

# Secular Pegs and God-Shaped Holes: The Uneasy Alliance of the Religious, the Spiritual and the Secular in Recent Art for the Church

Jonathan Koestlé-Cate<sup>1</sup>

Goldsmiths College, London, UK  
j.koestle-cate@gold.ac.uk

**Abstract:** It is sometimes claimed that contemporary Western culture has at its heart a God-shaped hole. It is an accusation more specifically levelled at modern art whenever it makes incursions into the church, especially when so many of the chosen artists openly admit to being atheists or agnostics. For some, the increasing use of non-confessional artists to produce work for the church is seen as a symptom of this spiritual vacuum; conversely, for others it signifies a repudiation of the premises of this thesis, in that spiritual values are judged to be no less evident just because a conventionally religious sensibility appears to be absent. An unlikely response to this debate may be discerned in Badiou's philosophy of the situated void; unintentionally offering an incisive perspective on this question of a God-shaped hole, his ideas disclose the possibility of a rapprochement between theology, spirituality and art.

**Keywords:** contemporary art; church art; God-shaped hole; situated void; spirituality.

## Introduction

The theologian Rudolf Bultmann once remarked that modern secular culture has at its heart a 'God-shaped hole', equating the decline of religious belief with the loss of meaning. Bultmann's supposition was that our so-called post-Christian age had been emptied of any truly spiritual quality, ironically a crisis exacerbated by Protestant theology itself, whose rigorous exegesis of

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1. Dr Jonathan Koestlé-Cate is an Associate Lecturer at Goldsmith's College, London.

biblical texts had resulted in a God-shaped hole in theology (Fuller 1985: 191–2, 304). Responding to Bultmann's thesis, Langdon Gilkey (1995) argued for art's potential to fill that absence, by implication reiterating the commonly voiced appeal for the museum of art to act as a site of spiritual sustenance. More interesting, perhaps, is a related but tangential response to Bultmann from the respected church historian Allan Doig, who some years ago broached this issue, asking the question, 'Is there a God-shaped hole in the middle of modern art?' (Doig 1999). Doig's query was directed rather more towards the perception that a spiritual vacuum is endemic to modern and contemporary art, an assumption with which he fundamentally disagrees. His argument is essentially a defence of the use of modern art in churches, using as examples several canonical works by Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland, Marc Chagall and Henri Matisse, as well as more recent artists like Antony Gormley, thereby disavowing the notion of modern art's besetting godlessness. This argument has two main thrusts: modern art, especially that produced by non-believing artists, need not be feared nor disdained as intrinsically godless, nor should the church, in choosing to patronize it, presume to fill art's God-shaped hole with its own system of thought and interpretation. Art is, and should remain, another way of expressing spiritual truths rather than a vehicle for the church to express its own values.

In this journal's first issue Rina Arya (2011) drew attention to the spirituality associated, rightly or wrongly, with certain artists working outside mainstream religion yet employing the language of the spiritual. I would like to approach this supposition of a God-shaped hole in art by considering Doig's argument with reference to the use of contemporary art within the church, before returning, in my conclusion, to another way of considering this purported vacuity. Against the accusation that contemporary art, especially that originating from secular sources, can have little to offer the church since it has a spiritual void where God should be, Doig's argument and the evidence of current practice suggest otherwise. Even if artists are often reluctant to comply with a religious framework of meaning, they seem perfectly willing to affirm the more encompassing notion of the spiritual in their work for the church.

As one might expect, this is not always acceptable. A common difficulty for art produced for churches and cathedrals is that the requirement to fulfil ecclesiastical criteria can take precedence over artistic decisions. In such instances the pressure to produce a 'message-oriented' or 'faith-directed' work of art can compromise creativity and devalue the work of art as art (Begbie 1991: 248). Among Christian authors on this subject, plenty of examples can be found in which an explicitly Christian aesthetic and inspiration

is deemed imperative as a bulwark against the encroaching godlessness of contemporary art and contemporary culture. As one such advocate has put it, art for art's sake must be relinquished in favour of art for God's sake (Ryken 2006). Thus, artistic values should always be subordinated to sacramental ones, or, in other words, spirituality must always be framed within specified doctrinal parameters. For anyone aspiring to promote a vital place for art in a religious context as a means of recording, understanding and interpreting the world on its own terms, such impositions on art to be overtly 'Christian' could be considered not only unduly constraining, foreclosing aesthetic possibilities and inhibiting creativity, but also an undesirable delimiting of the varieties of spiritual experience and expression. In his contribution to the 1993 Images of Christ exhibition catalogue Rowan Williams underlined this point, conceding that art may be 'most seriously religious, even theological, when it isn't perceived as trying to illustrate Christian truths' (Williams 1993: 27). Though counter-intuitive, this principle has been fulfilled by many of the more memorable church-based artworks and installations of the past two decades.

