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# Altar To The Unknown God

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Altar To The Unknown God

by

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A THESIS  
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**Abstract**

*Altar to the Unknown God* is an MFA thesis exhibition concerned with twenty-first century spiritual and religious expressions of visual identity, as well as and the academic structures employed when formulating interpretations of their meaning and validity. Informed by a literary analysis on secularism and contemporary art criticism, this studio-led research utilizes a rhizomatic philosophical structure that seeks expansion and connective multiplicities rather than a definitive conclusion. Towards this goal, the literary investigation endeavors to define and demystify the complex interrelations between secularism as a pluralistic cultural condition with the academic challenge behind the formation of a method of theological art criticism. The studio-produced visual artwork is both informed by this analysis and rhizomatically seeks its expansion through an introspective investigative process. This inquiry aims to theorize an academic interpretative language capable of taking visual displays of enchantment as genuine, rather than naive depictions of superstition, thus producing structures and inter-religious dialogue that is inclusive of spiritual identity in the shifting landscape of the twenty-first century.

## **Acknowledgements**

Before jumping into the body of this thesis paper, I would like to take a minute to offer my acknowledgement and thanks to some of the people who have helped make all this possible.

First, I would like to thank my family for their encouragement and support along the way. My mother, for your unsolicited “care” packages arriving in the mail during stressful periods. My father, for your genuine willingness to offer wisdom, guidance, and prayer when I needed it, and of course for also offering to write this paper for me out of a desire to relieve me of my anxiety and stress. It was such a tempting offer. My brother and sister-in-law, Kyle and Shannon, for your support and encouragement along the way. My grandparents for your steadfast prayer, support, and willingness to supply fresh pens when mine were running low. I would also like to thank my amazing friends, you Mighty Men, many of whom I have known for nearly two decades. I thank you and your spouses for always being available to talk and pray through stressful times, for your willingness to offer last minute proofreads of my assignments, and your enthusiasm for my work despite not really understanding what I am doing. And finally, Daisy May, for showing more enthusiasm than any other family member whenever I managed to visit home. You are an angel.

I would also like to thank Tiffany for sharing my passion for the arts and always being down to discuss the wild wonders of creativity. Also, for that one time you surprised me with a skip-the-dishes gift voucher so I would be sure to eat a proper meal that day. My heartfelt thanks goes out to one of my closest friends, Kaylee, who took the time to come out to Calgary to visit me, and who’s handwritten letters always served to brighten my day and encourage me. I would like to thank my friend Basia. Your show of support for my weird and wonderful creations, as

well as your social media messages of encouragement, have been so very appreciated.

Additionally, I would like to thank my colleagues and fellow MFA students for their feedback and critiques over the past two years, and for the valuable yet occasional moments we could vent or celebrate together over a pint.

I would like to thank my supervisor Gerald Hushlak and my committee members, Dr. Lisa Hughs and Marc Boutin, for your continued encouragement and guidance throughout this program. Your unexpectedly consistent expressions of interest, and your fantastic questions in response to my strange and confused ramblings on spirituality, religion, and art criticism, have been one of the sole encouragements that kept me from giving up and quitting.

And finally, I would like to offer my thanks and my praise to Jesus Christ, God almighty for never leaving nor forsaking me. This research and artistic pursuit has been primarily conducted for you and your glory. I only hope that at the end of the day, when the dust settles, it will prove to be an endeavor that is both honoring and glorifying to your name.

Thank you all, and God bless.

Per Calendar L.7 Copyediting, this thesis has been professionally edited by a copy editor.

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## **Preface**

As an artist pursuing a career in the contemporary art world, I realize it might seem odd, possibly even heretical, to read the words “theology,” “God,” and “religion” as descriptors of a thesis exhibition. Indeed, the subjects of “art” and “religion” seem like a rather odd and unexpected combination in the twenty-first century, especially when encountered in a gallery setting. Considering that there seem to be innumerable topics and subjects beyond religion that hold public interest in the world, then why continue to strive after this one? Why does the world of religion and spiritual identity continue to capture my attention? Possibly most important of all, beyond my own interest, why should it matter to a broader academic audience? In the remaining pages of this preface I will offer a personal narrative describing several major events that have helped to shape my story. Through this narrative I hope to offer clarity around my personal interest in this academic investigation, as well as to outline the foundational biases that continue to affect it.

The first significant detail about me is that I am a Christian, born and raised in a Christian family, under a Christian roof, and the recipient of a Christian education. The second significant detail is that I didn’t accept any of it until I had nearly graduated from high school. The truth of the matter is that for much of my childhood religion was an annoyance and chore more than anything. Sure, I prayed, went to church, and read the bible. There were definitely parts of it that were interesting and held meaning, but it just was not real to me. I always considered myself quite spiritual, being very interested in the supernatural components of life and enamored by magic, but for the Christian-ness of my environment I really just considered it a good story. My perspective on all this, however, shifted dramatically in and around 2011 through several major events.



When I tell the story of these events in person it usually takes a solid hour, however, seeing as I'm trying to keep this Preface to only a few short pages I'll simplify things.

Whenever someone asks me when I knew I enjoyed art, I always tell them about my grandmother, Alvina Klassen. Both of my grandparents were painters, and I had a particularly special connection with my grandmother. As a Christian she was a prayer warrior to be reckoned with, an angelic vocalist, and a painter who worshiped God with every brush stroke. She often painted through the night to greet the rising sun in her studio window. I'm pretty sure this is where I get my studio work ethic from. In October 2010, on a weekday, though I can never remember which, she had a severe stroke and was hospitalized. The tragedy of this story however is not in death, as I'm pleased to say she is still with us today. No, the tragedy here is that on that day over ten years ago, everything that I identified my grandmother with was destroyed. Her stroke took her voice, her hands, and her mobility. In one moment, the vocalist was silenced, the painter was shackled, and the prayer warrior was locked away.

My grandmother has been my steadfast source of encouragement and inspiration in becoming an artist since I was a small child. To this day, the joy in her eyes while I show her my latest creations is so earnest, it is enough to bring me back to sitting in her studio on a sunny afternoon painting my first painting. As powerful as these memories are, I also remember the breaking of my heart with terrible clarity when I learned I would never be able to paint with her again. This moment caused something in me to change and forced me to ask myself why I wanted to make art. I suppose it is sad to say that I could not actually answer this question for myself and eventually had to ask for her reasons. And the answer was simple, because she loved Jesus, and that love flowed out of every action and act of creation. At the time, this realization was difficult because I did not consider Christianity as anything more than a good story. I could

recognize a spiritual power in her connection to art and Jesus, but something was missing for it to connect with me. This was the first major event.

The second major event was in March 2011, when I received the opportunity to participate in a cultural exchange program between my school in Abbotsford, BC and an agronomy educational center in Coban, Guatemala. Life was normal when I initially applied for the exchange. I was a typical sixteen-year-old. I received the acceptance letter shortly after my grandmother's stroke and was suddenly faced with the opportunity of a lifetime during a season of unexpected tragedy and heartbreak. Yet through it all, I could not help but feel that I needed to go on this journey.

