metaphysicals”: English Baroque Literature in Context,” classical tradition scholar Rolf Lessenich has noted that Strozzi’s piece carries a highly erotic connotation, suggesting that the wound which effeminate Christ assists Thomas to penetrate, is symbolically associated with a female sex organ.⁸⁰ Christ’s relationship with the doubting apostle is thus regarded as physical and sensual. Hence, it would be logical to expect a scandalous satirist like Pinosa to utilize this suggestive logic that is so inviting for a pornographic intervention. Yet, Pinosa yields a hardly provocative rendering. He employs the caption to expand the meaning of his iteration of the

⁷⁹ John 20: 27.

⁸⁰ Rolf P. Lessenich, “The “Metaphysicals”: English Baroque Literature in Context,” Accessed March 31, 2018, <http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic21/less3/html/a028.html>

doubting Thomas — *Abrió mi herida, te extrañaba* ... (Open My Wound, I Have Missed You).

Given the context of the original artwork, these words neither manifest Pinosa's rejection of God as the biggest lies, nor strike us with as cynical intellectual gamesmanship that Pinosa is known for.⁸¹ Instead, they intensify the personal, intimate aspect of Pinosa's relationship with the idea of God. For me, the piece immediately became a metaphor for the artist's longing for the transcendental, possibly as it personifies itself in the figure of Christ incarnate.

In applying Seidell's theory to an analysis of *Untitled #1* and *Abrió mi herida, te extrañaba*, what is revealed is the striking manifestation of Pinosa's struggle for the transcendental. What Pinosa is attacking in his Instagram oeuvre is neither the existence of God, nor the core truths of faith, but the institutional aspects of organized religion. This distinction is of a paramount importance for any curatorial project that would attempt to offer an analytical interpretation of Pinosa's digital collages. Once again referring to Siedell's post-secular framework, I will take the liberty to state that these Pinosa works do precisely what the altar to the unknown god did— they point to the transcendental truth, the concept of God, without naming it.

Another important aspect of Siedell's concept of the altar to the unknown god is the discussion of the new, often unexpected, constructive meaning that emerges through the digital manipulation and iconographic defacing of sentimental Christian kitsch.⁸² Speaking about manipulation of

⁸¹ According to Naro Pinosa, "Religion is probably the biggest lie and hypocrisy of all time. God, Allah, Muhammad ... enough lies. Ourselves. The best religion is sexual." Pinosa quoted in Chad Saville, "Naro Pinosa Discusses his Offensive and Beautiful Collage," *Beautiful Savage*, January 18, 2016, <http://beautifulsavage.com/design/naro-pinosa-discusses-his-disturbing-and-beautiful-collage/>

⁸² Siedell, *God in the Gallery*, 54.

kitsch representations of Jesus, Mary, angels, saints, and other Christian iconographic motifs, Siedell argues that often, the appropriation and subversion of meaning results in works that are both formally sentimental yet resistant to sentimentality on a conceptual level.⁸³ A large number of Pinosa's collages, as well as collages created by many other Instagram artists who work in the same genre, digitally manipulate distinctly kitschy Christian imagery. These collages present a potential for transformation of the kitschified iconography that represents Christ, Mary and the saints as weak and helpless deities, conceptually transforming these motifs into forms that are both kind, yet powerful in the secular meaning of the word. Expanding on Siedell's concept of the altar to the unknown god, I propose that within the rejection of kitsch art as legitimate religious, and legitimate sacramental art, by both the Church, and the scholarly community of theologically-informed art theorists, the phenomenon of defacing kitsch Christian symbols presents an interesting case of what I will be referring to as a "double negative": an artist's attempt to debase an image that seemingly represents Christianity, without the consideration that such imagery has already been denounced by the Church and theologically-informed and post-secular academic voices.⁸⁴

⁸³ Ibid., 56.

