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**The Art of the Pink Nun:
Evangelical Christianity and
the Performance of Capitalism**

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The Pink Nun is an underground feminist performance artist, chastity advocate and pious evangelical Christian. In her artwork, the Pink Nun ironically deploys the methodologies and visual vocabulary of late American consumer capitalism, such that the evangelical Christian values of chastity and sexual purity become products to be bought and sold. In this unorthodox appropriation of capitalism, the Pink Nun finds an alternative way to preach her message, engage a self-announcing secular culture, and perhaps ultimately “harvest souls.” I argue that religion here does not perform in a conventionally “religious” way; it may be manifest more subtly, entwined with and disguised by the overarching economic system.

Introduction

The dynamic and decidedly over-the-top “Pink Nun” is not a typical woman of the cloth. She is probably never near a convent, and it is unlikely that she would attend mass. Although she dresses in a delightfully bright and glossy pink habit, the Pink Nun is not an ecclesiastically recognized sister at all. Rather, she is the fascinating creation and enduring alter ego of a performance artist who would prefer not to release her real name—a character she invented for an installation at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in conjunction with her MFA thesis in 2001 (Fig. 1). In the tradition set by feminist art icons the Guerrilla Girls, who famously use public masquerade to combat patriarchal practices in the art world, the Pink Nun is an ardent feminist and unconventional street performer with a die-hard sociopolitical message. Yet unlike many other contemporary feminist performance artists, the Pink Nun has firm religious

motivations as a committed evangelical Christian.¹ In a unique and sometimes uneasy amalgam of these dual sensibilities, the Pink Nun’s activist art testifies that chastity or “sexual purity”—primarily, abstinence until marriage—is a radically empowering feminist value.²

The Pink Nun’s work has been marked by persistent controversy. Ironically for the self-proclaimed “Defender of Purity,” the Nun regularly defends herself against charges of sacrilege and obscenity by many in the evangelical community. When performing at the colossal Christian music festival Cornerstone in 2004 in rural Illinois, she was actually asked to leave by a contingent of festivalgoers who were shocked by some of what she calls *Purity Products*—cleverly ludic and chastity-themed t-shirts, postcards, pencils, and even lingerie, among other paraphernalia—that she sells from her modest festival booth (Fig. 2). According to the offended group, the most egregious item she sold was a postcard declaring, “You are not a slot machine” (Fig. 3).³ Set on a bright pink background, the controversial card features a grainy black and white photograph of a slot machine, reminiscent of 1950s newspaper or television images. In the same visual

¹ My interest in the Pink Nun was precipitated by a Lilly Fellowship in the summer of 2006, during which I researched evangelical feminism, specifically relating to issues of identity and biblical interpretation. Indeed, to many people—including nonevangelicals and evangelicals alike—“evangelical feminism” is an oxymoron. Common understandings of the terms “evangelical” and “feminist” connote value systems and paradigms that are worlds apart. However, my research called for a more nuanced appraisal of evangelical culture than is often assumed by nonevangelicals. Evangelicalism is not monolithic, and it contains an enormous diversity of thought and practice within it. For this reason, it is difficult to define. The historian David Bebbington helpfully identifies four characteristics for identifying evangelicals: (1) biblicism, a “high view” of scripture, or a belief in the ultimate authority of biblical texts; (2) crucicentrism, an emphasis on the redemptive power of the crucifixion; (3) conversionism, or a “born again” experience; and (4) activism, or a commitment to evangelizing nonevangelicals and engaging nonevangelical culture. See Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-17.

² In an evangelical context, sexual acts are restricted to the context of marriage. Thus to preserve chastity, unmarried people must remain sexually abstinent. Within marriage, marital fidelity is required for chastity. Certain acts, whether inside or outside marriage, compromise chastity and more nebulously, “purity,” such as: nonvaginal sex, nonheterosexual activity, sexual thoughts, provocative dress, masturbation, and the use of pornography.

³ Interview of the Pink Nun, by author, Chicago, IL, September, 19, 2007.

style, a woman's arms and bare legs sprout from the machine's sides, composing a grotesque headless torso. Both legs and arms are spread wide, with the palms of her hands open as if in terrified but futile resistance. In no uncertain terms, the machine-hybrid body is lying on its back. The Nun's graphic montages are ultimately more than the sum of their parts; she designs them to jar viewers into thinking about the more insidious aspects of sex and sexuality that this society—regrettably mired in patriarchal legacies—too often takes for granted. Still, an evangelical Christian artist's campy eroticization of Christian purity induces an irony as palpable as it is strange. The question emerges: why does the Pink Nun choose to express herself visually in a way that puts her in danger of being misunderstood or rejected by the evangelical viewers she seeks to influence? One may be tempted to classify her as a Surrealist or a Dadaist, for the reasons behind her choice to promote her message with such ostensibly counterproductive methods are not immediately clear.

The Pink Nun defies aesthetic categorization. She does not create hard-hitting and obscene art merely for surrealism, controversy, or attention. She sincerely sees herself as an apostle sharing a social gospel. Considering the depth and sincerity of her commitment, to call her a Surrealist would be dismissive; she would not choose to create her art in this way if she thought that it maligned her message. Moreover—and more interesting for students of religion—the Pink Nun subconsciously or semisubconsciously deploys—indeed, co-opts—the methodologies and visual vocabulary of late American capitalism, specifically consumerism and commodification. Following the canons of Madison Avenue (e.g., “sex sells”), her graphic artworks like *You are not a slot machine*, free in their erotic use of camp vulgarity, paradoxically function as effective

advertisements for sexual purity. In fact, the Pink Nun closely follows common layout rules and psychological insights of advertisers. In this milieu, the evangelical Christian values of chastity and sexual purity become products to be bought and sold, both conceptually and literally in the case of her *Purity Products*. The business scheme might even be expanded to describe the Pink Nun as both CEO and salesperson, and her bright pink habit a logo.⁴ In her appropriation of economic methodologies, the Pink Nun has devised a crafty alternative way to preach the message, engage a self-announcing secular culture, and perhaps ultimately “harvest souls.” Through her own exploitation of consumerist methodologies, she performs as a preacher bent on getting you to the altar.