I traveled to Guatemala with some classmates in March 2011, where we spent four weeks touring various cultural sites around the country and trekking through the rainforest to remote villages. Many exciting things happened while abroad, but there is one thing specifically that impacted me deeply. On the third week of our four week exchange, we were trekking through the rainforest between villages, visiting isolated indigenous settlements. The villages were often half a day's walk apart and typically only had a single track trail connecting them. On the last day of our trek, the group was tired and began to spread out along the path, allowing the thick jungle to very quickly separate us. At some point on that day, when I believed myself alone and separated from my group, I suddenly found myself walking with God. I do not mean this in some vague spiritual or emotional sense, as outlandish as it may sound, I mean it literally. We walked and talked, and everything I had struggled against since childhood was made suddenly real. It was in this bizarre moment that I became a Christian. It was also at this moment that the passion that had given life to my grandmother's art suddenly made sense.

Sometimes you hear stories of dramatic shifts in a person that are sparked by strange, impossible events. Sometimes those stories are true, but who is to say which. In a split second, somewhere in the rainforest of Guatemala, I encountered an impossibility, and in that moment, I knew that God was real. The stories I'd grown up with were somehow more than just stories. Changes of this nature have a way of sticking with you and affecting every aspect of your being. The world was a different place when I got back to Canada, and I had many questions. As I grappled with this newfound identity, the messy and confused visuals of artistic expression became the outlet and language of my inquiry, something that is still true of my work today.

My story is certainly a unique one, maybe even a believable one, but I tell this story not to convince you of a truth that I hold, but to offer clarity to what drives me and contextualizes my interests. However, the question remains: why should spiritual and religious identity matter to others beyond me? The answer here, like before, is personal, but also is closely intertwined with my academic experiences.

Despite my own disconnect with Christian faith growing up, it is fairly safe to say I was raised in a Christian bubble. I knew very little of other beliefs and worldviews beyond my immediate vicinity, and as is true of many teenagers raised in such a context, attending university was an incalculably eye-opening experience. I knew I wanted to explore subjects around spiritual and religious identity when I started my undergraduate studies in 2013, but as I began my education, I very quickly learned that most people did not consider this to be an acceptable direction. I was constantly told not to involve religion with my art during the first couple years of my degree. While this was indeed frustrating, it also supplied me with more directed questions: Why is it that someone cannot talk about their faith identity through art? What is preventing religious dialogue from merging with artistic expression? What is this uncomfortable barrier that

seems to umbrella serious religious inquiry, and can it be overcome? Why does abstractly mentioning a spiritual identity seemingly garner support, when explicitly mentioning religious affiliation sneered at? And finally, why does it seem that the only acceptable tone with which to artistically approach religion is one of criticism and aggression? These questions would continue to direct my academic journey and inspire much of my studio application. While these questions are spawned from a personal interest in spiritual and religious identity, they also gain traction from a broader learned understanding.

Previously I told of my encounter with God and the circumstances that led up to that event. While those continue to be the most significant details in my unique story, university also taught me to consider and value the stories of others. While attending university I learned and worked alongside Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Bahá'ís, Atheists, Agnostics, Indigenous peoples and many more. This diversity caused tension in some instances, but often it actually allowed for a broader scope of learning. On select occasions that learning would come in the form of a personal story much like my own, detailing one's encounter with an impossibility and how it has since shaped them. The context of university helped me form and direct the questions of my academic interest, but it also opened the door to hearing about the wonders of this world through the eyes of others. After hearing many differing perspectives and stories from an incredible diversity of peoples, I established a deeply rooted understanding that if I consider my own story to carry any sense of weight or significance, then it would be folly to not think the same of others.

It seems that western culture in the twenty-first century is becoming more and more religiously and spiritually inclined, or at least more tolerable towards that outlet of identity. With that consideration in mind, then let the takeaway of the preface be this:

While unique stories exist, and indeed should be considered when formulating questions around spiritual identity, these stories exist to their bearers as deeply impactful circumstances that go far beyond the realms of simple institutional superstitions. If culture is going to continue shifting towards a more spiritually inclusive and diverse reality, then proper, considerate care is necessary whenever such stories present themselves. If we as an academic body are incapable of considering the unique and foundational circumstances of individual's beliefs as anything beyond mere delusion, then we are equally incapable of valuing the colorful impact of cultural diversity and difference. The point, if there must be one, is that peoples' stories and the identities that are established from them intrinsically matter.

## Chapter 1: Research Methods and Literary Nuances

### Thesis Paper Introduction

For thousands of years, art and religion were very well connected. However, in the twentieth century, an odd rift between the two formed because of the influence of modernism, especially when considered through academic discourse. Rosalind Krauss, in her essay “Grids,” explains, “Given the absolute rift that had opened between the sacred and secular, the modern artist was obviously faced with the necessity to choose between one mode of expression and the other. . . In the increasingly de-sacralized space of the nineteenth century, art became the refuge for religious emotion; it became, as it has remained, a secular form of belief.”<sup>1</sup> Despite this rift in the twenty-first century, Aaron Rosen comments, “Not only does the dialogue between art and religion appear to be deepening, the studies of both art and religion have undergone sizable shifts in recent years”.<sup>2</sup> As the literature makes apparent, there has been a notable increase in the artistic use of religious and spiritual subject matter, as well as an interest in the cross disciplinary study of art and religion.<sup>3</sup> James Elkins and David Morgan effectively encapsulate the fields’ growth through their editorial efforts in publishing *Re-Enchantment*, which highlights numerous avenues of investigative potential across dozens of contemporary scholarly voices.<sup>4</sup> While my interest as an artist lies in the manifesting visual realms of spiritual and religious identity, my academic attention is drawn towards discussions around the inclusion of theology in art criticism

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9, (1979): 54.

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Rosen, *Art and Religion in the 21st Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Rosen, 1-256.

<sup>4</sup> James Elkins and David Morgan, *Re-Enchantment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009).

and the defining of contemporary culture. By directing my academic engagement towards these specific avenues of thought, while holding the accomplishments of *Re-Enchantment* as foundational, this paper seeks to expand on the intellectual forces underpinning my artistic pursuits.

Chapter 1 of this thesis paper describes the employment of a rhizomatic research-creation methodology, identifying significant branches of thought within the art and religion dialogue as they relate specifically to this thesis' investigation. The first section of this chapter begins by defining the map-like cartographic goals of rhizomatic philosophy and the significance behind establishing subsequent multiplicities. The rest of the chapter identifies two such multiplicities, the first being Charles Taylor's defined secular plurality, and the second in describing the contemporary nuance between spirituality and religion. Through this structure, and by identifying these two distinct sections as rhizomes, the succeeding chapters are thus considered as additional multiplicities within the web-like growth of this support paper's composition.

Chapter 2 dives into the development of theory through the inclusion of theology in contemporary artistic criticism. This chapter frequently employs the terms explored in the previous chapter, subsequently directing its engagement as an expansion of already established multiplicities. It begins with an investigation into existing methods of art criticism and their notable reliance on a hermeneutic of suspicion to achieve results. This section is followed by an outline for a theoretical method of theological art criticism, drawing significant inspiration from Jonathon Anderson's published material on the subject.<sup>5</sup> Concluding with a side-by-side case

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan A. Anderson, "The (In)Visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism." in *Christian Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century: Prospects and Perils* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 53–79.

study application of this theoretical framework, this chapter offers a rudimentary view of the potential depth afforded by the academic inclusion of a theological critical methodology.

