

EDUARDO RALICKAS

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

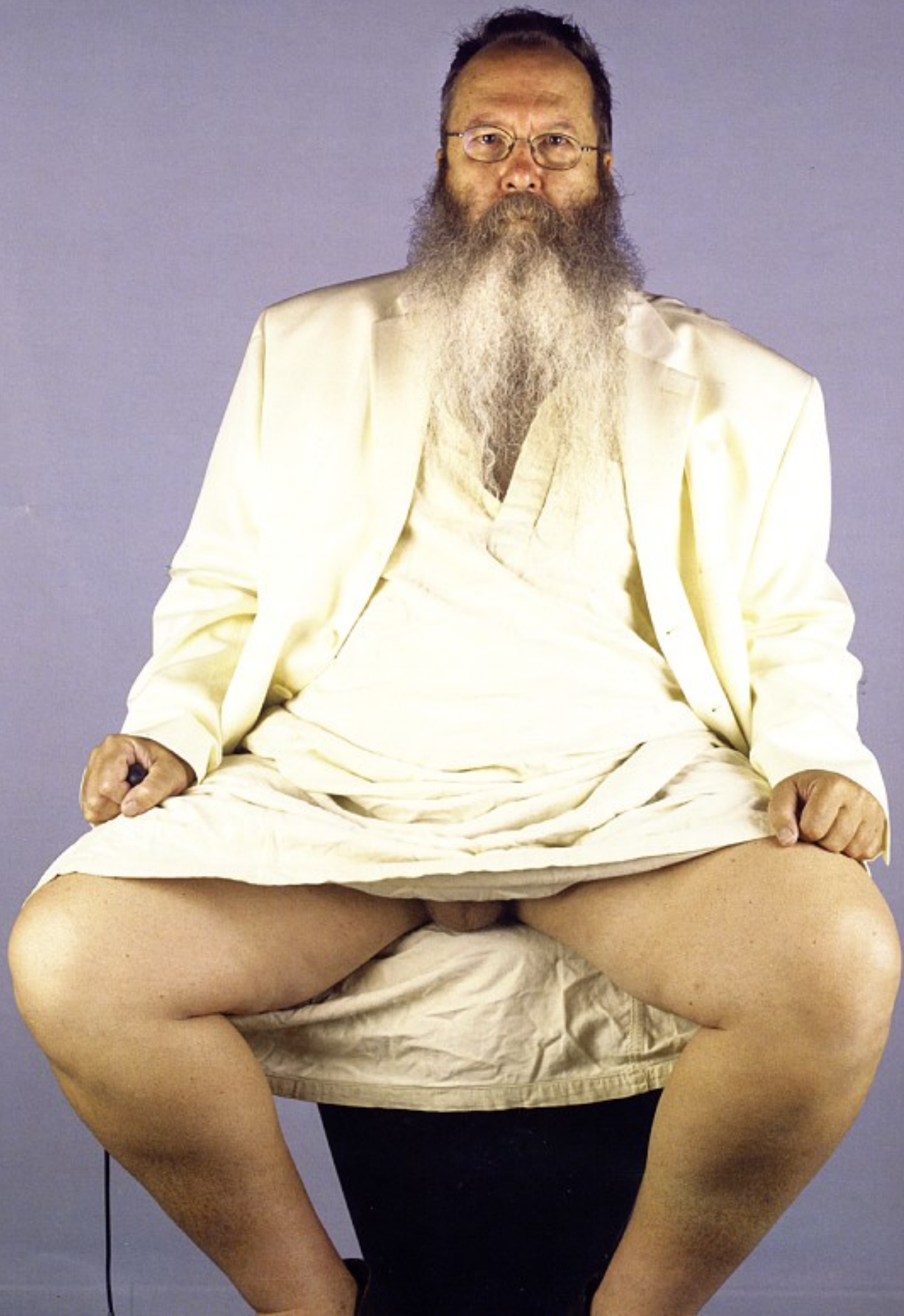
Porn, Cynicism and the Aesthetics of Christianity

PASSION

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

CYNICISM AS A MODALITY OF PRESENCE

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

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

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