⁸⁴ A conversation about Naro Pinosa's art would be incomplete without the discussion of Camp. Similarly but distantly from kitsch, camp is an aesthetic style that regards something as appealing because of its bad taste and ironic value. Camp seeks to challenge. According to Mallan and McGills, camp inverts aesthetic attributes such as beauty, taste and value through an invitation of a different kind of apprehension. In her famous essay 'Notes of Camp' (1964), Susan Sontag defines camp as self-conscious ironies, mode of appreciation, a variety of cultural artefact, whose key elements are artifice, frivolity, naive middle class pretentiousness, and shocking' excess. In the essay, Sontag who aligned herself with metropolitan gay culture discusses her complex dualistic perspective on camp, which she explains as 'failed seriousness' that elicits laughter or delight from its knowing (by and large homosexual) audience. Sontag writes, "I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it. That is why I want to talk about it, and why I can. For no one who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility can analyze; he can only, whatever his intention, exhibit it." For more on Camp see Mallan and McGills' "Between a Frock and a Hard Place: Camp Aesthetics and Children's Culture," 1-19; for more on Sontag's "Notes on Camp" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*.

Pinosa's collages that deface kitsch Christian symbols are a perfect manifestation of Latour's iconoclasm—the unintentionally constructive effect of an intentionally destructive act of defacing of an image. In 1967, German doctor of Philosophy and theology, ordained priest and professor of Moral Theology, Fr. Richard Egenter, wrote a book *Desecration of Christ*. The book was the very first publication that shed light on the phenomenon of kitsch Christian imagery. Fr. Egenter argued that “wrong emphases in Christian teaching have led large numbers of Christians to accept at face value images of Christ, Mary and saints that mirror the defects that inspired them.”⁸⁵ Fr. Egenter contended that the result is the perpetuation of untruth through works of art that are bogus, and that as representations of Christian attitudes “are at best simply beguiling and at worst meretricious.”⁸⁶ Fr. Egenter opens his work with a question: “Is kitsch a sin?” He then proceeds to answer his question, by countering it with another question: “Is stupidity a sin?”⁸⁷ Arguing that kitsch is not merely a question of taste, as it “strikes at man himself, his moral health and salvation,” Fr. Egenter identifies the problem of proliferation of kitsch in the 1960s, and approaches the subject both from the standpoint of Christian ethics, as well as from the standpoint of aesthetics.⁸⁸ Contending that kitsch Christian art is bogus, spurious and untruthful, Fr. Egenter argues that the intrinsic value of the chosen theme represented through kitsch art is either not understood or made manifest; and that instead the consumer of

⁸⁵ Richard Egenter, *The Desecration of Christ*. (Franciscan Herald Press, 1967), epilogue.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 14

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

kitsch art is offered its superficial aspects only.⁸⁹ Arguing against the “morally disintegrating effects of kitsch,”⁹⁰ Fr. Egenter goes on to examine the genealogy of the term kitsch, and defines it as sentimental art that is made to please, to take in.

In tandem with Fr. Egenter, American cultural theorist Camille Paglia writes that due to the divergence between religion and the fine arts in the twentieth century, overtly religious art became weaker and weaker.⁹¹ Instead, kitsch Christian art started proliferating. Pinosa repeatedly appropriates such theologically impotent kitsch art. His appropriations of popular kitsch image *Sagrado Corazón de Jesús*, as well as Joseph F. Brickley’s *Hijo de Dios* exemplify Pinosa’s intentional attempts to invert the Christian meaning, as well as the unintentional iconoclasm consequences of such an inversion—the rejection of Christian kitsch’s theologically incorrect representations of divine figures as helpless, weak and overly-friendly Caucasian-looking deities.