### **Policies and Criteria for Art**

Following on from this thought, a recent aspect of my research has involved analyses of the ever-increasing number of arts policies now being introduced by cathedral chapters in England. These are in effect an effort to ratify the use of contemporary art invited into or commissioned for their respective sacred spaces, and invariably attempt to determine the degree to which art should fulfil religious as well as aesthetic criteria. Central to all such policies is the place allocated to qualifying terms like 'Christian', 'religious' or 'spiritual' as descriptors of the art or artists engaged by the church. For some policies, fairly prescriptive rules are laid down regarding the spiritual pedigree of the art or artists to be employed; others prefer to keep their parameters as loose and unrestrictive as possible. Those policies that tend to be more conciliatory emphasize the faith placed in the visual arts as a source of spiritual insight, regardless of the religious persuasion of the artist. Nevertheless, an underlying implication of several of the policies is the need to contain art's unruly, subversive or unmanageable potential, a concern undoubtedly exacerbated when that art has secular rather than religious origins.

This new trend for arts policies clearly communicates a desire on the part of the church to defend a modern ecclesiastical artistic tradition. However, at their best such prescriptions can be delimiting; at their worst they could be characterized as a kind of 'soft iconoclasm', to coin a phrase

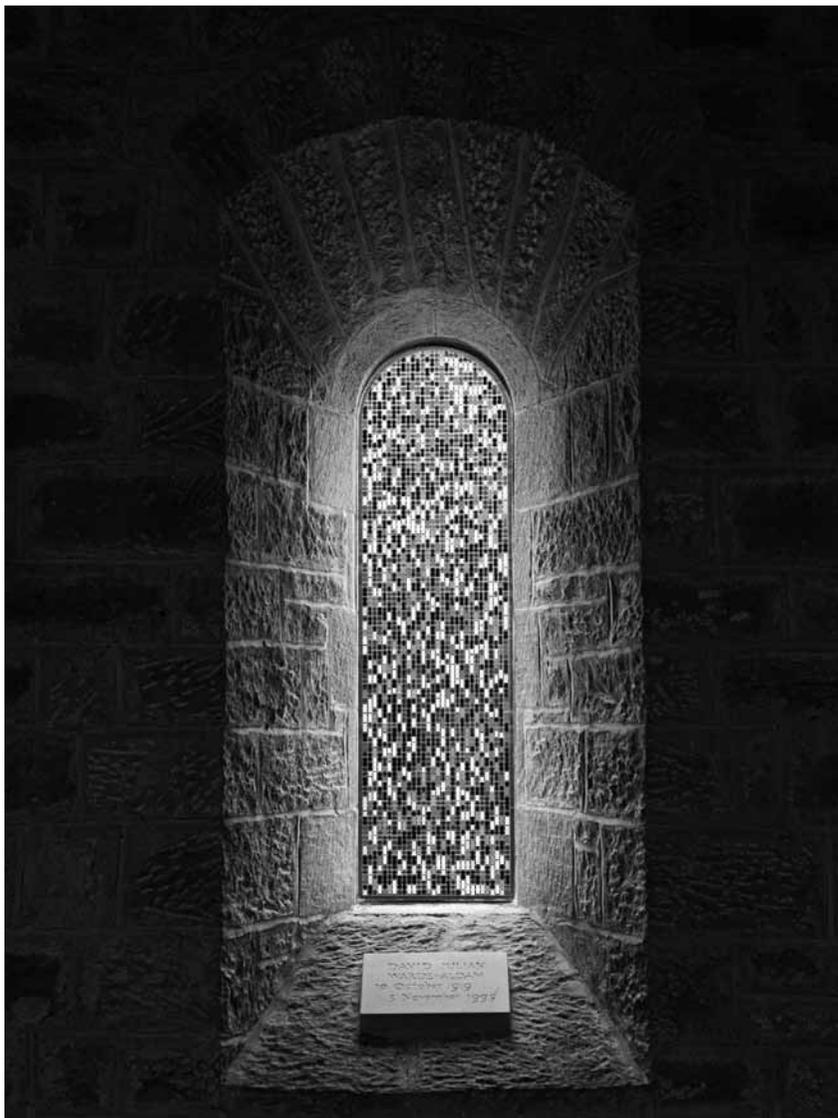
from a recent study (Siedell 2008: 14). Even among those at the forefront of encouraging a vital role for art in ecclesiastical spaces such discourses continue to predominate. For example, in 2009, at a conference debating the role of the visual arts in cathedrals, a set of criteria for commissioning was proposed by a senior clergyman. It is worth considering his proposals since his choice of criteria is so frequently reiterated. He outlined three essential qualities that he felt had to be taken into account or, to use his term, 'negotiated', in any commission for the church: aesthetic quality, clear Christian symbolism and accessibility (Inge 2009). Although we can see why he would describe these three as essential it is not insignificant that he chose to speak of negotiating since the viability of all three conditions is debatable. We would be unlikely to demand such rigorous criteria of a non-ecclesiastical work, and might well question the advisability of doing so for a church context. Furthermore, little scope is offered for explorations of spirituality that fall outside Christian iconography.