These observations may have noteworthy implications for the study of religion: I argue that religion here does not perform in a uniquely spiritual or didactic way. It may, invoking Max Weber, be manifest more subtly, entwined with and disguised by the overarching economic system. Although Weber would not have been able to anticipate the boom of consumerism now endemic to America’s late form of capitalism, I ultimately suggest that the Pink Nun may offer a contemporary link of an historically entrenched connection between consumerism and Protestant, particularly evangelical, Christianity.

⁴ Also ironic (yet less directly relevant) is the Pink Nun’s appropriation of the habit. The artist is not an ordained nun nor is she Catholic; evangelicals are generally suspicious of Catholic orders, rites, and accoutrements. The Pink Nun’s initially peculiar choice for her persona makes sense in that she symbolically deploys the habit not as a claim to identity but as an icon or logo, one that refers to the proto-feminist history of Catholic women’s monastic communities. Historian Caroline Bynum has argued that given the limited opportunities of medieval women, joining a convent could truly precipitate sexual autonomy and empowerment, albeit to a measured and appropriately contextualized degree. See Caroline Bynum, “Women’s Stories, Women’s Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner’s Theory of Liminality,” in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

Sites of analysis: why the Pink Nun?

Until relatively recently, scholars of religion have most often gleaned their information from sacred texts, creeds, and official documents—essentially, variations on *logos*, or “the Word,” doubtless reflecting a peculiar Protestant bias. In the past three decades, however, a slow shift has begun to take place in the field of Religious Studies. Scholars such as Margaret Miles, David Morgan, and Paul Tillich have ardently argued for the discipline’s recognition of the significance of the visual arts in the historical development of Christianity, as well as in ongoing spiritual revelation.⁵ Building upon their work, a new generation of academics is engaged in the field of religion and visual culture, articulated best by the American religionist Colleen McDannell in her groundbreaking book *Material Christianity*.⁶ McDannell argues that the material dimension of Christianity—including everything from Lourdes water to cemetery layouts to Mormon sacred garments—is a crucial site for the analysis of religious values, norms, behaviors, and attitudes. “American Christians,” she observes, “want to see, hear, and touch God... People build religion into the landscape, they make and buy pious images for their homes, they wear special reminders of their faith next to their bodies.”⁷ To overlook these visual or material manifestations of religion is to preclude potentially rich quarries of religious knowledge. My study of the Pink Nun is thus offered as a partial response to the challenge and call put forward by McDannell and others.

⁵ Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985); David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Paul Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, ed. John and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

⁶ See also David Morgan and Sally Promey, ed., *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2001).

⁷ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 1.

Reflecting innovations within the disciplines of Art History, Anthropology, and Theatre Studies, I further use the category of “performance” as a site of analysis. The discipline of Performance Studies and the definition of performance are contested terrain, but they are crucial to understanding the Pink Nun’s creative actions as consequential in the public sphere.⁸ Her images, products, and costume certainly qualify as art and as visual culture, but they are not passive artifacts; they are actively distributed, sold, and worn out in the streets. Whereas many studies on the visual culture of religion tend to approach imagery and objects as texts to be decoded or as material manifestations of a pre-existing ideology, performance is understood as an epistemology *sui generis*. Performance allows for an alternative exploration of religion as an embodied *practice*, not always transmittable through verbal or written constructs.⁹

My application of performance is highly indebted to Latin American Studies scholar Diana Taylor and her book *The Archive and the Repertoire*. To Taylor, performances are centrally about transaction; they are “vital acts of transfer” that transmit and create social knowledge in Latina/o culture and, by extension, other cultures.¹⁰

Although the Pink Nun is in many contexts a “performance artist,” not all of her art (like the products she sells from her website, www.thepinknun.com, for example) fits into

what we tend to colloquially describe as performance (Fig. 4). Thought of more

⁸ Anthropologist Victor Turner was among the first to introduce performance as a way of understanding the construction of culture, as in his epigrammatic adage, “performance as making, not faking.” See Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* (New York: PAJ Productions, 1982), 91. Turner’s ideas set the stage for a flood of diverse poststructuralist critiques from a variety of disciplines; for an introduction to contemporary performance discourse, see D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies* (Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage Publications, 2006).

⁹ With its deliberate emphasis on practice, performance is particularly important for the study of religion. Anthropologist Talal Asad has rightly criticized Clifford Geertz, long considered canonical for the anthropology of religion, for overstating symbolic religious meaning while ignoring disciplined practices and behaviors that may have significance in and of themselves. See Talal Asad, “Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz,” in *Man*, New Series 26, no. 3, (1983).

¹⁰ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

inclusively as “acts of transfer,” performance need not be defined in conventional terms of theatrical display. Performance can cover an extraordinarily broad range, encompassing traditional events like a ballet performed for an audience’s entertainment and more mundane cultural behavior like a birthday party, as well as even the commodified reproduction of graphic artwork and technologically mediated performance like a website.¹¹ Unlike the fixed display of visual culture, as a transaction, performance implies a reciprocal relationship. It insists on placing spectators within its frame, thus “implicating us in its ethics and politics.”¹² The Pink Nun is not performing for herself, nor is she performing uniquely for God; she performs as an apostle sharing a social gospel, vehemently dedicated to subverting patriarchal ideas and practices regarding sex and sexuality,¹³ thereby empowering heterosexual women in particular.¹⁴ In the Pink

¹¹ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 6.