Following in the footsteps of the previous chapter, Chapter 3 applies the established theoretical method of theological art criticism on the thesis exhibition, *Altar to the Unknown God*. While the exhibition itself can be considered a rhizome with an impossible number of connections worth exploring, this chapter will restrict its critical attention towards three dominant theologically significant details. The first detail is the unassuming depth of the title, second is the carefully designed exhibition floor plan/layout, and third is the exhibition's consistent employment of artistic abstraction. The conclusion of this chapter presents a summary of the successes and failures of the artworks analyzed, analyzing areas for artistic improvement, as well as considerations for future development within the theorized art critical methodological structure.

The final concluding chapter of this thesis paper summarizes the main takeaways from each preceding chapter, reinforcing the notion of layering multiplicities. It concludes with a final statement on the overall academic investigation and its connection to the healthy formation of inter-religious dialogue.

### **Research Methodology and Studio Process**

*Altar to the Unknown God* is the culmination of two years of academic and artistic inquiry at the master's level, presented as a curated visual arts thesis exhibition and supporting research paper. The research conducted and realized within this exhibition and paper ranges across a wide array of visual and academic media with an overarching creative concern towards the visual manifestations of spiritual and religious identity in the twenty-first century. By



employing a research-creation methodology structured by rhizomatic philosophy, this investigation seeks to expand understanding and foster dialogue around the contemporary maintenance of an enchanted worldview.<sup>6</sup> While the two components of this thesis, the exhibition and support paper, are produced in common purpose, they are ultimately distinct languages of investigation. The exhibition, in this context, carries the dominant weight of the overall thesis, whereas the support paper operates under its umbrella by aiming to offer an allied academic voice to the otherwise voiceless visual language of art. By considering the exhibition and paper in this way, they are defined as multiplicities in search of ever-increasing expansion rather than linear inquiries seeking conclusion. This chapter section thus offers a breakdown of research-creation and rhizomatic philosophy as it is employed in the overarching investigation.

Research-creation as an academic methodology can be understood most simply as the synthesis of research and data through the use of creative studio methods. Although this may function as an acceptable surface level definition, the complex conceptual frameworks supporting the methodology require a more comprehensive understanding contextualized to this thesis. In their joint publication on the topic, Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk point out that the problem persistent in defining research-creation lies in the relationship between academic methods of inquiry and the inclusion of creative processes.<sup>7</sup> While Chapman and Sawchuk identify several distinct “modes within the set of ‘research-creation,’” they are also quick to point out that the physical manifestation of this process is likely to be unique from person to

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<sup>6</sup> Glen Lowry et al., “Polemics: Short Statements on Research-Creation,” ed. Natalie S. Loveless, *RACAR : Revue D'art Canadienne* 40, no. 1 (2015): pp. 41-54; Gilles Deleuze, Guattari Félix, and Brian Massumi, “Introduction: Rhizome,” in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 3-25.

<sup>7</sup> Owen B. Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and ‘Family Resemblances,’” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37, no. 1 (2012): 5-26.

person.<sup>8</sup> Building on this thought, Glen Lowry points out the possible “good research / bad art dichotomy,” and vice versa, that may arise as one pursues the balancing of terms.<sup>9</sup> Although the goal should clearly be good art and good research, Lowry suggests that the focus in any application of research-creation should be on the achieving of good research first and foremost.<sup>10</sup> Although his point is well taken, I find the reasoning here unconvincing, and would instead assert that good research when paired with bad art will ultimately fail to communicate visually, thus rendering the “good research” component moot. With these considerations in mind, I offer the following definition as it applies specifically to this support paper: Research-creation, in this context, can be understood as the synthesis of creative artworks serving as the primary product and culmination of a research investigation, and whose materiality and aesthetics are informed by the overarching academic inquiry.

In addition to research-creation as the primary methodology, this paper and the exhibition it supports are also informed and structured through the implementation of Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the majority of western dualist philosophy, which structures its approaches in a linear fashion going from point *a* to point *b*, a rhizome is more akin to a web or the synapses of a brain.<sup>12</sup> The prime function of a rhizome is in its incessant desire for connection and expansion, “where any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other,

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<sup>8</sup> Chapman and Sawchuk, “Research-Creation,” 14.

<sup>9</sup> Glen Lowry et al., “Polemics: Short Statements on Research-Creation,” *RACAR: Revue D’art Canadienne* 40, no. 1 (2015): 43.

<sup>10</sup> Lowry et al., “Polemics,” 43.

<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “Introduction: Rhizome,” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3-25.

<sup>12</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 7.

and must be.”<sup>13</sup> Within such a system, research questions aid in the formation of new pathways and connections, and the possible formation of multiplicities, rather than steering the overall engagement as they would in linear structure. Deleuze and Guattari point out that the rhizome can thus be understood as a mapping of unknown territory, expanding in all directions, seeking out any and all points of connectivity:

The map does not replace an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious. It fosters the connections between fields, the removal of blockages . . . The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. . . Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways.<sup>14</sup>

The difficulty of this philosophy, however, is its continuous pursuit of expansion.

Rhizomatic philosophy refuses typical western convention and places its emphasis on the in between. According to Deleuze and Guattari “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things,” but how can something exist without, at the very least, a beginning?<sup>15</sup> This question is precisely the struggle identified. Rhizomatic philosophy operates in a similar, though not the same, manner as that of eastern paradoxical logic which is cyclical by design. To the western mind, a paradox is an illogical conclusion, however John Perry points out that our cultural contexts play a role in determining how we measure conclusions as logical:

Lao Tzu would not have said, “Words that are strictly true seem to be paradoxical” if he had been raised in a culture where paradoxical logic was valid. When paradoxes become logical they cease to be paradoxical. Anyone who is not struck by the paradoxical nature of statements such as “That which is one is one. That which is not-one, is also one” is not comprehending what is said, either superficially or profoundly.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 25

<sup>16</sup> John Perry, “Paradoxical Logic,” *Philosophy East and West* 13, no. 2 (1963): 156.

Different cultures play by different rules and therefore cannot be measured by a single type of measurement. The rhizome “is always in the middle,” perpetually interested in its own movement and expansion.<sup>17</sup> To ask, “how can it exist without at least a beginning?” is the same as applying linear rules to a cyclical structure: it is a fundamental misunderstanding. The paradox, if this is how you see it, is purposeful.

To help further understand this investigative process and how it affects the work presented, I offer the analogy of a swarming beehive. In this analogy the bees are concerned with the expansion of their home, and consequently with the continuous gathering of the material necessary to do so. Within this explanation the intrinsic thought processes of the artist/researcher can be understood as representing the bees directly, where each bee represents a thought, the flowers and other sources of pollen represent investigated sources of information, and the hive being constructed represents the final synthesis of data. The artist/researcher selects sources of information for study, such as books, journals, historical artworks, and even personal experiences and environmental influences, and in essence plants their information in a vast garden from which the bees will harvest. The bees then access that garden and select information (pollen) seemingly at random, where it is then transported back to the hive to be integrated into the developing research. The information brought back and used to form distinct sections of the hive can be from one source (flower) or many, effectively expanding the rhizomatic map. Interestingly, although the bees work collectively in their construction, each individual bee may adopt a particular fondness for a specific source of information thus, producing consistent threads throughout the hive's comprehensive assemblage.

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<sup>17</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, “Introduction: Rhizome,” 25

How then does the rhizome apply to the research conducted within this paper and thesis exhibition? *Altar to the Unknown God* utilizes a research-creation methodology that is heavily informed by rhizomatic philosophy, which emphasizes expansion and connection over establishing a conclusion. The general interest of this investigation is in contemporary spiritual and religious identity, while its many parts, abstract painting, defining secular culture, sculptural assemblage, the hermeneutic of suspicion, art criticism and theology, etc., all engage to expand the rhizomatic map as a whole.<sup>18</sup> Each section can thus be taken as an entry point into the overall expansion or as a supportive component of the whole.