The first condition may be subsumed into subjective criteria of taste, however much voices within the arts, media or the church call for certain objective standards to be upheld. If we are to utilize this criterion we would need to understand precisely what is meant by aesthetic quality. Although there may be an argument in favour of this condition it is no easy matter to decide its parameters or scope, especially where the use of new media is concerned. It may be that certain assumptions inform (or rather pre-form) aesthetic expectations. The second condition barely seems to apply at all based on many of the successful precedents for contemporary ecclesiastical art. Christian symbolism is often absent, and when it is present is often far from clear. This lack of clarity is compounded by a frequently lamented lack of visual and symbolic literacy among the lay public (where a common complaint concerning the first condition is that it is compromised by a lack of visual sensitivity or education on the part of the clergy). Of course, a perceived decline in the power and communicability of traditional Christian symbolism, along with the appropriation and wilful distortion of religious imagery in much contemporary art outside the church, does not necessarily devalue the importance of such symbolism, but it does cause us to ponder the efficacy of such a condition. As the theologian Paul Tillich (1984) once mordantly noted, the poverty of a great deal of 'church-sponsored art' has been its adherence to such clear and distinct directives, often resulting in an art that calls for iconoclasm! Does clear Christian symbolism preclude all forms of abstraction, for example, or rule out ambient or conceptual works? Are works based upon the symbols of other religions automatically disqualified? Several significant pieces of church art would be ineligible on

these grounds. Would it discount works that might be considered difficult or abstruse? This was a criticism often levelled at Epstein's sculptures, but few today would dismiss his works for the church as lacking in relevant symbolism. I could go on but let us move on to the third condition of accessibility, which is an extension of the second. What is required of a work of art for it to be accessible, and to whom must it be accessible? Does this imply easy access to a work? Does it infer that at some level everyone should be able to appreciate it? Is there not a sense in which at times accessibility takes second place to mystery, uncertainty or complexity? A work of art may be initially accessible on one level but guarded on another, requiring effort, patience or determination on the part of the viewer. Multifarious discourses of art, no less than the complexities of theology itself and the richness of human experience, would seem to militate against anything other than a discrepant view of accessibility.

From a certain Christian standpoint one might justifiably lay down the law on these three conditions, and demand that it is only good and right that a work of art in an ecclesiastical setting fulfil these requirements, but one would be going against a tradition of modern art in the church, from Marie-Alain Couturier, Walter Hussey and George Bell onwards, that has sought to extend the range of artistic form and content beyond such narrow limitations. In his defence of Hussey's commissions for St Matthew's Church in Northampton, for example, Sir Kenneth Clark offered a robust retort to critics of the use of a contemporary, often difficult, idiom in art for the church, objecting to 'the fallacy that works of Church Art must be immediately perceptible and understandable to everybody' (Hussey 1985: 41). This charge is no less relevant today. Does not this schema place all the emphasis of communication upon the work of art – to be aesthetically pleasing, symbolically clear and hermeneutically unchallenging – as well as presupposing an ideal or universal subject to whom it communicates its meaning and message? Such a model is rarely invoked outside the church today, but nor is it typically found inside it.

Taking the most recent winning entries of the Art and Christianity Enquiry (ACE) Award for Art in a Religious Context, a recognized award for works that are judged to be not only significant works of art in their own right but specifically so within their ecclesiastical setting, it is evident that these criteria, although undoubtedly widely supported, hardly apply at all. 2011's joint winners, James Hugonin and Anne Vibeke Mou, created two windows for the parish church of St John's in Healey, Northumberland, thus working with a familiar ecclesiastical aesthetic but in unfamiliar ways.



**Figure 1.** James Hugonin, 'Contrary Rhythm (Glass)', 2010, St John's Church, Healey, Northumberland.

Image courtesy of the artist; Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh; and St John's Church, Healey. Photograph by John McKenzie.