¹² Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 33. In a similar vein, theater theorist Peter Brook uses the French verb *assister* to describe the audience’s participation in this reciprocal relationship. Commonly translated in English as “to watch,” *assister* implies not merely passive viewing but active engagement. Only with the active *assistance* from the audience can a performance become a living event, or what Brook laudably calls a theatre of *représentation*. Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 139.

¹³ A case could be made from the left of the Pink Nun, that in her support of chastity she actually is complicit to the historical whore/virgin binary—an instance of the patriarchy she presumes to oppose. It is important to recognize that feminism is not monolithic and is manifest differently in divergent social and religious contexts. While chastity may not have emancipatory power for all women, for the Pink Nun it can be a radical assertion of feminist power that speaks from and to her specific evangelical context. In sexual abstinence, she is freed from having her sexuality—indeed, a constituent part of her identity—dependent on men. While her choice may strike others as unappealing, alienating, or even complicit in patriarchal structures, it is nonetheless profoundly empowering for her. Further, as participants in cultures and structures, all of us are all complicit in patriarchy to some degree. Historian Margaret Miles suggests that for women in particular, culture-making has always been “a blend of identifying, adapting, and rejecting fragments of the cultural fabric that contributes to, or detracts from, their lives.” Insofar as women have historically had limited power and limited choices, their deployments of power are necessarily negotiations. Thus it is unsatisfactory, although tempting, to romanticize feminist women as completely emancipated subjects; ultimately, all women still encounter and must react to the patriarchy, and in all likelihood even the most passionate feminist unwittingly harbors internalized patriarchal tendencies. Yet it is inadequate to treat women as cogs in an overwhelming culture industry. Instead, women (and men, although the models of idealized masculinity often do not indicate it) must negotiate their own subjectivity neither as agents nor cogs but as something in between. From their own place in the web of power dynamics, women have a uniquely determined set of choices and a uniquely available set of tools. That the Pink Nun is not only a woman but also an *evangelical* woman circumscribes these choices. See Margaret Miles, “Introduction,” in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, ed. Clarissa Atkinson,

Nun's particular case, the transaction is a literal one; she wants her audiences to "buy in," in every sense of the term.

Costume and Street Performance

A brief introduction to the Pink Nun's costume and most common street performances is necessary to contextualize the forthcoming discussion of her appropriations of capitalism. First, her costume is commonly known in Catholicism as a habit. Although the Pink Nun's habit has moderately changed since 1998, its most recent incarnation is a full-length tunic with wide arm sleeves and a wide skirt, stretching to her ankles, and simple hot pink flat shoes. The fabric is hot pink with a glossy finish. She wears a white, similarly glossy wimple secured with elastic around her face and shoulders. Covering her ears and hairline, it wraps around her cheeks, chin, throat, and presumably the back of her head. Another white band covers her forehead. Exaggeratedly, the wimple extends just past her shoulders and rests, bib-like, across the upper part of her chest and back in vast semicircles. Unlike most bonafide wimples, hers seems unstarched. Atop her head is a long and lissome veil of the same glossy pink material, grazing her upper back. A relatively new addition to her costume is the embellished hot pink "P" on her chest covering part of the wimple, referencing the familiar Superman emblem (Fig. 5). Unlike Superman, the Pink Nun's "P" is pasted on a

Constance Buchanan, and Margaret Miles (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 3. For the classic "culture industry" argument from the Frankfurt School, see Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Adorno and Horkheimer, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

¹⁴ Like any good advertiser, the Pink Nun has a target audience. She assumes heterosexuality as normative, indicative of her theologically conservative context, but recently she has been more open to other sexualities and is now in dialogue with nonheterosexual artists such as San Francisco's famous drag group the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Beyond her evangelical values, the Nun considers heterosexual relationships as the exceptionally problematic because of inherently uneven power dynamics in patriarchal society.

bright yellow cartoon uterus.¹⁵ The uterus is pearl studded around the edges, with lines of pearls spiraling inward on both sides representing fallopian tubes and ovaries. Another recent addition to her costume is a silver chain around her waist in lieu of a rope or belt. On the chain, a secure combination lock is prominently displayed at the center, as a symbolic and modified form of the medieval chastity belt. No detail insignificant: the Pink Nun also carries a bright pink shoulder bag. She wears powder-white make-up such that her skin tone appears an unearthly pale. Thick, painted black eyelashes frame her blue eyes, while matching lipstick, eyeshadow, and blush—all in bright pink, of course—complete her visage.

As a performer, the Pink Nun created the costume—and a corresponding persona—to be worn in public where other people would see it. One of the Nun's preferred performance techniques is the street interview (Fig. 6).¹⁶ Standing in her full ensemble on the sidewalk of a crowded street in the north Chicago neighborhood of Belmont—known for its offbeat shops and eccentric characters—she assertively asks passersby if she could interview them for a minute. Momentarily confounded, most say no and hastily move on. Those who reluctantly or bemusedly consent are handed a microphone attached to the Nun's portable tape recorder. Possessing a jovial disposition paired with a palpable seriousness of purpose, the Nun begins recording and launches into a series of questions taken from her quasi-standard script.

¹⁵ Although space does not permit me to go into detail, and the Pink Nun herself would disagree, I suggest that the subtext here is actually highly queer and homoerotic, particularly reminiscent of 1980s gay/AIDS activism. With this intimation in mind, it is not difficult to recognize that her costume strongly evokes that of a drag queen. Aside from conventionally symbolizing innocence and girlhood, pink is also the traditional color associated with lesbian and gay activism. The Superman logo is frequently featured in pride imagery as well. These appropriations are, of course, highly ironic, as the Pink Nun's markets her message almost exclusively to heterosexual people—many of whom are homophobic—reflecting her evangelical Christian context. I am indebted to art historian Winston Kyan for this observation.