### **Contemporary Secularity According to Taylor**

“Secularity” or “Secularism” became prominent in western culture at the rise of modernity. Since then, it has occupied the position of identifier for much of the western world’s spheres of influence. For much of the twentieth century, secularity could be understood by two progressive definitions: the privatization of religion and the loss of belief.<sup>19</sup> Charles Taylor, however, presents a dissatisfaction with these past formulations and their explanatory power over the present age, ultimately offering a third descriptive: the pluralization of belief.<sup>20</sup>

The first definition, “the privatization of religion,” is understood as the removal of religious influence from public spheres, stipulating it to only be acceptable in the private space of

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<sup>18</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, “Introduction: Rhizome,” 25.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Jonathan A. Anderson, and William A. Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses of Modernism* (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

one's own home.<sup>21</sup> This formulation can be traced back to Max Weber's famous dictum, "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and above all by 'the disenchantment of the world.'"<sup>22</sup> Anderson and Dyrness additionally respond to Weber, arguing for the place of religion within his statement:

This formulation does not remove God from the world - indeed, Weber believed that disenchantment was primarily attributable to the development of Judeo-Christian (especially Protestant) theology. But it does generally detach divinity from our explanations of the everyday functioning of the world and eradicate "magic" from the field of explanatory possibilities - a field that is reconceived in terms of contingent mechanical causes that are calculable, manipulable and manageable through technological innovation.<sup>23</sup>

Following this line of thought, part of the modernist project can be characterized by a desire to seek separation from the deeply rooted religious influence of Eurocentric historic culture. By achieving this separation, disenchantment could be pursued, and a rational, far less superstitious culture could emerge. Under this definition, belief does not disappear from culture but becomes greatly restricted, holding substantially less influence over our formulations of phenomenal reality.

The second descriptive, "the loss of belief," which Taylor calls a "subtraction story," is essentially a more radical interpretation of the first definition.<sup>24</sup> Continuing off Weber's dictum,

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<sup>21</sup> Anderson and Dyrness, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation" in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (2014) 155, 139. "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and above all by 'the disenchantment of the world,'" . . . "There are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."

<sup>23</sup> Anderson and Dyrness, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Anderson and Dyrness. *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture*, 27. "Secularity 2 refers more specifically to the loss of religious belief and practice: a turning away from God, an incredulity and denial at both social and individual levels that there is any need to postulate a transcendent order."

this definition assumes that culture will steadily see a decline in “enchanted” world views. Under this formulation, religion is definitionally reduced to functioning entirely as an institution of control, while spirituality is separated from religion altogether and presented as nothing more than superstition, adopted by those possessing a weak self-identity. It has long been theorized that as Weber’s idea of “rationalization and intellectualization” rises through the education of the general public, it will result in directly correlate in a decrease of enchanted world views, as stated by James K. A. Smith:

According to secularization theory, as cultures experience modernization and technological advancement, the (divisive) forces of religious belief and participation wither in the face of modernity’s disenchantment of the world. According to secularism, political spaces (and the constitutions that create them) should carve out a realm purified of the contingency, particularity, and irrationality of religious belief and instead be governed by universal neutral rationality<sup>25</sup>

To borrow a term from T. J. Clark, secularism in this sense can be understood as the profound “sterilizing” of culture and “a great emptying and sanitizing of the imagination.”<sup>26</sup> The projected outcome of this definition sees the removal of belief entirely from developing western culture, thus generating a wholly rationalistic society that is free of enchantment and delusion. This, however, serves as the entry point for Taylor’s third formulation, a descriptive he produced by means of his own dissatisfaction with the preceding two explanations of secularity, where he.<sup>27</sup>

Taylor's third definition for our consideration is “the pluralization of belief,” under which, secularism is defined as “a condition in which our experience of and search for fullness

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<sup>25</sup> James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 21.

<sup>26</sup> Timothy J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from the History of Modernism* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1999); Anderson and Dyrness, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, 4. Taylor states, “I am not satisfied” continually throughout his text, the first appearance happening on page 4.

occurs; and this is something we all share, believers and unbelievers alike”<sup>28</sup> By this, Taylor asserts that contemporary culture presents wholly new *conditions*, under which “belief” or “unbelief” may or may not materialize. The rudimentary proposition being that the definition presented by modernity sought to inverse the cultural paradigm, shifting the “conditions” of culture to being one of unbelief instead of belief. Taylor argues, however, that this definition fails to encapsulate the cultural reality. “Unbelief” cannot be the foundation of secularism, as it would thus define secularism as the antithesis of belief. Rather, the foundation of secularism is one of a “condition” where a plurality of belief arises.<sup>29</sup> Anderson and Dyrness illuminate Taylor’s point, stating that such a condition or context “refers to a ‘mutual fragilization’ of many different religious (and irreligious) beliefs and practices such that there is no longer one that functions as axiomatic.”<sup>30</sup> Secularism, as understood in this third sense, presents as a condition within which both theisms and a-theisms exist as potential realities, depending on your direct cultural influences.

Taylor takes a moment, however, to offer a clarification, “that pluralism in the sense meant here doesn’t just mean the co-existence of many faiths in the same society, or the same city.”<sup>31</sup> To present such a formulation would be incredibly idealistic and utopian. Rather, it is asserted that the instability achieved by allowing all manner of faiths to exist within a common cultural condition serves “to bring the fragilizing effect of pluralism to a maximum.”<sup>32</sup> In past

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<sup>28</sup> Taylor, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, 2-3, 303-304.

<sup>30</sup> Anderson and Dyrness, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, 304.

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, 304.



historical formulations, culture generally predicated a single outlet of belief as being axiomatic, allowing one voice to maintain dominance over cultural developments and achievements.<sup>33</sup> Described by Taylor in the contemporary, the presence of many belief paradigms essentially operate to fragilize each other in order to maintain the pluralistic balance.<sup>34</sup> Within such conditions, curiosity towards the *other* or doubt towards the *inherited* serve as indicators of other spiritual potentials. Taylor suggests that a person living within such conditions “cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on” available to them.<sup>35</sup> For Taylor, there are other options, “one can live the spiritual life differently; [spirituality] can take different shapes.”<sup>36</sup>

Under this new definition, and Taylor’s overall investigation, we reach a rather interesting conclusion concerning twenty-first century culture. If culture is to be acknowledged as a space where belief exists in plurality, instead of as a subject under steady decline within a “subtraction story,” then Weber’s disenchantment can only be understood to have limited purchase. Within such a reality Jeffrey Kosky’s jovial statement might give us an appropriate trajectory: “however empowering the project of disenchantment and demystification might be, many today have grown disenchanted with modern disenchantment.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the desire to

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<sup>33</sup> Taylor, 13. An idea Taylor explores in far greater detail as the main subject of Chapter 1 “The Bulwarks of Belief.”

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, 532.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Arts of Wonder: Enchanting Secularity—Walter De Maria, Diller + Scofidio, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworthy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), XII.

acknowledge mystery in a world where answers are abound presents itself as a surprisingly alluring conception.