In each case, no clear Christian symbolism is evident, nor do they necessarily invite accessibility. One is motivated by diagrammatic abstraction, the other informed by minimalism; one follows a programmatic grid, the other is vaporous and ethereal; each is designed to invite contemplation yet each works with unconventional form and ambiguous meaning. Similarly, neither Tracey Emin's permanent neon work, 'For You', in Liverpool's Anglican cathedral, nor Rose Finn-Kelcey's 'Angel', temporarily sited atop St Paul's Parish Church in London, offers a straightforward aesthetic, clear symbolism or certain accessibility. Although we might think we know to whom Emin's fluorescent statement – 'I felt you and I knew you loved me' – is directed, this cannot be taken for granted. And, although as a work of light it clearly resonates with the aesthetic quality of the stained glass directly above it, what about the fact that it is delivered in an aesthetic form whose nearest equivalent is the electric signage found in any public institution today? There are many for whom the use of neon represents tawdry populism ill-suited to what might otherwise be read as a statement of devotion. In fact the work is surprisingly nuanced. Unlike the neon texts of Bruce Nauman or Martin Creed, the thicks and thins of Emin's pink neon script replicate the personality of the written hand, adding a candid



**Figure 2.** Tracey Emin, 'For You', 2008, Liverpool Anglican Cathedral. Photograph by Jonathan Koestlé-Cate.



**Figure 3.** Rose Finn-Kelcey, 'Angel', 2004, St Paul's Parish Church, London.  
Image courtesy of the artist, and Art and Sacred Places.

note of intimacy to a very public setting. Set beneath the enormity of Carl Edwards's colourful and multi-fragmented window, Emin's text posits a still and meditative focal point, offering the viewer an affective, tender statement; mawkish perhaps, but sincere, a human dimension within the cavernous proportions of the nave.

Finn-Kelcey's work, on the other hand, is saturated with the language of popular culture, using the economical language of mobile phone texting to spell out, in colourful shimmer discs, the most 'visually economic rendition of an angel' (Moffatt 2004: 4). 'Angel' gained widespread popularity during its brief tenure at St Paul's, but her use of the emoticon seemed designed to appeal to a specific audience able to recognize the unorthodox language it applied. Alison Watt's painting, 'Still', in Old St Paul's Church, Edinburgh, is composed of four closely abutting canvases depicting folds of white fabric, a cross negatively formed by the thin dark cleft between the canvases. It seems to indicate a closer correlation with the proposed criteria, yet retains sufficient mystery in its silent presence within the church to confound all but the most indirect and allusive of interpretations. In each of these cases the lack of obvious 'religious' imagery is not seen as an impediment to conveying spiritual intent; indeed, if anything, it adds to their spiritual efficacy.



**Figure 4.** Alison Watt, 'Still', 2003–4, Old St Paul's Episcopal Church, Edinburgh, Scotland. Image courtesy of the artist and Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh, and Old St Paul's Episcopal Church. Photograph by Hyjdla Kosaniuk Innes.

### **Non-Christian Art and Artists**

A concrete effect of the issues at stake here extends beyond the degree to which a work of art satisfies certain specified criteria to the consequences it has for the choice of artists selected to produce work for the church. Whatever the religious convictions of the artists discussed above, a characteristic scenario of ecclesiastical installations nowadays is that artists are routinely selected who openly profess no form of Christian belief. This

is deemed no bar to their ability to produce work appropriate to a sacred environment. If, in a great many cases, including the afore-mentioned examples, an invited artist eschews explicitly 'religious' themes or conventional 'sacred' iconography, they are invariably willing to engage with some notion of the 'spiritual'. Yet if art is not to become merely a spiritual fetish to plug the gap of a disquieting God-shaped void, should we not question the nature of the spiritual experience on offer? If the church has a quite definite sense of what it means by 'spiritual', when applied to art it threatens to dissolve into empty platitudes, often little more than a nebulous justification for ambiguity or abstraction. As the art critic Peter Fuller once damningly opined, 'one worrying feature of recent years has been the fashionable appropriation of the language of the "spiritual" to defend work of a numbing vacuity' (Fuller 1985: xviii). Fuller's complaint is not necessarily directed at church-based art (although see below) but has clear implications for the justification of works whose claim to 'spirituality' has no basis in religious conviction.

Père Marie-Alain Couturier is usually cited as an early defender of employing non-believing artists for the church, a risk-taking agenda realized in the commission of works for the church of Notre-Dame de Toute Grâce at Assy, France, and shortly followed by projects at Vence and Audincourt. Piety, he felt, was no replacement for artistic vision; among those chosen for Assy were confirmed atheists like Richier, communists such as Léger, Lurçat and Braque, and Jews such as Chagall and Lipchitz. This lack of concern for the religious persuasion of the chosen artists extended even to employing some who had been openly hostile towards the Catholic Church (an attitude still evident as recently as 1997 when an invitation was extended to Dan Flavin to create a permanent light installation for a Milanese church, despite his well-publicized antipathy for Catholicism). Not everyone agrees with this line of thought of course. Others have reversed Couturier's argument, stipulating that sacred or religious art must demonstrate sacramental values over and above aesthetic or affective qualities. This would seem to imply that art is only ever a material means to a sacramental end. Thus, the quality of the artist is of less importance than their religious motivations. Even if we decry this extreme, a more incisive criticism of Couturier's attitude comes from the art historian Meyer Schapiro who raised the legitimate objection that the lack of a personally-felt religious sensitivity on the part of the artists at Assy meant that:

They followed their own sense of what was appropriate and produced a whole that has impressed visitors as no more than a museum, an episode in modern art rather than as a church building that owes

its unity to a single governing thought, to a program of decoration rooted in a living tradition of consistent religious thinking and art. (Schapiro 1999: 186)

Although we might understand the reasoning behind Couturier's disavowal of the absolute necessity for Christian artists, and at the same time concede that Schapiro's criticisms, whether true or not of Assy, could certainly be applied to a number of cathedral-based exhibitions of recent years, rightly or wrongly the balance has of late been weighted far more against those who would insist on the confessional artist. The shortlist for Chichester Cathedral's proposed (now possibly aborted) new sculpture commission was typical in this respect.

Couturier's stated aim had been to re-engage the church with 'living art', a reconciliation of the church and the contemporary world from which it had been so lamentably divorced (Couturier 1989: 61). That spirit of rapprochement appears to a large extent to have been achieved, judging by the evidence of the past two decades, with a steady flow of living artists apparently eager to extend their practice into the environment of the church. In fact, that evidence may be misleading. Writing on this subject some twenty years ago, Graham Howes had rightly pointed out that the 'religious' quality of artistic output was invariably poor since 'few contemporary artists have either the religious imagination or technical capacity to respond to ecclesiastical demand' (Howes 1991: 441). Though I would argue that, since then, the situation has radically improved, both in terms of the number of commissions available and the quality of response to them, the reluctance of artists to deal with 'religious' subject matter, let alone anything overtly Christian, in favour of broadly 'spiritual' themes is noticeably evident. Unsurprisingly perhaps, this is even more the case outside the church. As Dan Fox, senior editor of *Frieze*, put it in an editorial for a special issue dedicated to religion and spirituality, 'it's OK for artists to be "spiritual" in some vague, New Agey sort of way, but not "religious"' (Fox 2010: 15). Making art about religion is perfectly acceptable, even welcome, but religious art is not. Thus 'spirituality' becomes a kind of surrogate religion for a post-Christian culture. Perhaps this is what Rothko had in mind when he famously described the 'religious experience' of the viewer inspired to tears by his paintings and felt by the artist himself when painting them, yet in the same breath could deny that they had any specific religious content (Barnes 1989: 22).

Surprisingly perhaps, something akin to Schapiro's position was upheld by Fuller, an avowed atheist whose harsh reviews of early British church-based exhibitions like *Prophecy and Vision* (1982) and *The Journey* (1990)

were yet tempered with a genuine belief that a flourishing religion, faithful to its soteriological and Christological foundations, is alone capable of producing spiritually fulfilling art. 'Aesthetic experience', he claimed, 'was greatly diminished if it became divorced from the idea of the spiritual' (Fuller 1985: xiii). By which, as he makes clear in his *Images of God*, he means religiously spiritual, albeit a broader vision of the religious than many might espouse, one benefitting from the cultural and communal effects of the kind of shared symbolic order that religion once provided (Fuller 1985: 187–93). For Fuller, this spiritual dimension attributed to art acts as a necessary riposte to an overweening emphasis on the material. It is in an experience of art that a transcendental dimension may yet be found in the absence of God. Coming from 'an incorrigible atheist' (Fuller 1985: xiv) and Marxist, this is quite a confession. Similarly, in his conclusion to *Real Presences*, George Steiner predicts dire implications for creativity where a God-shaped hole signifies above all the loss of a religious sensibility. 'What I affirm', writes Steiner, 'is the intuition that where God's presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where his absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming weight, certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable' (Steiner 1989: 229).

Both Fuller and Steiner appear to be forging a middle way through this debate, taking a standpoint perhaps best captured by the nineteenth-century biologist T. H. Huxley, who once declared that 'a deep sense of religion' can be compatible with 'an entire absence of theology' (Carlyle 2002: xxi). Huxley could find no basis for the claims of theology but recognized the experiential validity of religious feeling, as his contemporary William James also adduced. Religion in this sense might best be understood through the words of an artist who has played no small part in the history of modern art and the church:

Artists, in a way, are religious anyway. They have to be; if by religion one means believing that life has some significance, and some meaning, which is what I think it has. An artist could not work without believing that. (Harries 2012)

These words of Henry Moore clearly bridge the gap between those who profess no orthodox religious faith and yet whose works possess some innate spiritual quality or profound spiritual significance, as Harries puts it. He cites Mark Wallinger, Antony Gormley, Bill Viola and Anselm Kiefer. A good many others could be added to this list.