¹⁶ Documentary footage by Megan Vandehey, Columbia College film student, Chicago, IL, 2003.

How old are you?
Do you think there is still a purpose for marriage?
Should people wait to have sex until marriage?
Do you have certain standards or circumstances that must be met before you
 have sex with someone?
Do you think it is damaging to have casual sex?

Never antagonistic or expressly dogmatic, the Pink Nun simply listens and does not explicitly offer her own perspectives in most of these conversations, albeit her choice of questions are intended to invoke a certain kind of thinking. At the end of the interview, she always offers her interviewee a pink bookmark, in the style of a common Catholic prayer card (Fig. 7). The bookmark features a stylized picture of herself, a lyrical “Purity Prayer,” and the address to her website, pinknun.com. Like planting a mustard seed, the deliberately gentle and ambiguous interview is evidently supposed to sufficiently gain her public’s interest and entice them to visit her website, where she makes her pro-purity message resoundingly clear.

On Valentine’s Day, 2006, in South Beach, Florida, she swapped the microphone and recorder for a brimming bag of special Pink Nun valentines. The small white cards offer a chocolate heart in gold wrapping on the front, which when removed reveals the judicious advice, “Guard your heart.” Inside is a pithy original poem, free in its use of camp vulgarity, penned by the Pink Nun herself:

It can be quite a sting
When you go and swing
without a ring
You see, along with THAT THING,
Consequences cum.
Add up regrets,
And what’s the sum?

She closes her irreverent verse with an italicized exhortation, “Take Control... Respect yourself,” followed by her website address in bold font (Fig. 8). Brazenly forward and

relentlessly cheerful, she offers these imaginative cards to chance individuals and couples on the street, regularly and obligingly stopping to pose for photographs (Fig. 9).

The Art of the Purity Business

The Pink Nun's performances extend beyond their physical dimensions. To illuminate her methods of inciting viewers to "buy in," I investigate two further performative transactions in the Pink Nun's body of artistic work. First, I review her graphic art (especially her postcard *You are not fast food*) which functions ironically as advertisements for the traditional evangelical Christian values of chastity and sexual purity. Second, I demonstrate how the Pink Nun goes even further and translates sexual purity into a bonafide commodity in her extensive conceptual art project *Purity Products*. I draw comparisons between the Nun's work and that of secular artists similarly exploring the idea of art as commodity, namely Barbara Kruger and Claes Oldenburg. These comparisons locate the Nun within an appropriate artistic and historical framework and, more important, help clarify how she creatively departs from her secular predecessors commensurate with her own social and religious contexts and desires.

The Pink Nun and Advertising

Central to the Pink Nun's body of artistic work are her postcard-sized graphic images. She sells postcards like the *You are not a slot machine* on her website, www.pinknun.com, and often distributes them for free to passersby on the streets. When I met her for an interview on the sidewalk of a crowded street in the north Chicago

neighborhood of Belmont, she was distributing a stack of such postcards. The card, that I refer to as *You are not fast food* declares (Fig. 10):

You are not fast food
You are not to be consumed
Respect yourself
Take control
www.pinknun.com

This text is set on alternating red and yellow banners running at somewhat haphazard angles down the left side. The banners have jagged borders, giving the composition an edgy quality. The text banners absolutely pop off the postcard's black background, compelling the viewer to read them immediately. Accompanying the text on the right side of the postcard is an image of the Pink Nun's head and shoulders in three-quarters perspective. As usual, she dons her hot pink veil and full white wimple, and her face is made up flamboyantly with pink eyelids, cheeks, and lips against powder-white skin. Here she presents herself with expressively wide eyes that are almost cartoon-like; despite her body turned at an angle, her eyes dart straight at the viewer in a confrontational gaze. Never explicitly didactic, the Pink Nun (with help from Photoshop) holds a hot dog, likely representative of the "fast food," in her right hand. Perhaps bemused by her own phallic innuendo, the nun subtly curls her hot pink lips into an ambiguous half-smile.

This postcard pays explicit homage to the feminist graphic artist Barbara Kruger, famous for her image and text montages in the 1980s. Kruger ingeniously designed her work to emulate advertisements in order to provoke the viewer to think more critically about the media that he or she regularly and automatically consumes. This tactic is especially manifest in her renowned untitled 1981 piece popularly known as *Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face* (Fig. 11). In this grayscale image, a cropped photograph of a

woman's sculpted stone head is shown in profile; the line of her cheekbone is presented on the orthogonal, such that she seems to be looking down toward the lower right corner of the composition. The thick square base on which her neck rests is quite prominent. This sculptural head appears lit from above, casting a dark shadow over the eye and cheek. Kruger overlays this photograph with accompanying text that descends down the entire left edge in seven distinct text boxes, alternating black and white contrasts: Your / gaze / hits / the / side / of my / face.

Although Kruger's use of image and text is relatively spare, she manages to evoke a lot. The succinct text is written confrontationally in the second person, alerting the viewer that he or she is just that—a viewer. This has the immediate effect of engendering discomfort, for we are unaccustomed to attention drawn to our active interactions and relationships with images. The text now compels the spectator, habituated to viewing uncritically, to meditate on that relationship. The woman looks away, her eye dark in shadow. She does not return the viewer's gaze. The image ideally incites the viewer to consider the power dynamic inherent to the gaze—that the unchecked (male) gaze can function to objectify the gazed-upon (female) individual. In this piece, the object of the gaze is so arrested by the gaze that she becomes literally petrified, an ironic inversion of the Medusa story and perhaps a metaphor for women's relative social immobility.

