

Charis Constantinou  
Student number: 2103382  
Tutor: Julia Lockheart  
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My exhibition focuses on religion within the modern world, and a contemporary critique of Christianity's relevance and authenticity. The exhibition includes five artists' work, including Maurizio Cattelan, David LaChapelle, Ron Mueck, Andres Serrano, and Alexander Kosolopov. The exhibition is held in a traditional theatre, to demonstrate the performative quality of religion.

The exhibition, entitled *The New and Old Worship; A Performance* offers the viewpoints of the five aforementioned artists regarding Christianity and religion. Sub-themes include: how Christianity has become commercialised, cheapened, and lost its value; the fall of Christianity's power and necessity; as well as investigating how it has divulged from a path of a true and caring religion.

The location is a comment on how religion and the leaders of Christianity, partake in a story telling charade with the intention of leading followers into an escape of reality. However, in my theatrical church, you would be there to worship the artwork and be led by the imagery displayed just like Catholic churches use iconography to convey their message. Traditionally Catholic services would be read in Latin, so almost all the population would not be able to translate, so elaborate paintings, sculptures, and stained glass windows were used to form a narrative. This technique was used often as a fear tactic; 'doom' paintings were depictions of hell and heaven and served as a warning to the public as to what consequences may follow if they were not obedient to the church. I would be subverting this technique from a tool of manipulation, to an exposé of modern Christianity.

Within the theatre are three tall flats along the back depicting simplified and colourful stained glass windows composed of patterns instead of religious imagery. This is paired with four flats (two either side of the stage) painted to look like stone wall features of a church, upon which will be suspended four of the works of art. This faux church demonstrates the use of semiotics, wherefore the audience will understand the room to be a church without it actually being one. Using Roland Barthes theory of semiotics it can be understood that the imagery denotes a church space, and connotes a place of worship and a practice of belief (Barthes, 1957). With regards to the place of the audience they will view the work by walking down the central aisle between the two sections of chairs, alluding to walking down an aisle between pews (refer to Fig. 1). The long walk towards the raised stage will give the viewer time to process the set and transition to the state of mind or understanding one may assume within a place of worship. They will then ascend onto the stage and be met by *La Nona Ora* and then circle around to view the five other pieces, and finally exit the way they entered. The placement of the pieces themselves can be explained by reasons of practicality and effect. The four two dimensional pieces are mounted onto the theatre flats as the two sculpture pieces cannot. This also allows a sense of balance across the space. When you first walk up the stairs you are greeted by Cattelan's *La Nona Ora*, as leaders of the Church would be placed at the forefront to give sermons and homilies, however he has now been cast down, and has no such speech to offer. Behind *La Nona Ora* towards the back of the space will be Ron Mueck's *Youth*. This is to take the place of the figure of Jesus placed at the same position in Churches.