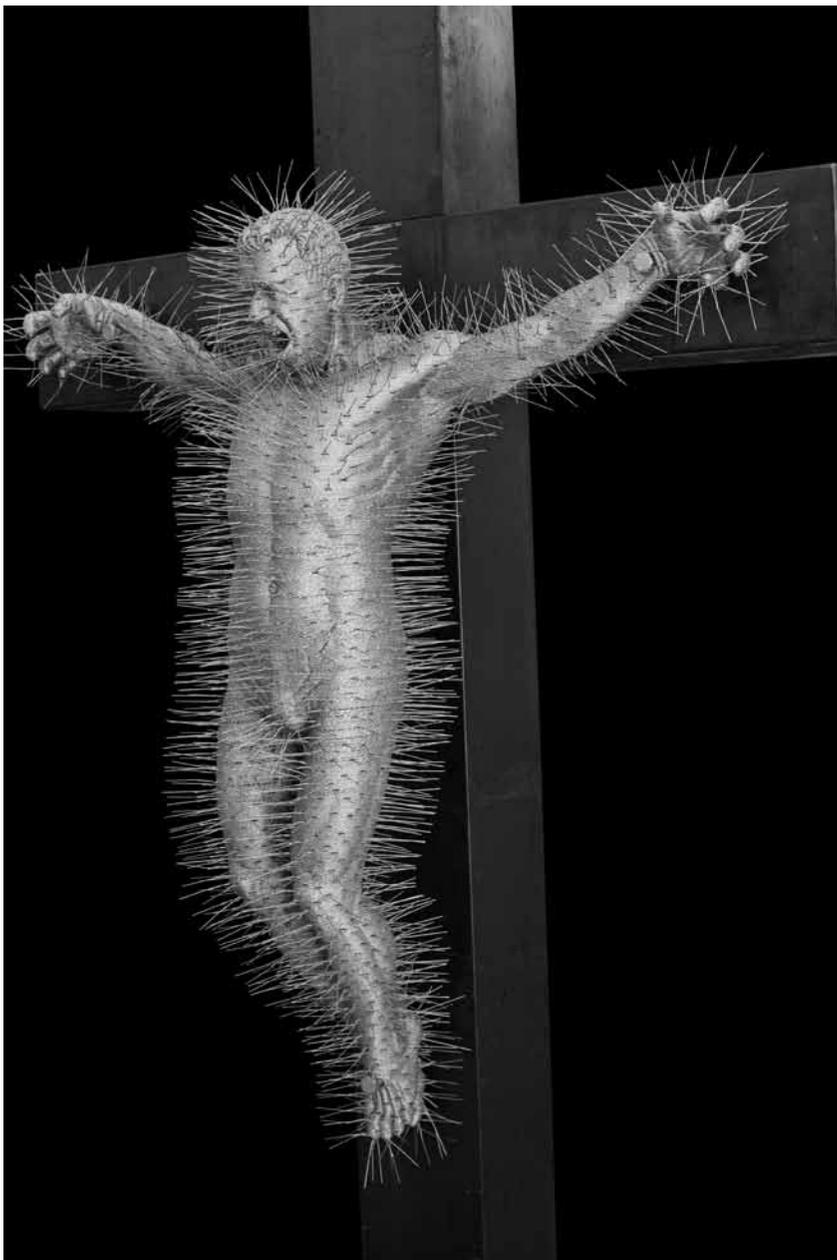
The argument continues to be made, with considerable justification I believe, that an insistence on Christian art and artists is limiting where

expressions of spiritual experience are concerned. And yet, for those of us with no desire to dispense with theology in the name of some kind of religiously or spiritually inflected art, the question then comes down to the role allotted to art in filling the God-shaped hole left vacant by a secular culture willing to dispense with any formative central place for religion. This brings with it its own problems. As David Morgan once observed, 'surely no word is used less happily these days when talking about art than "spiritual"'. It conjures up everything from auras and artists in robes to the mysteries of the sublime and the great white cube of the gallery-chapel' (Morgan 1996: 34). As if in response to this plaint, some years ago a special issue of *New Art Examiner* set itself the task to consider precisely the 'spiritual' credentials of an art divorced from a religious symbolic order. One of the contributors considered the way in which the term could be subdivided into more manageable and perhaps more meaningful categories – 'the religious', 'the occult', 'the transcendent' (Brown 1999: 23) – to which, of course, could be added the immaterial, the abstract, the non-rational, the primitive, the surreal, the sublime, the sacred, the contemplative, kenotic or numinous aspects of experience, all of which have been artistically employed to fill that existential emptiness of the God-shaped hole. Brown stresses the importance of recognizing 'the multifaceted nature of contemporary spirituality', since failure to do so 'cannot help but impoverish the understanding of contemporary art' (Brown 1999: 27).<sup>2</sup> But it is equally this recognition that paves the way for an exploration of alternative spiritualities within the contemporary church whereby theology, religion and spirituality can mutually correspond with unconventional forms of art and non-confessional artists.