While the Pink Nun and Barbara Kruger both creatively take advantage of American culture's consumerist and patriarchal tendencies by invoking advertising, they do so in different ways and to different ends. First and foremost, *Your Gaze* emulates advertising in order to contest the patriarchal gaze it relies on. *Fast Food* does this, too, but the Pink Nun has a larger project in mind: to convince the viewer of the feminist

power of sexual purity. The Pink Nun does not emulate advertising merely to challenge it; she appropriates advertising in order to *sell* sexual purity more effectively as a new and improved, self-empowering consumer good. She markets purity as a commodity to be bought or sold. In so doing, she puts herself on display, embracing the gaze. This tactic is clever, but the irony is inescapable: she offers purity as a commodity for public consumption yet this commodity ostensibly promotes the unequivocal anticonsumerist message, “You are not fast food. You are not to be consumed.” Further complicating this conceptual schema, she raises the incontrovertibly phallic “fast food” to her lips, as if to take a bite. The Madison Avenue axiom rings true: sex indeed sells, everything from shampoo to beer to cars. In an irony of ironies, the Pink Nun uses the quasi-pornographic to sell chastity and purity. She condemns the entanglement of consumerism and sex, while manipulating this exact entanglement to amplify her own agenda.

There is much evidence to illuminate her visual appropriation of advertising techniques. In his book *Advertising and Popular Culture*, Jib Fowles argues that in recent history there has been a shift in emphasis from society to the individual; institutions have been “replaced in whole or part by individuated and internalized coda.”¹⁷ Reflecting this societal trend, advertising has tended to construct idealized images of the self and to engender norms of individual identity.¹⁸ The Pink Nun and Kruger both use this technique. The artists’ messages are likewise directed toward a particular individual through the second-person pronoun. The Nun’s slogan “You are not fast food. You are not to be consumed” creates a world in which the individual must fight to “take control” against a dangerous and destructive society. The accompanying image she offers is

¹⁷ Jib Fowles, *Advertising and Popular Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), 197-98.

¹⁸ Fowles, *Advertising and Popular Culture*, 198.

amusingly not a beautiful, thin, young woman, as the viewer might expect, but the Nun herself in full habit. By displaying this image as the postcard's chief subject, she seeks to persuade the viewer to see the Pink Nun as the ideal self, or at least to attribute authority to herself as a teacher.

The Pink Nun also appropriates common aesthetic and layout rules. In an advertising handbook, New York art director Don May specifies the qualities of an effective advertisement. *Fast Food* exhibits remarkable congruence with almost all of them. For instance, following May's guidelines, the text is regular and presented in alternate colors that pleasantly mirror the colors in the Nun's hot dog. The image of the Nun bilaterally complements the text, while leaving enough black space so as not to inundate the viewer with information. The stark contrast allows the text and the image to stand out.¹⁹ Through the Nun's appropriation of these advertising techniques, she offers the evangelical Christian value of sexual purity as a highly desirable product, one that *you* need to be a more empowered, whole individual.

By creating hundreds of these postcards for distribution, the Pink Nun also facilitates hundreds of potential performances that may occur long after she has left the scene. She has reached the third and final order of Baudrillard's simulacra, in which the Pink Nun herself is no longer necessary for her goals to be accomplished.²⁰ Instead, she has made herself—effaced herself—into a logo, enabling infinite reproduction. The

¹⁹ Don May, *101 Roughs: A Handbook of Advertising Layout* (Chicago: Frederick J. Drake & Co., 1939), 95. Also see F.H. Wills, *Complete Introduction to Fundamentals of Layout: For Newspaper and Magazine Advertising* (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 1965).

²⁰ See Jean Baudrillard, "Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

postcard can carry out the Pink Nun's original intention; as an inanimate object, it can actually engage in unique interactions with whoever happens to view it.

Purity as Product

The Pink Nun does not stop at advertising. In a radically ironic move, she turns the traditional evangelical Christian value of sexual purity into a bonafide product to be bought and sold. Taylor suggests that technologically mediated performances will become increasingly relevant, articulating the visual and the embodied in altogether different ways, many still yet to be seen: I examine one site of (mainly) technologically mediated performance by the Pink Nun—her line of *Purity Products*, which she sells on her personal website (Fig. 12). These products premiered pre-cyberspace in her exhibition at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2001 in conjunction with her MFA thesis, in which she turned her gallery space into a store for myriad Pink Nun products, accessories, and accoutrements. These works were for sale, and the Pink Nun operated the cash register. Although this particular store closed at the end of the exhibition, popular interest encouraged the Pink Nun to continue to sell the products on her website. The Nun sells postcards, vinyl stickers, buttons, patches, pencils, t-shirts, trucker hats, an original “zine,” and novelties like bar soap tied with a pink bow and emblazoned with the Pink Nun's image and the message “Fight the filth,” a Pink Nun *ofrenda*-style pillar candle, a Pink Nun night light, and a Pink Nun Christmas ornament (Fig. 13).

The most popular products are her trademark Purity Panties (formerly known as Chastity Undies) available in several styles and colors. The classic design is bright pink

and displays an iconic silkscreen of the Pink Nun's expressive face alongside the words "You ain't gettin' nun!" (Fig. 14). Another original line of underwear offers different amusing patterns: one blue pair features rows of miniature beavers and warning labels that read "Nature preservation site... Keep out." Recently, the Nun began offering fashionable boy-short styles; One prominently displays a patch on the back that mimics a road construction sign, declaring, "This seat saved." Thong styles are available by request. And finally, by popular demand, the Nun now offers a line of boxers for men, one of which is stamped with the wry exhortation to "Lock your cock" (Fig. 15).