### **Towards Defining Spirituality and Religion**

Moving past Taylors defined secularity, we again enter into rather contested ground as two significant terms come to the forefront of this investigation, *spirituality* and *religion*. As previously noted in the second definition of secularism, modernity saw the separation of spirituality and religion. Religion was reduced purely to that of an institution of control, and spirituality was nothing more than superstition. Although this section seeks to offer some clarity and argue for unity between the terms, it is by no means a conclusive statement on their respective definitions. Spirituality and religion have been terms in contest with one another since before the rise of the secular and will likely still be at odds far into the future. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will argue that they are two sides of the same coin, possibly existing in tension, but ultimately in unity.

While the analysis of Taylors plurality helps produce a definitional understanding concerning contemporary secularity, it also helps inform us of the difficulty behind forming concise and accurate definitions for spirituality and religion. Within a pluralistic condition, identities, beliefs, and institutional voices vie for inclusion across the definitional conversation, each seeking accurate representation. Because of this, many definitions for both spirituality and religion have emerged within academia and creating a condition where a definition's breadth is favored over its nuance. Of course, this is not an exclusive reality, as the inverse has also been

true. As the problem of breadth is recognized, some scholars have swung the pendulum too far to the other side, defining the issues too narrowly, and ultimately adding to the confusion.<sup>38</sup>

We face another issue concerning spirituality specifically. For much of recorded human history, or more specifically Eurocentric history, spirituality was largely pursued as a companion of religious devotion. In the contemporary, however, Pepe Karmel points out “that the pursuit of the spiritual, outside of the framework of organized religion, is a distinctly modern phenomena.”<sup>39</sup> When seeking after a definition of religion, we are benefited with a fairly clear recorded history of many centuries from which to draw. In the case of spirituality, though, we simply do not have a serious written history of it, and so must rely on speculation and biased religious voices.<sup>40</sup> Due to this lack of scholarly record, Roger Lipsey concludes that the term “*spiritual* remains an old-fashioned word of vague meaning,” and possessing “no specific meaning [at all] in academic analysis.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite the difficulties defined by Lipsey and Karmel, several reasonable attempts towards a concise definition exist for our consideration. In her essay “Spirituality vs. Religion,” Sandra Marie Schneiders investigates the spiritual by identifying four significant defining characteristics:

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<sup>38</sup> Elkins and Morgan, 297-98. “. . . The “problem” itself has been too narrowly defined, and too tightly confined, within limiting interpretations of religion, art, and modernism. In particular, anxieties about meaning - about the nuances of interpretation, the contexts of significance - overwhelm more efficacious approaches to the cultural work of religion, and the broader relationships between art and faith.”

<sup>39</sup> Pepe Karmel, “The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present,” *Material Religion* 12, no. 3 (September 2016): 391.

<sup>40</sup> Karmel, 391

<sup>41</sup> Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (Shaftesbury: Shambhala, 1988), 7.

. . . denotes *experience* . . . imply[ing] that spirituality is not an abstract idea, a theory, an ideology, or a movement of some kind. . . Second . . . *conscious involvement in a project* which means that it is neither an accidental experience such as the result of drug overdose, nor an episodic event such as being overwhelmed by a beautiful sunset. . . is a project of *life-integration* which means that it is holistic, involving body and spirit, emotions and thoughts, activity and passivity, social and individual aspects of life. . . [and] is pursued by consistent *self-transcendence toward ultimate value*. This implies that spirituality is essentially positive in its direction.<sup>42</sup>

These identified components allow Schneiders to define spirituality as “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”<sup>43</sup> Although not the same, Charlene Spretnek proposes a complementary definition where spirituality is an individual's consideration of oneself as being in relation, or connected to, imperceptible reality, “the dynamic interrelatedness of existence . . . the awareness of and engagement with that unity and those dynamics.”<sup>44</sup> Between these two perspectives, there also seems to be the implied notion that spirituality is ultimately individual in nature, a conclusion I think James Elkins would agree with, considering his own definition asserts it “is any system or belief that is private, subjective, largely or wholly incommunicable, often wordless, and sometimes even uncognized.”<sup>45</sup> As this leaves us with some reasonable assertions regarding spirituality, let us move onto the definition of religion.

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<sup>42</sup> Sandra Marie Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no. 2 (2003): 167.

<sup>43</sup> Schneiders, 166.

<sup>44</sup> Charlene Spretnak, *Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 14.

<sup>45</sup> James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. “What I mean by spirituality - again, only for the purposes of this book - is any system or belief that is private, subjective, largely or wholly incommunicable, often wordless, and sometimes even uncognized. Spirituality in this sense can be part of religion, but not its whole. Some of the artists and artworks in this book I will be talking about are spiritual without being religious; they depend on idiosyncratic, individual, and private acts of devotion or senses of belief.”

The first detail we must note regarding religion is the change in cultural circumstances between the twentieth century postmodern and the twenty-first century contemporary.<sup>46</sup> In the early modern period, religion was definitionally reduced, as previously noted in this chapter. That reality that continued into the postmodern. However, as early as 1993, Richard Tarnas observes that “religion no longer tends to be understood reductively.”<sup>47</sup> With this consideration in mind, reaching a definition for religion should be significantly simpler than that of spirituality. Dr. Mary Evelyn Tucker, a historian of religion at Yale University, offers us the following:

In its broadest sense . . . [religion is] a means whereby humans, recognizing the limitations of phenomenal reality, undertake specific practices to effect self-transformation and community cohesion within a cosmological context. Religion thus refers to those cosmological stories, symbol systems, ritual practices, ethical norms, historical processes, and institutional structures that transmit a view of the human as embedded in a world of meaning and responsibility, transformation and celebration. Religion connects human with a divine or numinous presence, with the human community, and with the broader earth community. It links humans with the larger matrix of mystery in which life arises, unfolds, and flourishes.<sup>48</sup>

Largely in agreement, Scheiders also points out, “What seems to mark religions in the concrete is that they are cultural systems for dealing with ultimate reality,” regardless of their theological claims towards divinity.<sup>49</sup> Scheiders also notes, “In this sense, religion is at the root of any

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Tarnas, “The Postmodern Mind,” in *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 403. “The cultural and intellectual role of religion has of course been drastically affected by the secularizing and pluralistic developments of the modern age, but while in most respects the influence of institutionalized religion has continued to decline, the religious sensibility itself seems to have been revitalized by the newly ambiguous intellectual circumstances of the postmodern era.”

<sup>47</sup> Tarnas, 404.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim. “Introduction: The Emerging Alliance of World Religions and Ecology,” *Daedalus* 130, no. 4 (2001): 14.

<sup>49</sup> Schneiders, 169.

spiritual quest which is not explicitly atheistic or reductively naturalistic.”<sup>50</sup> Working off of these definitions I would further simplify this conception in agreement with Sally Promey by defining religion as the encompassing term, “incorporating spirituality as one of its many dimensions.”<sup>51</sup>

Between the two terms, despite the possible degree of variance, contemporary scholarship seems to suggest an innate connection between them, though it is clear that not everyone is going to agree with that notion. Regardless, it would appear reasonable to state that culture exists in a contemporary condition, where the assertion that spirituality and religion, although technically different and possibly antagonistic, exist as two sides of the same coin.