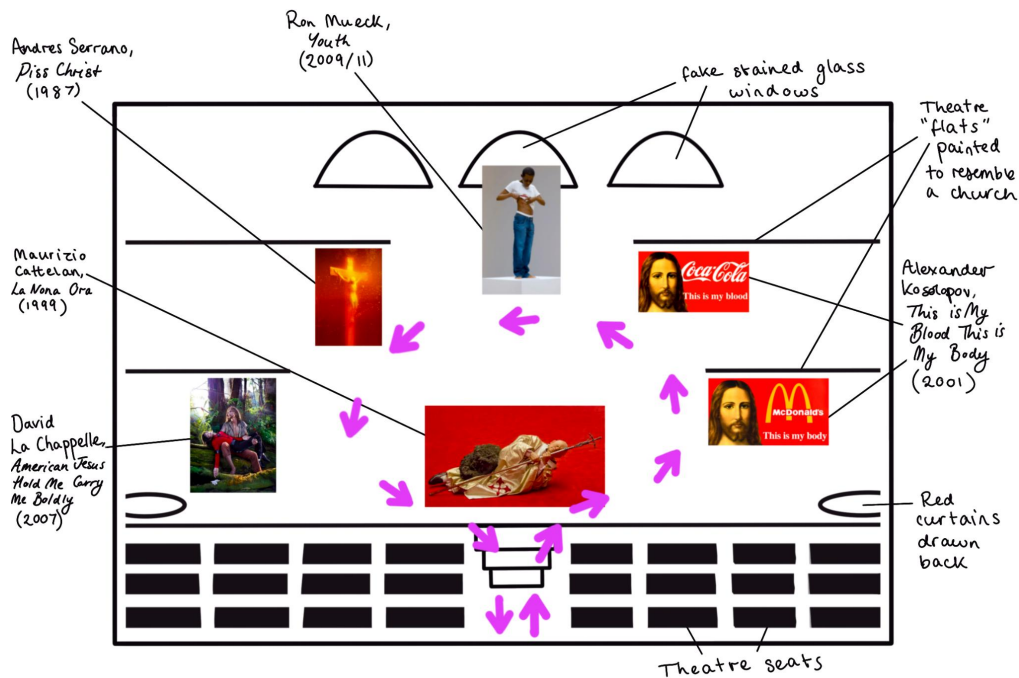


Fig. 1

The first piece selected to be in this exhibition is Maurizio Cattelan's *La Nona Ora* (1999). Translated the title means The Ninth Hour- a reference to the death of Jesus. The sculpture itself is modelled on John Paul II, who was Pope from 1978 until he passed in 2005 (Pope John Paul II - Simple English Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, n.d.). John Paul II has been associated with the large scale sex abuse scandal within the Catholic Church, and has been criticised for his inaction. John Paul II was made aware of the horrors at play multiple times but remained passive- "Despite a 1984 warning memo from the Rev. Thomas Doyle, then a canon lawyer in the Vatican Embassy in Washington, and a ninety-three-page report on the problem co-written by Doyle in 1985, which was sent to every American bishop, John Paul ordered no outreach to victims, no binding policy to rid the priesthood of deviants" (Berry, 2011). In light of John Paul II's lack of agency, in 1989 the US conference of bishops attempted to act upon the issue instead of waiting for the Pope's response, and still John Paul refused any involvement. *La Nona Ora* has been interpreted as having multiple meanings, including; the humanisation and weakness of those with the greatest religious power; an allusion to the neglect demonstrated by the Church with regards to the aforementioned sex abuse scandals amongst others; or even a reference to the secularisation of the modern world, that are moving out from living under the power of the Church (La Nona ora | Maurizio CATTELAN (1999) | PERROTIN, n.d.).



Maurizio Cattelan, *La Nona Ora* (1999)

Second is David LaChapelle's *American Jesus, Hold Me Carry Me Boldly* (2007). This work contributes to the theme that religion is becoming outdated and replaced in a modern world as fewer people rely on religion for guidance and instead turn to pop culture. LaChapelle consistently uses religious symbolism along with modern pop imagery across his work to convey the similarities between them in their importance to the modern world. Religion has lost value as celebrities have gained it, bringing them to a par. Within *American Jesus, Hold Me Carry Me Boldly* LaChapelle chooses a Pieta for the composition, but Jesus is in Mary's place and pop star Michael Jackson replaces Jesus. This perhaps alludes to how the celebrity as an icon has replaced Jesus in importance, but the masses' desire to follow said icon stems back to Christianity. In addition it conveys a similar story of the public's twisted relationship with both figures; both had mass followings but were also persecuted and criticised.



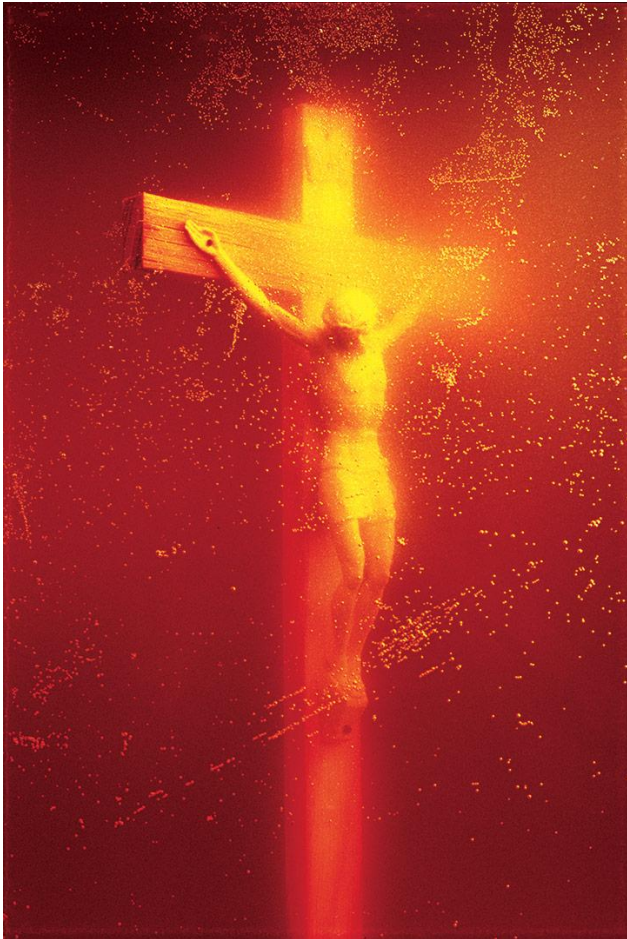
David LaChapelle, *American Jesus, Hold Me Carry Me Boldly* (2007)