⁸⁹ Almost three decades before Fr. Egenter published his *Desecration of Christ* (1967)—a book on Christian kitsch, in 1939, *The Parisian Review* published an essay by a secular modernist art critic Clement Greenberg entitled “Avant-garde and Kitsch.” The essay had a profound effect on the way popular art would come to be perceived by the intellectual community in the United States. In the essay, Greenberg contrasts the avant-garde with the ‘rear guard’ of kitsch. Greenberg reveals an antithetical balance between the two that, he argues, is reflected in modern “cultural dichotomy,” a dichotomy that may one day topple over into fascism. Despite acknowledging the limitations of this cultural dichotomy, same as Fr. Egenter, Greenberg is not sympathetic towards kitsch, arguing that kitsch is parasitic on “a fully mature cultural tradition” rather than independently generated; and that the few worthwhile works kitsch has produced are so due to their “authentic folk flavour.” For Greenberg, as a product of the Enlightenment’s revolution of critical thinking, modern art was too “innocent” to be effectively used as propaganda or bent to a cause, while kitsch, he argued, was ideal for stirring up false sentiment. For a more nuanced analysis of Greenberg’s perspective see Routt, “Making looking public: Clement Greenberg imagines the kitsch public” 47-58.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 15

⁹¹ Paglia, “Religion and the Arts in America,” 13.

Naro Pinosa's oeuvre testifies to the artist's lack of understanding of or disregard for the conceptual rift that exists between kitsch and non-kitsch Christian art. For example, Pinosa's rendering of *Sagrado Corazón de Jesús* (fig.6) uses a fragment from the original kitsch image—Jesus' face— and pastes it over a black and white photograph of an athletic male torso, with two bent arms. The sitter whose photograph Pinosa appropriates is showing his middle fingers to the viewers. Pinosa's *Sagrado Corazón de Jesús*, while trying to deface kitsch Christian representation of Christ, ends up giving it a new edge: it metaphorically empowers the image of weak, helpless Jesus— Jesus that has little in common with neither his historical version, nor with the actual teachings of the Church.

Joseph F. Brickley's painting *Hijo de Dios* is another inspiration for Pinosa's iconoclash collages (fig.7). While the conceptual idea of Pinosa's collage is unclear, a linguistic subversion of both the title, as well as Brickley's original thematic reference is obvious. Pinosa drops Brickley's title *Hijo de Dios— The Son of God*— and replaces it by a new title [*daddy*]— the subverted opposite of the original, with a potential for a sexual connotation.⁹² In addition to the linguistic subversion, [*daddy*] questions the legitimacy of representational language used by kitsch artists of the twentieth century. The original *Hijo de Dio* painting reminds me of another, iconographically and thematically analogous kitsch Christian artwork— William Sallman's *Head of Christ* (1940). In *Religion and the Arts in America* (2011), Paglia discusses Sallman's piece and argues that this 1941 American oil painting “inspired by Victorian precedents that showed a

⁹² Pinosa [*daddy*] iteration of Brickley's *Hijo de Dios* resulted in a collaboration with a clothing brand Adam's Nest— thousands of [*daddy*] T-Shirts with a print were sold online. See Adam's Nest, “Naro Pinosa: Colalge Art, Exclusiv Postcards, and T-shirts,” <https://www.adamsnest.com/collections/naro-pinosa-collage-art>

long-haired Jesus bathed in light and gazing toward heaven,”⁹³ was, regretfully, one of the most disseminated images of the twentieth century. Paglia quotes a post-secular art scholar David Morgan, a post-secular professor of religion and art at Duke University, who noted that *Head of Christ* was reproduced five hundred million times over the next four decades after its creation.⁹⁴ Paglia continues to say that many critics, including the believers, rejected the kitsch painting as sentimental and denounced its portrayal of Christ as “overly Nordic Caucasian.”⁹⁵ Needless to say, this reduction of Christian imagery to Euro-centric kitsch was often used as a means of ideological propaganda, through which, intentionally or unintentionally, colonial sentiments were perpetuated.⁹⁶ Thus, following Paglia’s lead, I argue that Pinosa’s collages that deface kitsch Christian symbolism are problematic, but only to the extent to which the proliferation of kitsch Christian imagery is problematic for the institution of the global Church.