## Conclusion

Within this chapter we have discussed the methods and rhizomatic philosophy that guide this thesis’ research, as well as the defining of contemporary secularity around Taylor’s discussed plurality, and finally the terms “spirituality” and “religion.” As a final consideration, I would assert that the underlying goal of this chapter’s investigation, and thus a further expansion of the established rhizome, is the pursuit of a foundation for inter-religious dialogue.<sup>52</sup> Through the acknowledgment of our pluralistic condition and the acceptance of the multiple potential definitions that may arise within it, we can take several steps outward, expanding the field of

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<sup>50</sup> Schneiders, 168.

<sup>51</sup> Sally M. Promey, “The ‘Return’ of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (2003): 583.

<sup>52</sup> Schneiders, 179. “. . . we must enter the arena of dialogue with our faith tradition behind rather in front of us. In other words, we do not advance as onto a field of battle with our tradition as a shield against heresy or paganism or, worse yet, as a sword with which to vanquish the other. Not, however, do we check our faith tradition at the door of the conference room and enter as a religious tabula rasa.”

understanding around art critical discourse engaging faith groups and their identities. As Camille Paglia states, “the route to a renaissance of the American fine arts lies through religion. . . Great art can be made out of love for religion as well as rebellion against it. But a totally secularized society with contempt for religion sinks into materialism and self-absorption and gradually goes slack, without leaving an artistic legacy.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Camille Paglia, “Religion and the Arts in America,” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 15, no. 1 (0AD): pp. 2, “Let me make my premises clear: I am a professed atheist and a pro-choice libertarian Democrat. . . I have been calling for nearly two decades for massive educational reform that would put the study of comparative religion at the center of the university curriculum. Though I shared the exasperation of my generation with the moralism and prudery of organized religion, I view each world religion, including Judeo-Christianity and Islam, as a complex symbol system, a metaphysical lens through which we can see the vastness and sublimity of teh universe.”

## Chapter 2: Developing Theological Art Criticism

### Introduction

In 1979, at arguably the height of postmodern thought, renowned art critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss proclaimed an “absolute rift . . . between the sacred and the secular,” effectively pronouncing any attempt to incorporate religious or spiritual dialogue into the still-developing art critical discourse a futile errand.<sup>54</sup> The phrasing “absolute rift” would go on to become a slogan within the world of art criticism, and eventually make its way into the general academic spheres, ultimately transforming to serve as a rallying point for those who would oppose Krauss’ proclamation.

Since the dawn of the twenty-first century, numerous scholars and historians have asserted a renewed interest in subjects around religion, and the complex dynamics between art and the diverse enchanted world views of culture. In 2004, James Elkins mounted a preliminary investigation into art criticism, making the statement, “Talk about art and talk about religion have become alienated one from the other.”<sup>55</sup> Working as the primary point of his inquiry, various methods of art criticism are applied directly to several artistic case studies in an attempt to merge religious dialogue and postmodern forms of academic critique.<sup>56</sup> Throughout his book, Elkins continuously defends his premise that art and religion, in their current realized forms, do not mix, “wherever the two meet, one wrecks the other.”<sup>57</sup> The conclusion is one of a sad

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<sup>54</sup> Krauss, “Grids,” 54.

<sup>55</sup> Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, x.

<sup>56</sup> Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*.

<sup>57</sup> Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, 115. It is interesting to note that despite this conclusion Elkins also states, not two paragraphs later on p. 116 “It is



realization. Under current forms of criticism, religious and spiritual subject matter fail to be addressed, ultimately resulting in a strictly formal analysis leaving behind an artistic husk that is void of its intended meaning. On this, Jonathan Anderson offers a concise review of the current disconnect:

As I read Elkins, the central problem in the art and religion discourse is not reducible to a modernist secularization theory, nor is it simply attributable to the deliberate ideological suppression of religious voices (though he admits this is a reality); rather, it has much more to do with the structure of modern and contemporary visual *hermeneutics*. . . The trajectory of art theory and criticism for the last 150 years makes it impossible for religious content to be mediated with any kind of directness, clarity, or sincerity of expression, thus effectively precluding it from having any compelling presence in the *interpretation* of artworks. Thus, in Elkin's view the rift exists not in artistic production per se but in the academic writing about art.<sup>58</sup>

Anderson goes on to address the problem directly. He calls for a new method of artistic criticism, one that is designed to account for religious intention, and operate in equivalent dialogue with other critical methods: "I am not arguing for a theological interpretation of art *at the expense* of other interpretive levels. . . Instead, what is being maintained here is that a properly thick understanding of art must at some level be open to theological reflection as one of its potentially significant dimensions."<sup>59</sup>

This chapter is largely written as an investigative response to Anderson's call, directly seeking the theoretical formulation of a theological methodology. I begin with an analysis of postmodern art criticism and its intended academic application, followed by outlining the structure of what a method of theological art criticism might present as. This outline, consisting

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impossible to talk sensibly about religion and at the same time address art in an informed and intelligent manner: but is also irresponsible not to keep trying."

<sup>58</sup> Anderson, "The (In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism," 55-56.

<sup>59</sup> Anderson, "The (In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism," 72.

of four main rules, is then applied via a limited application in a case study of two contemporary artworks.

### **Postmodern Art Criticism and the ‘Hermeneutic of Suspicion’**

The current state of artistic criticism is a complicated engagement, one that would take far too many pages to overview effectively. However, offering even a basic understanding of the goals and intentions behind contemporary criticism will help to contextualize the forming of a new theological methodology. With this aim, I pose the following two questions: Where do we get our current day frameworks for contemporary art criticism? And what is contemporary art criticism's literary objective?

The twentieth century saw the advancements of critical thinking across nearly every intellectual spectrum, as models of thought were formulated and applied in diverse academic venues. These formulations would be pivotal in the establishment of the modern age's vibrant arts culture. Despite this, Anderson comments, there is a remarkable “asymmetry between the spheres of contemporary art-making and the spheres of contemporary art interpretation.”<sup>60</sup> Arguably the most prominent critical establishment – certainly the most significant to the contemporary state of art criticism – would have to be the creation of the OCTOBER art journal, “co-founded in 1976 by Rosalind Krauss.”<sup>61</sup> Krauss, just several years later, would proclaim in her essay “Grids”, the proclamation of “the absolute rift . . . between the sacred and the secular, [where] the modern artist [is] obviously faced with the necessity to choose between one mode of expression and the other.”<sup>62</sup> October, since its foundation, has operated as the benchmark of

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<sup>60</sup> Anderson, “The (In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism,” 56.

<sup>61</sup> Anderson, "The (In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism." 56,

artistic criticism, serving as a platform for the formulation of critical methodologies such as *Psychoanalysis, Formalism and Structuralism*, and *Poststructuralism and Deconstructivism*.<sup>63</sup> Foundational to these critical methods is the honing and development of a “hermeneutic of suspicion.”<sup>64</sup> Anderson states that contemporary criticism finds purchase in its suspicion that artworks are the effects of ideology, “beneath and behind the surface appearance of any human activity, there is always a more basic (material) explanation - generally centered on either biology or social power.”<sup>65</sup> It is this exact suspicion, however, that causes contemporary art criticism to fail when applied to religious subjects, but more on that later. When it comes to criticism, Rita Felski defines it as “conceiving itself as an austere exercise in demystification.”<sup>66</sup> Additionally, when investigating the driving forces of postmodern criticism, Richard Tarnas notes the “underlying intellectual ethos is one of disassembling established structures, deflating pretenses, [and] exploding beliefs.”<sup>67</sup> Existing methods of postmodern criticism can therefore be understood to align with modernity's first and second definitions of secularity, as defined by

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<sup>62</sup> Krauss, “Grids,” 54.