Claes Oldenburg's famous 1961 sculptural and conceptual work *The Store* is an revealing comparison to the Pink Nun's 1998 store and subsequent online business (Fig. 16). Oldenburg rented a vacant storefront on the Lower East Side of New York City and set the space up like a shop, from which he sold sculptural simulacra of food, clothing, and jewelry, inspired by the tawdry merchandise in bonafide stores in the neighborhood. Unlike the polished, mechanical style of pop art, Oldenburg deliberately created these objects with rough, uneven surfaces by laying plaster-soaked muslin cloth on wire frames. He then sloppily dripped brightly colored paint on them, engendering a sensuous and crude sensibility.²¹ While Oldenburg's myriad products are all art objects to some extent, these products serve a larger conceptual art project. Recalling Diana Taylor, I would describe *The Store* as a performance piece in that it requires a transaction to deliver its punch. When a viewer enters the store, she becomes a potential customer. She does not merely passively view Oldenburg's simulacrum of a pop can 7-UP as she might if it were displayed in a museum; she is expected to consider purchasing it (Fig. 17). Here

²¹ Coosje van Bruggen, *Claes Oldenburg: Mouse Museum/Ray Gun Wing* (Cologne, Germany: Museum Ludwig, 1979), 20-21.

Oldenburg emphasizes that art is a commodity—a fact that is undeniable in the art world but customarily circumvented in polite conversation by curators, critics, and collectors. That these artifacts are displayed as products in a store rather than as valuables placed in vitrines in a private gallery does not ontically change the works, but changes what they are worth and the implied social status of their consumers. Ironically but not surprisingly, many of these original objects are now in prominent museums and private collections and are worth hefty sums.

The Pink Nun's *Purity Products* online store is similarly a performative art project that requires transaction. Like Oldenburg, she deliberately creates her objects to become products to be bought and sold, comically revealing the nature of art as a commodity. Unlike Oldenburg's intentional sloppiness and resistance to sleek, mass-produced products, the Pink Nun, in a postmodernist move, embraces what is slick, shiny, and gimmicky. Her products all possess an off-the-rack look. Thus instead of creating her store to question capitalism, as Oldenburg did in the 1960s, she appropriates this aspect of capitalism to her own advantage. She offers a bizarre twist on Walter Benjamin's famous argument that art in the age of mechanical reproduction should serve Communist political goals; her mechanically reproduced art serves as a vehicle for capitalist consumption.²² It may have the secondary effect of making the audience question what it consumes, but the initial goal is to get the audience *to consume*. She brazenly offers sexual purity and chastity as commodities; with only a credit card and a PayPal account, an audience member can enter the Pink Nun's creative artwork and buy into her moral message. Especially in the case of her lingerie line, chastity is offered as

²² Walter, Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 217-252.

an eroticized commodity—an ironic choice but one that makes sense in her larger consumerist project.

Evangelical Christianity and the Spirit of Consumerism

The Pink Nun appropriates several methodologies of capitalism in her art, especially advertising and commodification, but a larger question remains: how might we theoretically account for this? It may be tempting to sideline her religious motivations as incidental or marginal (after all, much of her art does not appear to be didactically religious). On the contrary, I suggest that she turns to techniques from the economic domain because they themselves reflect disguised techniques of evangelical Christianity.

Sociologist Max Weber provocatively argued for the historical connection between Christianity, specifically Protestantism, and the rise of the capitalist economic system. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he posed that modern capitalism had developed hand in hand with a particular Protestant attitude toward work. According to Weber, these religious roots later became unrecognizable.²³ He began his historical analysis with the 16th century Protestant Reformation and artfully pulled a thread through the ensuing spiritual and intellectual developments—including the thoughts and practices of Lutherans, Calvinists, and Puritans, among other Reformed groups. Through complex processes of rationalization, Weber argued that these Protestantisms logically precede and anticipate rational capitalism as it is known and practiced today.²⁴ These developments were hardly the goals of Protestant groups but instead ironically emerged as byproducts, making the connection all the more subtle.

²³ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003), 40, 27.

²⁴ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 21, 26, 78.

Weber avoided oversimplification by clarifying that Protestantism's relationship to capitalism is in no way monocausal. Rather, Protestantism and capitalism functioned first to accommodate and then reciprocally to reinforce one another, ultimately leading to the current multifaceted economic system of his time.²⁵

Writing in 1905, Weber could not have anticipated the explosion of consumer culture and its corollary Madison Avenue advertising techniques associated with advanced modern capitalism today. However, I posit that if early 20th century capitalism indeed masked Protestant underpinnings, surely the consumer capitalism we know today is not free from Protestant influence, implying that the advertising that bombards us constantly is only ostensibly secular (in the sense of being religiously neutral or free of religion altogether). That the Pink Nun appropriates these techniques should come as no surprise. Although she likely thinks of herself as appropriating solidly secular techniques, she is actually coming home—she simply deploys the techniques well known to her own cultural history. After all, Protestant evangelicalism is a direct descendant of Calvinism. The secularization of this Calvinism in capitalism thus emerges with a renewed force right back into the world of evangelicals through the Pink Nun.

Advertising and consumerism were never purely secular enterprises then; they have always had a distinct yet masked Protestant—and more specifically, Calvinist-evangelical—underside. Furthermore, the pervasive evangelical commitments to proselytizing and saving souls can be understood as entangled with Madison Avenue advertising techniques. The advertising canons of how to sell a product may in fact, thanks to the printing press, have something to do with how to convince someone in the 16th century to have *sola fide* in Christ, or, thanks to the internet, someone in the 21st

²⁵ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 40-42.

century to approach the virtual altar and be “born again.” Significantly, my suggestion does not imply that evangelicals are the cause of, or are responsible for, the rampant consumerism in our capitalistic system. The idea that suppressing evangelicalism would lead to a reining in of capitalism is surely reductionist. As Weber would affirm, capitalism emerged as an unintentional byproduct of Protestantism—and consumerism and evangelicalism are merely residual 20th and 21st century reincarnations of these already complexly related juggernauts. Consumerism, like capitalism in general, is incontrovertibly interwoven into the fabric of our society, and it has emerged in forms barely recognizable to what we could definitively call Protestant, much less Calvinist or evangelical.