In his more contemporary analysis of the phenomenon of kitsch, Mathew Milliner notes that while many post-secular organizations and publications are understandably interested in an artistically sophisticated faith, and, are thus less than eager to draw attention to the Christian kitsch that they hope to leave behind, kitsch remains “the visual religion of everyday believers.”⁹⁷ Yet, with the advent of post-secular theory, kitsch has now become a subject of

⁹³ Camille Paglia, “Religion and the Arts in America,” *Arion* 50, no. 1. (Spring/Summer, 2007), 13 <https://www.bu.edu/arion/files/2010/03/Paglia-Religion-and-the-Art.pdf>

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ “Sallman was in fact the son of Scandinavian immigrants.” Ibid.

⁹⁷ Milliner, “The Unmappable Terrain of Christainity and Art.”

serious academic investigation, mostly through the impressive infrastructure erected by David Morgan, and the journal *Material Religion*.⁹⁸ Nowadays, therefore, kitsch is no longer regarded as low-brow artifacts, but is seriously analysed by art historians. In short, for post-secular theorists, kitsch counts, mostly, as a complex sociological phenomenon. In *The Forge of Vision: A Visual History of Modern Christianity* (2015), Morgan, who has written about Christian material culture and Christian kitsch through the lens of post-colonial studies, takes a more generous stance towards kitsch Christian art than Fr. Egenter did.

Morgan examines several dominant ways in which (Western) Catholic and Protestant images and visually-orientated sensibilities have not only circulated as material objects and practices within an increasingly globalized modern world but also “shaped and continued to shape” this increasingly globalized modern world. He contends that there is a “contentious yet fluid boundary” between sacred and profane economies as evidenced in proliferation of kitsch imagery, for instance, within the histories of modern trade and colonial encounter.⁹⁹ In his response to the many theologically-informed and post-secular critics of Christian kitsch, Morgan writes, “Yes, it is kitsch, but so what? [This art is] not about artistic expression, but about community, about prayer, about devotional feeling.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, an argument can be made that while on a theoretical and theological levels, debasing of kitsch imagery leads us to an unexpected effect of the double negative, it is paramount to remember that as a consequence of

⁹⁸ For *Material Religion* journal website, see <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfmr20>

⁹⁹ Jorella Andrews, "The Forge of Vision: A Visual History of Modern Christianity David Morgan." *Art and Christianity* 86 (2016): 12-14.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

globalization, modern trade and colonial encounter, kitsch Christian art remains the visual religion of many everyday believers,¹⁰¹ and thus the defiling of the imagery represents a case of patronizing mockery, yet not a anti-religious misconduct. Expanding on Morgan's argument, it can be concluded that kitsch Christian visual language is metaphorical, and thus should not be taken at face value. As someone who grew up around kitsch Christian imagery, I agree with this Morgan's opinion. That being said, it is important to remember that such visual metaphor, is yet again, an altar to the unknown god— an altar that only point at God, yet does so in a vague, simplified, and, often, ideologically-biased way.

¹⁰¹ Milliner, "The Unmappable Terrain of Christainity and Art."

Conclusion: The Importance of Adopting the Post-Secularly Mediated Curating as a Response to the Freedom to Manipulate Christian Symbolism

As Camille Paglia notes, “great art can be made out of love for religion as well as rebellion against it.”¹⁰² In a cultural climate where relationships between secular and religious parties are complex and not clearly defined, it is important that Instagram does not become an aggregator for online hatred coming from either end of the religious and art debate. To that end, I argue that one potential way to facilitate a respectful, yet productive post-secular conversation between the religious and secular contemporary art camps, is to set up alternative curated Instagram accounts — accounts that offer the records of theologically informed engagement with art that defaces Christian symbols. The imagery exhibited on these curated accounts (including iconographically-defaced and NSFW (not-safe-for-work) media), would be sourced from the original artists’ Instagram feeds by means of lawful appropriation (credited reposting), cross-posting and embedding of imagery. Shared visual materials would be accompanied by post-secular contextual commentary that would provide appropriate contextual information about the original un-manipulated Christian artwork, discuss its original symbolism, as well as reflect on the contemporary contexts in which traditional symbols intentionally or unintentionally surface in the iconographically-manipulated works that aim at defacing those very symbols.