<sup>63</sup> Anderson, “The (In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism,” 57. Anderson goes on to add that these are only a few of the many of the forms of criticism that October has helped establish since its founding.

<sup>64</sup> Anderson, “The (In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism,” 58, “These methods are the honed and developed “hermeneutics of suspicion.” (originally cited from Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 32-36.

<sup>65</sup> Anderson, “The (In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism.” 58.

<sup>66</sup> Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 116.

<sup>67</sup> Tarnas, “The Postmodern Mind,” 401

Charles Taylor: the privatization of religion, and the loss of belief.<sup>68</sup> Within this secularity, enchanted world views are considered little more than superstition, and thus are largely overlooked. Considering the words of Weber, the critic thus seeks to “disenchant” the artist's creative core, refusing any degree of serious religious engagement.<sup>69</sup>

This brings us to the second question, what is the literary objective of contemporary art criticism? It would be easy to say that the role of the critic is to determine what is “good” versus “bad” art, but this is an overly reductive simplification. Art criticism, rather, is an effort to track the artwork's effect on reality, reality being the critic's engagement with the artwork. In this way, it would be accurate to state that art criticism bears the burden of expanding the possible depth of understanding inherent in the artwork rather than expressing explicitly what the artwork means.<sup>70</sup> Daniel Siedell writes in his book *God in the Gallery*, “Criticism is not merely an act of judgment or a mode of description. It is the practice of discerning reception. It sorts and sifts to find what is useful. It does not content itself with the surface appearance of things but probes their depths. It seeks to find unity in diversity and diversity in unity.”<sup>71</sup> In a very similar vein, Donald B. Kuspit remarks, “art criticism, like criticism in general, is a way of making one aware of

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<sup>68</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007)

<sup>69</sup> Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 2014, 155, 139. “The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and above all by ‘the disenchantment of the world,’ . . . There are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.”

<sup>70</sup> Daniel A. Siedell, *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 125. “If criticism, including art criticism, does not expand our experience of all aspects of art and life through the distinct subjectivity of the critic, then it is not worthy of the name of criticism.”

<sup>71</sup> Siedell, 124.

invisible significance behind visible reality, whether in art or anything else. Criticism teaches one not to parrot the given in description nor to exult about it in quasi-religious esthetic ecstasy.”<sup>72</sup> In essence, rather than offering an interpretation of the artwork, art criticism aims to expand on the possible interpretations and avenues of meaning found within and around it.

To continue on, my previous statement, when art criticism is applied to religiously informed art, the suspicion that artworks are the effect of ideology ultimately acts to exclude the religious content. The “hermeneutic of suspicion” actively structures the critics' response by aligning them with a position of critical skepticism. Generally speaking, postmodern criticism operates under the assumption that human activity, including artistic production, is based in either “biology or social power.”<sup>73</sup> The implication behind this reality is the reason for the religious disconnect. When an artwork engaging with religious subject matter is exposed to methods of contemporary criticism, the immediate assumption is that the artwork's foundation is either human (biological) or is institutional (social power), immediately failing to consider the possibility of a third (supernatural) dynamic.

An obvious example of this failing would be Andres Serrano's, *Immersion (Piss Christ)*, 1987.<sup>74</sup> When this work was first revealed, it garnered an incredibly diverse response from both the academic and religious communities, most of which were critically misled. The artwork is displayed as a cibachrome print depicting a small wooden crucifix emerged in amber liquid, which viewers soon discover to be urine. Despite Serrano stating otherwise, the work was

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<sup>72</sup> Donald B. Kuspit, “Art Criticism: Where’s the Depth?” in *The Critic Is Artist: The Intentionality of Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1984), 81-82.

<sup>73</sup> Anderson, "The (In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism," 58.

<sup>74</sup> Andres Serrano, *Immersion (Piss Christ)*, 1987, Cibachrome print, 154.4 cm x 101.6 cm (60 in x 40 in.). Figure 1.

viewed almost unanimously as a blasphemous image, condemned by religious communities, and praised by institutional critics. Under the hermeneutic of suspicion, the image of the crucifix is appropriated and misunderstood beneath strictly human terms, completely ignoring any potential theological significance. For example, if we assume the artist is utilizing the image of Christ from a biological foundation, the artwork then reads as an appropriation of identity, possibly translating suffering or misery. Under such an interpretation the crucifix is hijacked as a symbol of the human condition. On the other hand, if we assume a foundation of social power, as the majority of critics did, then the artwork reads as a harsh critique of the Christian religious institution. The urine submersion directs this interpretation, reading metaphorically, suggesting Christianity to be corrupt and soiled. Interesting to note, both readings are not necessarily wrong, as these deductions are logically reached and defensible. However, when establishing a critical interpretation, if the critic only considers the possibility of a *biological* or *social power* foundation and ignores the *supernatural*, then the conclusion is inevitably going to be incomplete. Interpreted thusly, the theological implications of Serrano's imagery are ignored, and preference is given over to debate secondary issues.

Serrano himself states clearly that the artwork is a serious Christian image, a response coming from his own faith background, "What it symbolizes is the way Christ died: the blood came out of him but so did the piss and the shit."<sup>75</sup> The artwork's intention therefore can be understood as dealing with the significance of the crucifixion in Christian theology, as well as Christ's hypostatic union. In the Christian faith, Christ is theologically understood as being fully human and simultaneously fully divine, a perfect union of humanity and divinity, as noted in the

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<sup>75</sup> Jonathan Jones, "Andres Serrano on Donald Trump: 'I never speak ill of people who've posed for me', accessed April 6th, 2021. In this short article Andres Serrano comments directly on intentions with "Piss Christ." <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/apr/03/andres-serrano-interview-donald-trump-piss-christ>

gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.”<sup>76</sup> The true importance and complexity of this claim is unfortunately beyond the scope of this text; however, it is this duality of Christ’s identity that makes Serrano’s image so theologically compelling.

In the Christian narrative of the crucifixion there is a moment just before Christ’s death, where his dual nature of divinity and humanity become fractured. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is recorded as crying out, “Eli, Eli, lema sabechthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>77</sup> G. K. Beale writes, “Throughout Church history, Jesus’s cry of dereliction has been identified as the moment of divine abandonment. Jesus, who died to atone vicariously for the sins of humanity, recognized at this point in his suffering that he no longer was experiencing the communion with his heavenly Father.”<sup>78</sup> On the cross, Jesus bears the weight of all humanity’s sin, and at this moment experiences separation from God, from himself. He becomes truly immersed in the fallenness of the human condition. Theologically, sin is understood as the rebellion of humanity staining all created things, the soiling of perfection, which parallels the piss immersion of Serrano’s imagery. Serrano effectively isolates the stained human moment of the crucifixion and asks us to dwell on it, not as a moment of venerable adoration, but of disgust and horror. What is truly remarkable about *Piss Christ*, however, is that

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<sup>76</sup> John 1:1-4 (NIV). The theology of Christ’s hypostatic union is a dense subject and a major point of theological inquiry for the early church and theologians today.

<sup>77</sup> Matthew 27:46 (NIV).