For example, in 2011, *The Guardian* newspaper asked a number of writers to respond to the question, 'Do we need faith to see religious art?' Adrienne Chaplin responded with reference to David Mach, a self-confessed non-believing artist, whose signature wire coat-hanger sculptures of the crucifixion have recently been shown in London's Southwark Cathedral and formed the sculptural centrepiece for a massive exhibition of Mach's work devoted to the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible in Edinburgh in 2011.

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2. Brown specifically proposes four categories of spirituality available to artists: an exclusivistic spirituality which asserts a single set of orthodox ideas and practices, typically associated with organized religion; an assimilative spirituality which combines ideas and practices drawn from distinctly different sources, as found in Theosophy or Anthroposophy, or which promotes a universalizing aesthetic; an alternative spirituality which espouses the spiritual values of the counterculture or the experiences of drug-induced consciousness; a pragmatic spirituality which defends the necessity of a re-enchantment of experience in the face of an overwhelmingly materialistic and spiritually impoverished world (Brown 1999).



**Figure 5.** David Mach, 'Die Harder', 2011.  
Image courtesy of the artist.

Chaplin's text counters the assumption that religious art is necessarily made by religious believers:

Works like Mach's challenge the assumption that only artists of faith can produce religious art. Indeed, it can sometimes be the artist without faith who does the better job, unencumbered by expectations of conforming to the standard interpretations of either the church or the history of art. (Chaplin 2011)

Personally, I suspect that Mach's religious images are unlikely to have the kind of long-term religious significance of a Henry Moore, Jacob Epstein or Graham Sutherland. They rely upon too great an attachment to our contemporary times and contemporary culture. Even so, at the Edinburgh exhibition one critic was astonished to witness genuine emotional engagement with Mach's works from members of the public. If these were works 'executed by a sceptic' he felt they had a clearly devotional effect on the devout (Lawson 2011: 9). Such public affirmation adds testimony to Lawson's belief that Mach has seriously 'reinvigorated spiritual art' (Lawson 2011: 10).

### **The Situated Void**

Is it then the case that criticisms of a God-shaped hole in contemporary art are not in fact borne out by the evidence of the works I have discussed, especially when spiritual content is dissociated from conventionally religious form? Or do we come at this question from the wrong direction entirely? In conclusion, I would like to suggest that Doig's disavowal of a God-shaped hole in modern art masks a fundamental misperception on his part. As I have noted, the notion of the void draws attention to a thorny problem that has frequently troubled critics of secularization – the idea that it results in a God-shaped hole – for which the French philosopher Alain Badiou may have provided an incisively perceptive answer. In order to capitalize on this possibility we must briefly familiarize ourselves with Badiou's philosophical schema.

This operates according to just four contexts of truth for philosophy: science, politics, art and love (but emphatically not religion). In other words, philosophical truth requires a set of conditions, whether political, scientific, amorous or artistic, within which an understanding of that truth may be satisfactorily expressed. Each of these fields of discourse has its own specified language, traditions, history, practices and theory. The environment in which these instituted forms of knowledge are operative as recognized frames of

reference is what Badiou calls their 'situation', meaning the already existing world in which they have meaning. A situation may be a coherent political structure, a well-defined set of scientific laws, legitimate forms of sexuality, a canon of artistic works, even (pushing the bounds of Badiou's conditions further than he would go) an adequate and persuasive theology. Periodically, within these established parameters something internal to the situation emerges, something with no proper place and making no sense within it. This is what Badiou calls an 'event'. It is his term for something that bears no relation to whatever is assumed to belong, by common consent, to the recognized values, parameters or conditions of a situation as it is, yet appears from within it, as its unrecognized or illegible aspect.

Thus, according to Badiou's vision of the world, any genuine philosophical work operates by a subtractive gesture. It makes holes in sense, interrupting the circulation of meaning or, as he puts it, it 'names the void inasmuch as it names the not-known of the situation' (Badiou 2001: 69). This is no less true of art. As one of the key theses of his *Manifesto of Affirmationist Art* states, art operates outside the framework of the recognizably existing, rendering visible this putative non-existence (see Badiou and Winter 2006: 133–48). As such, it is tempting to detect in this formula certain popular definitions of the spiritual in art as, say, the non-material made visible; however, it would be a misreading of Badiou to do so. It is rather that any art worth the name operates out of a 'situated void', meaning whatever remains invisible to, or unthought within, the milieu in which it appears. Sticking with Badiou's terminology, in an ecclesiastical environment art can uphold and sustain the consistency of situated knowledge, meaning whatever can be named or counted as belonging to it. Alternatively, it can plumb the unknown for its resources, meaning art can operate out of the void of a situation and its recognized epistemologies. If working within the situation implies an art of orthodoxy, of patronage, tradition and convention, from which, it must be said, truly remarkable art and architecture have been achieved, the situated void refers to whatever remains, from the perspective of the church and church-goers, irreducible to ecclesiastical parameters, as a kind of latent possibility.