Adoption of such curatorial strategy would be conceptually innovative, yet not groundbreaking, as over the past eight years, Instagram has become an extension of the exhibitionary complex

¹⁰² Paglia, “Religion and the Arts in America,” 2.

where curators create and share their own images, add tags, captions and links, all of which foster the feeling of connectedness between them and their audiences. In her article *Curators and Instagram: Affect, Relationality and Keeping in Touch* (2016), contemporary art and curatorial studies professor Jennifer Fisher argues that the capacity to contextually configure appropriated Instagram content using captions, comments and tags – integral to Instagram– is continuous with curatorial practice.¹⁰³ Fisher contends that as technology and social media proliferate in the contemporary moment, many art curators engage with new digital image-based social media platforms to conduct art world activities, and facilitate connections with their audiences.

According to Fisher, many prominent curators have adopted Instagram and employ it within their practice since when the platform got launched in 2010.¹⁰⁴ The platform resonates in the art world because "its interface is predominantly iconic and visual."¹⁰⁵ Fisher notes that the frequency of an immediate transmission predicates Instagram's affective power: "as posts are shared, the network responds and *buzz* is produced."¹⁰⁶ This buzz, along with the fast access to visual information fosters the emergence of trends, including the trend in question— the recent phenomenon of digital collages that iconographically deface Christian symbolism.

A thoughtful post-secular curatorial effort would offer a potential for a negotiation of the viewer's post-secular identity, as well as creation of a new discursive terrain for an informed

¹⁰³ Fisher, "Curators and Instagram: Affect, Relationality and Keeping in Touch," 102

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

dialogue between secular and post-secular art camps. In order to eliminate the ideological and religious hatred that proliferates social media, it is paramount for the post-secular-oriented curators of today to create both physical and digital forums for an exploration of what constitutes post-secularity, to educate the public on the necessity of a post-secular perspective, and to emphasize such a perspective's role in the mitigating solely affective responses.

The curatorial Instagram intervention that I am proposing is intended to test those principles, and to affirm that contemporary Instagram art that deals with matters as problematic as defacing of religious symbols should be taken more seriously than mere puerility. Instead, it should be regarded as the artist's personalized way of understanding, experiencing, and interpreting a phenomena as complex as God, and organized religion. For instance, being saturated with both carnal and, as I have previously shown, spiritual desires, Pinosa's collages embody the complexities of the idea of a transcendental God, and the multidimensionality of the phenomenon of organized religion—the two ideas the artist loves to hate, and that are never directly expressed neither in his Instagram oeuvre, nor in the art writings about it. The intervention would thus regard Pinosa as more than simply a satirist, but as an artist whose works offer a fascinating record of complexities of both the erotic, the religious, and, most saliently, the spiritual. The proposed post-secular curatorial intervention would suggest that the works of Pinosa are more than what he himself jokingly refers to as “stupid art.”¹⁰⁷ Offering a detailed post-secular analysis of the works that incorporate and deface Catholic iconography, I suggest that Pinosa's, as well as other Instagram artists' collages that deface traditional Christian

¹⁰⁷ Naro Pinosa, Instagram feed, <https://www.instagram.com/naropinosa/>

symbolism are not only aesthetic pranks, but are also the archives of an unfolding exploration of the artists' personal relationship with God, Church, and the world.