The question arises, does the Pink Nun’s application of capitalism degrade her religious ideas and motivations into something sacrilegious? Surely, for instance, her strategic use of the hot dog in *Fast Food* is at least problematic? While it may be tempting to imagine religion to be immaculately “sacred,” untainted by “profane” or worldly economics, I resist such a dichotomy and romanticization. The noted anthropologist Michael Taussig has actually even argued the opposite: that, when an object becomes desecrated, an effervescent empowerment or an irresistible “negative energy” is often released.²⁶ In the terms of the Pink Nun, when the ostensibly uncontaminated evangelical value of chastity becomes entwined with capitalism or even eroticized, chastity actually garners greater symbolic sacred power.

A particularly dramatic recent example of Taussig’s phenomenon might be the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Previously, most New Yorkers considered the

²⁶ Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 52.

Twin Towers to be unfortunate eyesores—they were not the powerful symbols of patriotism, national identity and so-called freedom the way they are now. Today, however, Ground Zero is shrouded in religious rhetoric, often referred to as a “pilgrimage” site where hundreds of thousands of pilgrims-cum-tourists visit each year. By the Towers’ very defacement, a new reality erupted. According to Taussig:

Defacement conspires with this fateful ambiguity, energizing it while accentuating the accursed share... that was there all the time, latent, so to speak, hidden, so to speak, all the more effectively granting sacred or quasi-sacred status.²⁷

In this meta-framework, the Pink Nun’s religious or sacred power exists not only in spite of, or incidentally to, her use of capitalism, but because of it. Without her sacrilegious appropriation of consumerist methods, perhaps the sacred would have no engine, no clear way to connect with viewers/consumers: it is capitalism that carries her message forward. One could even say that capitalism has replaced the function of the Holy Ghost. Recalling Taylor, her art, instead of being a performance and thus necessarily implicating the viewer, might merely be an emission, a quiet message metonymically folding back into the ether.

Conclusions and Implications for the Study of Religion

One larger implication of this peculiar blending of religion and economics that I wish to bring out is that “religion” cannot be relegated solely to the private or spiritual realm, even in this self-announcing secular nation, in which religion and the state are

²⁷ Taussig, *Defacement*, 52. Sociologist Emile Durkheim, the inventor of the famous sacred/profane dichotomy, would likely concur. Durkheim argues that the sacred is fraught with ambiguity and always exceeds attempts to contain it; his research on Australian indigenous ritual indicates that though transgressing taboo, impurity can actually become an instrument of sanctification. He further reminds that the Latin root for sacred is *sacer*, meaning both accursed and holy. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press), 1995, 415.

supposedly in separate spheres. As a case study of religious performance in contemporary America, the Pink Nun sheds light on religion's shifting role in public life. Religion performs on public stages and it may not present itself in a conventionally "religious" way. In fact, religion may be disguised, wrapped in a secular visual vocabulary and by using secular methods, obscenity and consumerism included with it. In the case of the Pink Nun, the traditional evangelical Christian value of sexual purity actually emerges from Madison Avenue-style commodification. The Pink Nun markets sexual purity erotically as a product to be bought and sold. Recalling Emile Durkheim's classic observation that the sacred tends to spill over into the profane, I suggest that the Pink Nun's evangelical Christianity, via capitalism, similarly spills over into the public secular sphere. The case of the Pink Nun, then, appears to run contra to secularization theory put forward by Marx, Freud, and others. It is not that society will become more and more secularized; perhaps it is that religion will become more and more masked until it is barely recognizable as religion, even stamped onto mass-produced lingerie. Religionists often remark that "the study of religion is often an exercise in making the strange familiar and in making the familiar strange."²⁸ The Pink Nun is an exceptional case of the former. For all her extravagance, complexity, and flamboyance, she actually taps into something quite normal—consumerism, the very air we breathe.

²⁸ For example, Jim Laine, "Mind, Mood, and Meta-Religion: Wider Horizons for Studying Religion and Culture," unpublished article, 2008, 24.

Figures



Figure 1. The Pink Nun, Chicago (2007), photograph by author.



Figure 2. Pink Nun Products booth at the Cornerstone Music Festival, Bushnell, Illinois (2004), photograph from pinknun.com.



Figure 3. *You are not a slot machine* postcard (2000), photograph from beliefnet.com.