Badiou adds weight to the idea that art generates its own truth or access to truth, an idea often employed in support of art in churches. His contention is that truths are specific to particular conditions, the inference being that art offers a singular access to meaning or experience inaccessible to other realms of truth. In other words, the truth peculiar to art may be found nowhere else than in and through art. Of course, it is not possible to claim that every art event of note is an 'event' in Badiou's terms, but it may be that those that do present the viewer with the unconventional and unexpected

contribute in some small way to reworking the situation of ecclesiastical art by rendering visible or thinkable what was previously unimaginable, and are important to us for doing so. Badiou would no doubt argue that, if there is indeed a God-shaped hole in contemporary art, it is exactly this void or hole that makes meaningful art, and indeed philosophy, possible, not only within secular culture but also within the culture of the church. Indeed, we could argue that the artists mentioned above attempted to tap the riches of that void, articulating a visual, expressive language that was to some extent illegible within the religious iconography of its time.

From the perspective of the God-shaped hole thesis, what is usually signified is the absence, loss or lack of reference to God in a secular culture overshadowed by the Nietzschean declamation of God's death. However, from Badiou's perspective we could argue the exact opposite to be the case. Would it not be true to say that it is the unrepresentability of God that is itself the hole or void that artists over the centuries have attempted to fill with art (hence the iconoclastic destruction of images as idolatrous)? The void, the unrecognizable, unsymbolizable place from which an event emerges becomes in this sense another name for God. Thus, when some decry a God-shaped hole in today's Western culture, and imagine that a renewed dedication to religious belief will plug this gap, are they not forgetting that God is precisely the name of this void, whose presence, as the ultimate Real, can only be felt as the not-known in contemporary culture, as a hole puncturing reality? Against the assumption that God is the shape that fills the void, in strictly Badiouian terms it would be better to say that God is the very site of the void. And in fact Doig gets closer to this idea when he refers to the God-shaped hole central to the non-realist theological *Weltanschauung*: the radical unknowability of God as wholly other.

However, we should not be too hasty in drawing upon Badiou's philosophy in order to arrive at an apophatic reading (nor should we ascribe a spiritual character more generally to his ideas). The point is this: by Badiou's reckoning truth always exceeds the knowledge of a situation, and this is no less true of a Christian or ecclesiastical situation. However, the preference for orthodoxy, tradition and the familiar can often obscure this fact, delimiting experience, as David Brockman has observed: 'So long as Christians operate solely within the Christian situation, what they can "know" is limited to the elements collected therein' (Brockman 2010: 304). But, as might be argued for Christianity, its truth cannot be limited to those elements. Indeed, it is the not-known that appears to be of greatest significance, as that which gives shape to the known. Is it not the case that, for many contemporary artists producing work for the church, a desire for a kind of eventual truth has displaced the reproduction of familiar religious



**Figure 6.** Katy Armes, 'NoThing', 2011, St John the Baptist Church, Hellington, Norfolk. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Jodie Jaye.

themes, even if is far from clear how the former may be achieved? In this sense, art is always an excursion into unknown territory. It is exploratory, experimental and, at least potentially, revolutionary.

For Badiou it is the void that makes meaningful philosophy possible, finding its outlet in one of the four conditions of truth: the creative potential of art. Rather than a state of affairs to be lamented, therefore, this vacuum at the centre of contemporary Western culture, this veritable absence of God, is in effect the site of the Real, where artist and theologian find themselves on common ground. It is equally where a transformative spiritual dimension to experience may be posited since, to speak in very un-Badiouian terms, if the spiritual in art is something which cannot be comfortably assimilated into, recognized by, or counted as belonging to the situation in which it appears, neither is it, as Morgan reminds us, 'a formal feature embedded in the surface of the image'; it is rather 'something that happens between the work and the viewer' (Morgan 1996: 40).

Let me conclude with one modest example which subtly put this principle into practice. In 2011, in a quiet country parish church, the artist Katy Armes created a discreet and elegant response to its dusty interior using the most economical of means. In an environment discoloured by years of grime, a simple line was carefully and painstakingly cleaned from the dust-encrusted floor, running the full length of the church and leading to the altar. Difficult to convey in documentation, those who have seen the work testify to its surprisingly engaging presence and spiritual resonance. Yet there is in a sense nothing there, or rather it is the carefully executed appearance of the mundane and unseen that becomes the source of revelation. The work operates out of the situated void, disclosing what was always already there, only obscured and inaccessible. Through this process of creation by taking away, a humble stone-flagged floor thereby offers access to some dormant spiritual possibility.

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