Following Siedell's theoretical approach, such a curatorial strategy would encourage Christian and secular followers of Pinosa and other Instagram artists of the same genre to perceive their seemingly iconoclastic art reverently, thinking of them as icon-painters of the unknown god. Before drawing quick conclusions about the anti-Christian drive in collages that iconographically deface Christian symbols, followers should be encouraged (in captions that foster contemplations) to take enough time with the collages and "experience them on their terms"—something that the short attention spans promoted by platforms such as Instagram make hardly possible.¹⁰⁸ It is only then that we will see the constructive, and not the destructive hand of Pinosa and others that, as Latour suggested, destroys the venerable symbol, but does so with the belief that a utopian order lies behind or beyond the structures it shatters.¹⁰⁹

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a post-secular curatorial strategy seeks to understand and accept, and not to promulgate the execration of the doctrinal aspects of Christian thought and aesthetics. Thus, it is important to mention that the post-secular curators who would participate in the facilitation of the curatorial intervention must ensure that the curated feeds fairly represent

¹⁰⁸ The short duration of the viewers' engagement is characteristic of Instagram, and is what produces the platform's affective power. As the collages are shared, the viewers visually engage with their own and others affective responses, which are produced by the fast energetic connection with the defaced artworks. Fred Sanders, "Giant Chocolate Bunny: Siedell's God in the Gallery," *The Scriptorium Daily*, August 5, 2010, <http://scriptoriumdaily.com/giant-chocolate-bunny-siedells-god-in-the-gallery/>

¹⁰⁹ Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" 475.

both religious and secular sentiments, and do not tolerate online hatred coming from either Christian, or anti-Christian audiences. It would thus be the primary role of theologically-informed post-secular curators to learn, rigorously analyse, and thoughtfully integrate the Christian dimension of the contextual materials into a critical interpretation of the artworks, and to do so in a way that avoids the perpetuation of an ideologically unbalanced double standard operative in the art world—public normalization of the use of the often insulting anti-Christian language tolerated in ways that would never be acceptable if used in relation to the art discourse about other major religions.¹¹⁰

In her profound study that analyses the divide between the predominantly secular and liberal, and a majority conservative religious art camps, Paglia speaks about how over the past three decades, the primary arena for the conservative-liberal cultural antagonism has been the contemporary arts.¹¹¹ Similarly to how Anderson, who argues that the both modern and contemporary art textbooks testify to the fact that the institutional art world regards Christianity as having hardly made a contribution to Western arts of the last century,¹¹² Paglia contends that while leading conservative, and often pro-Christian voices defend the traditional Anglo-Saxon canon, which, she notes, has been under scrutiny and in flux for over forty years, conservatives on the whole, have shown hardly any interest in the arts.¹¹³ By the early 2000's, this lack of the interest in the

¹¹⁰ Paglia, "Religion and the Arts in America," 18.

¹¹¹ Paglia, "Religion and the Arts in America," 1.

¹¹² Anderson, "(In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism."

¹¹³ Paglia, "Religion and the Arts in America," 3.

matters of contemporary art on the part of the often conservative theologically-inspired art theorists in general, and Christian art theorists in particular has resulted in a nearly complete lack of ideologically pluralistic theoretical frameworks that would, as Mathew Milliner argued, prevent the limiting of the interpretive dilation that an ideologically balanced debate would allow.¹¹⁴

In a response to the ideologically- and culturally-unbalanced contemporary secular moment, the early 2000s gave rise to a proliferation of post-secular art scholarship that focuses on contemporary art that references Christian thematics—from artworks that make overt religious references, to artworks created by artists of religious faith, and, finally, to artworks that deal with subjects of interest to a Christian tradition. Today, the new structure of theologically-informed post-secular art theory is quickly expanding, engaging both the religious and the secular, as well as the conservative, and the liberal art camps, offering a new, more balanced approach to the secular/religious art discourse— an approach that recognizes and acknowledges the plurality of world views and religious beliefs. It is my hope that by providing alternative critical and curatorial post-secular frameworks that contextualize contemporary digital art that iconographically defaces Christian symbols, the works of Naro Pinosa, and of many Instagram artists who work in the same genre, will be regarded not as mere hubs of anti-Christian hostility, but as platforms for a dialogue between the secular and religious camps in the contemporary art world.

¹¹⁴ Milliner quoted in Watkins, “Post-Secularism, Theology and the Arts.”

List of Figures

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



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