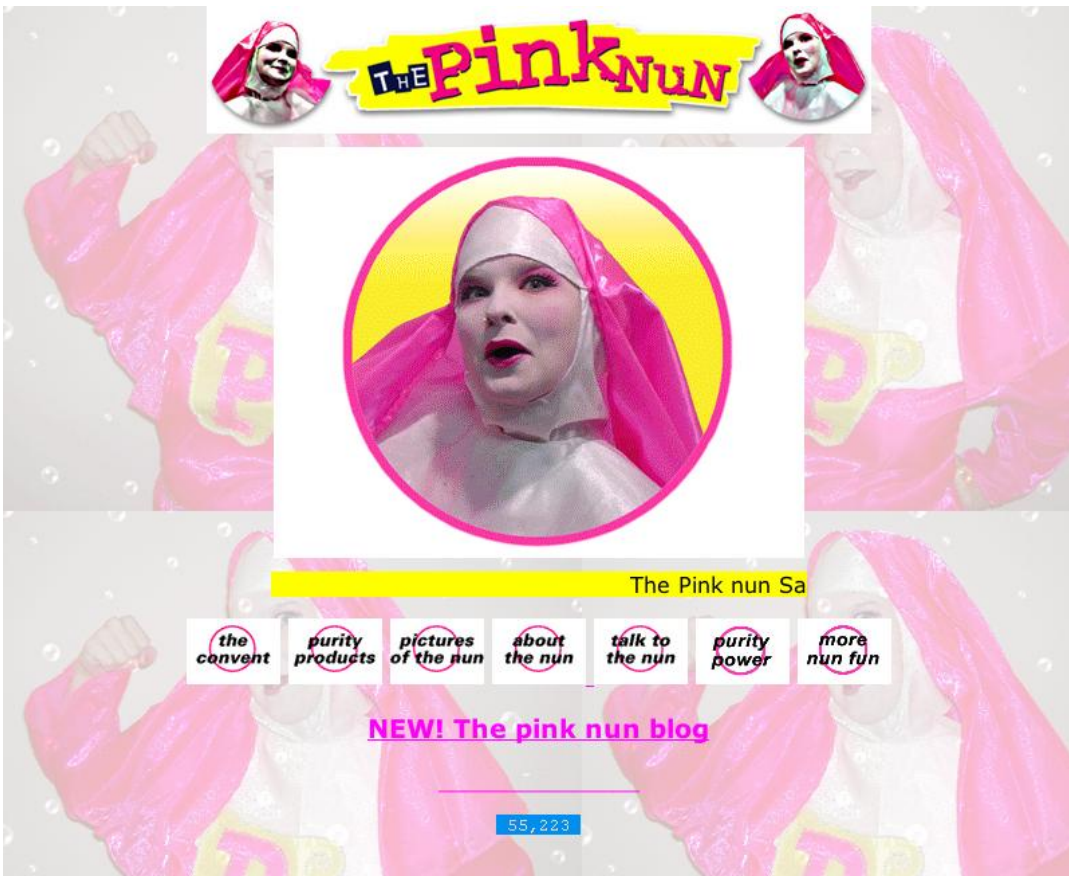


Figure 4. Screenshot from pinknun.com (2008).



Figure 5. The Pink Nun's pearl-studded uterus emblem and chastity belt, Chicago (2007), photograph by author.



Figure 6a. Interview with a man on the street, Chicago (2003), photograph from pinknun.com.



Figure 6b. The Nun engaging Madonna concertgoers, Chicago (2001), photograph from pinknun.com.



Figure 6c. The Nun with her canary yellow pick-up truck, decorated with slogans and logos. On the front is a painted image of the Nun's visage with the words, "Defender of Purity," Chicago (2003), photograph from pinknun.com.

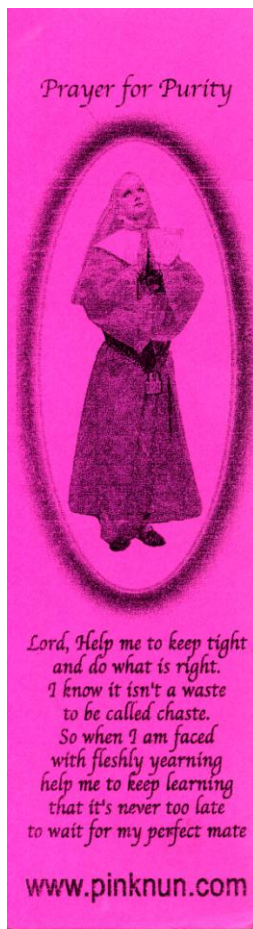


Figure 7. A prayer card offered by the Nun to people on the street, featuring an original "Prayer for Purity" (2008), 7 ½ x 2".



Figure 8. A prototype for the Pink Nun's valentine, South Beach, Florida (2006), from pinknun.com.



Figure 9. The Pink Nun pausing for a photograph with a bemused valentine recipient, South Beach, Florida (2006), photograph from pinknun.com.



Figure 10. *You are not fast food*, a postcard that the Pink Nun distributes on the streets (2007), 4 x 6".



Figure 11. Barbara Kruger, *Your gaze hits the side of my face* (1981), photograph, 54 ½ x 40".

the convent purity products pictures of the nun about the nun talk to the nun purity power more nun fun

Click to view or purchase the products

New Tshirts! New Mesh Hats! New Purity Panties Designs

New Boxers New Patches Extras

[Return](#) to Pink Nun products!
View the [next](#) group of products!

Figure 12. *Purity Products* screenshot from pinknun.com (2008).



Fig. 13a



Fig. 13b



Fig. 13c



Fig. 13d



Fig. 13e

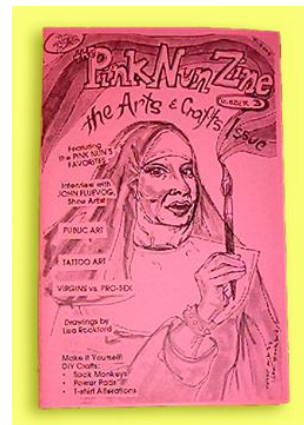


Fig. 13f

Figure 13. Various Purity Products available online (2001-2008).



Figure 14. The original design of *Purity Panties* (2000).



Figure 15. The Pink Nun's new line of boxers for men, stamped with the slogan, "Lock your cock" (2007).



Figure 16. Claes Oldenburg, *The Store*, New York (1961), photograph by the Green Gallery, New York.



Figure 17. Claes Oldenburg, *7-Up*, a product from *The Store* (1961), enamel on plaster-soaked cloth on wire, photograph by the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington D.C., 55 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 39 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".



Figure 18. The Pink Nun and the author, Chicago (2007), photographer unknown.

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