Next is Ron Mueck's *Youth* (2009/11). Although Mueck has left the meaning of the piece down to the viewer's own interpretation, there is a clear reference to the moment Jesus displays a similar wound to Saint Thomas as proof that he is himself and has risen from death. The stigmata on the boy's chest ties his story to Jesus but instead of a depiction of resurrection and new life, it symbolises mortality and those who are vulnerable to violence. The boy's youth and innocence have been corrupted as he is forced to face death as a fact of life. It is a demonstration of the depravity of mankind and a hopelessness for the youth, perhaps alluding to a loss of religion or an awakening to the fact that religion offers no protection in a world full of cruelty.



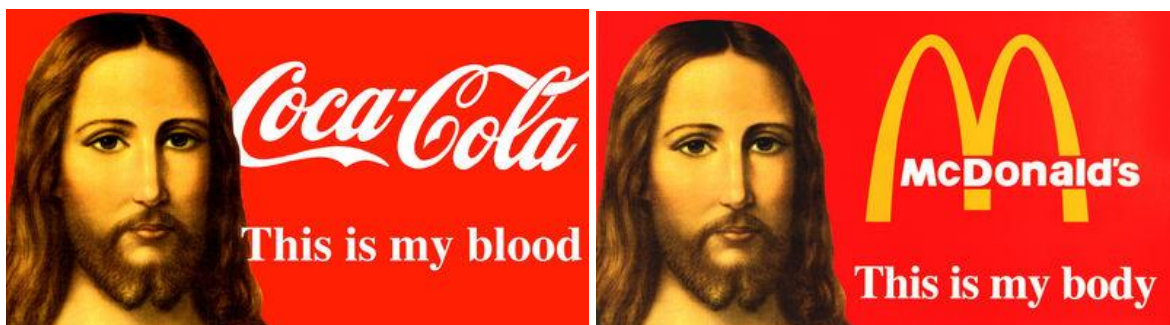
Ron Mueck, *Youth* (2009/11)

The fourth piece is Andres Serrano's infamous *Piss Christ* (1987). It is one of the more controversial art pieces in recent history, reaching a tipping point "on Palm Sunday 2011 when French Catholic fundamentalists attacked and destroyed the photograph with hammers" (Holpuch, 2012), but has since been reprinted and exhibited, often met with a wall of protest. The photograph depicts a plastic figurine of Jesus Christ submerged in the artist's own urine. Despite the artist's own proclamation that the work itself is designed to be ambiguous, Serrano has also previously stated an interest in "over-commercialisation and cheapening of Christian iconography in contemporary culture" (Campbell, n.d.)



Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ* (1987)

Lastly selected is Alexander Kosolapov's *This is My Blood, This is My Body* (2001). Along with other artists work, Kosolapov's diptych was on display in the 2003 exhibition *Beware Religion* at the Sakharov Center in Moscow. The exhibition was met with a similar level of anger to that of Serrano's and all pieces displayed were defected or destroyed, as well as additional vandalism to the building itself (Cleric Describes "Beware, Religion!" Art Exhibit as Downright Provocation, 2003). Kosolapov explains "the idea of portraying an image of Christ juxtaposed against a billboard for Coca-Cola, dawned on me in 2000. Most of my work is a postmodernist interpretation of certain philosophical ideas, translated into the language of art. Christ marketing the Coca-Cola brand arose as a response to a text by S. Zhizhik, about a God and a people, who have lost their ability to communicate to one another." (Sotheby's, n.d.). *This is My Blood, This is My Body* can be understood as Serrano's critique on the power of religion in dictating public opinion throughout Russia (Brodsky, 2014).



Alexander Kosolapov *This is My Blood, This is My Body* (2001)

Upon leaving the exhibition, the audience should have a new perspective and understanding on what religion is in the contemporary world and how it should be received and questioned instead of blindly accepted.

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## Figures

Cattelan, M., 1999. *La Nona Ora*. [Polyester resin, natural hairs, accessories, stone, carpet].

Fig. 1, floor plan for *The New and Old Worship* exhibition

Kosolopov, A., 2001. *This is My Blood, This is My Body*. [Digital print].

LaChapelle, D., 2007. American Jesus, Hold Me Carry Me Boldly. [Chromogenic print mounted on aludibond].

Mueck, R., 2009. Youth. [Mixed media sculpture].

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