<sup>78</sup> Gregory K. Beale, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 100.

the horror of the crucifixion story is not always the viewers' immediate response. Aaron Rosen remarks, "the resplendence of the image, suffused in hazy, golden light like an icon, seems to signal Christ's capacity to triumph over ignominy."<sup>79</sup> Although the urine serves as the catalyst for disgust and indignation, it also presents with an initial degree of beauty and wonder. What is particularly fascinating about this is that from a Christian perspective, an initial reading of awe and wonder, followed by realization and ultimately disgust, is a surprisingly accurate reminder of the duality of the biblical crucifixion. Although Christians look to the cross as a symbol of hope and God's sacrificial love, it is also a symbol of incredible pain, and the unspeakable fallenness of humanity. This duality is one that requires constant meditation for Christians, as both are necessary for a theological reading of the cross. The challenge here is the dual application of theology and contemporary art criticism. The two must find a way to operate together, but this is precisely the problem that Elkins and others have addressed.<sup>80</sup>

Postmodern criticism almost unanimously employs the use of a "hermeneutic of suspicion," which, as Anderson says, assumes that all creative productions are the products of a material catalyst.<sup>81</sup> The critic thus assumes the position of a skeptical interrogator, who then attempts to unearth the hidden ideological center. In the case of Serrano's *Piss Christ*, this becomes most obvious in the critics misguided attention towards investigating biological or social power foundations. By ignoring the theological potential of the image, the critic fails to take the religion of it seriously, ultimately producing an interpretation that actively excludes a rather significant avenue of the works potential meaning. The presumed operation of this

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<sup>79</sup> Rosen, 16.

<sup>80</sup> Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*

<sup>81</sup> Anderson, "The (In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism," 58.



hermeneutic is that the artist or artwork never fully reveals the core or foundation of their creative investigations. For Felski, this non-revealing is then considered skeptically by the critic as a willingness to hide foundational motivators, the works ideological core.<sup>82</sup> The artist is thus denoted as a kind of con man, and the critic as a righteous enforcer who seeks “a relentless rooting out of concealed motives and impure thoughts.”<sup>83</sup> Genuine enchanted engagement, however, operates in direct contrast to this structure by openly declaring its foundational belief. Upon such a declaration, the critical interrogation, in consequence, produces extremely questionable results, as the genuine intention and foundational belief of the artist becomes the very thing the interrogation holds under suspicion.<sup>84</sup> As the hermeneutic of suspicion is currently structured within postmodern methods of criticism, it can be reasonably argued that any degree of serious, genuine, religious engagement is simply not possible. Anderson would also reach this conclusion, devising that an artwork conceived to operate in unity with an enchanted world view “will find itself interpretively derailed and destabilized” or “will simply be ignored as unworthy of serious engagement.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 1.

<sup>83</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 114.

<sup>84</sup> Anderson, “The (In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism,” 61. “. . . religious content is unable to survive the suspicious interpretive operations of avante-garde theory and criticism. Subjecting, for example, a pictorial religious allegory to a psychoanalytic or Marxist or deconstructive reading will produce extremely disorienting effects for the devout allegorizer as the image is reappraised as an endless play of sublimated desire, social hierarchies, and institutional power.”

<sup>85</sup> Anderson, “The (In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism,” 61.

## A Theological Methodology

The development of a theological method of art criticism must contain several key features in order for it to effectively function both theologically and academically. Following the suggestion of Wilson Yates, the first of these features is dialogical.<sup>86</sup> As scholarly engagement with religious subject matter rises, an increase in academic involvement from practicing theological voices has also been noted. However, these engagements often find themselves being unidirectional., as Siedell explains, “. . . commentators rarely address modern art on it’s own terms, within its own framework of critical evaluation. Rather, those commentators produce theology, philosophy, apologetics, or politics that rely on - or even require - a superficial understanding of modern and contemporary art. They do not produce art criticism.”<sup>87</sup> As such, to effectively apply a dialogic, a difference between *theological interpretation* and *theological criticism* is required.

In simple terms, *theological interpretation* happens when an artwork is appropriated for the purpose of expressing a theological point or inquiry while the artistic merit of the work is left unaddressed, unintentionally producing a kind of subtle iconoclasm.<sup>88</sup> Speaking directly to past Christian engagements Siedell states:

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<sup>86</sup> Wilson Yates, "Theology and the Arts after Seventy Years: Toward a Dialogical Approach," *Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies*, (2018), accessed March 25, 2021), p. “What I wish to call for is a dialogical approach, or at least a recognition that a dialogue is needed rather than a monologue in which we assume art to be passive - to be an object waiting for the wisdom of theology to act upon it and give it meaning. A dialogue between the theologian and an artwork needs to take place.”

<sup>87</sup> Siedell, 13-14.

<sup>88</sup> Siedell, 14. “An important consequence of the church’s approach to modern and contemporary art is that in its commentator’s zeal to engage it through certain philosophical, theological, or political perspectives, they have tended to reduce art to visual illustrations of propositional truths better expressed in other forms, usually words.”

Too often commentators on modern and contemporary art have approached the subject with a rigidly stable “Christian perspective” that is then merely applied to art. Little, if any, commentary reflects a dialogical and dialectical relationship with modern and contemporary art, in which the art is able to exert some counterpressure, stretching and shaping this “perspective.”<sup>89</sup>

As such the failing of theological interpretation is its tendency to divert focus away from the artwork in question and onto the theology being presented. In Anderson’s call for the development of theological criticism he similarly recognizes this issue and offers this clarification, “I am not arguing for a theological interpretation of art *at the expense* of other interpretive levels. . . . Instead, what is being maintained here is that a properly thick understanding of art must at some level be open to theological reflection as one of its potentially significant dimensions.”<sup>90</sup> Essentially, while a dialogue is paramount, within a framework of theological art criticism the focus must remain on the substance of the artwork itself.

The second feature is an attention towards depth and the subsequent engagement it offers with traditional forms of criticism. As previously mentioned, properly directed art criticism seeks to expand the possible depth of understanding inherent in the artwork, rather than expressing explicitly what the artwork means.<sup>91</sup> As such, theological engagement must not remain on the surface, it must dive deeper, fertilizing new possible grounds of meaning. The temptation inherent within theological criticism is the desire to make religiously subjective truth claims. To do so, however, diverts the goal of gaining depth and instead narrows the conversation, landing

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<sup>89</sup> Siedell, 14-15.

<sup>90</sup> Anderson, "The (In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism," 72. Anderson continues, “We want to avoid the tendency for theological commitments to pulverize artworks into an unacceptable thinness, but we also want to avoid the thinness that results from precluding those commitments altogether.”

<sup>91</sup> Siedell, 125. “If criticism, including art criticism, does not expand our experience of all aspects of art and life through the distinct subjectivity of the critic, then it is not worthy of the name of criticism.”

the dialogue again in the realm of theological interpretation instead of criticism. Thus, the challenge for the theologian is that contemporary art is not a vehicle for dogmatic religious claims, but rather a methodology itself through which new perspectives and possibilities can be discovered. For example, *Piss Christ's* engagement with Christ's hypostatic union can be considered theologically successful only because it refrains from telling the viewer exactly the artist's interpretation, but rather calls attention to it as a point of dialogue. Its failing, however, is that the dialogue is arguably too firmly grounded in a Christian theological worldview, thus restricting the art and preventing the exertion of Siedell's noted 'counterpressure'.<sup>92</sup>

The third feature is the acceptability of contradiction. As application of theological criticism progresses by expanding on the possible depth of an artwork's interpretation, theological contradiction is inevitable. By proceeding out of a desire to avoid opposing thoughts, the conversation is ultimately stifled, again resulting in theological interpretation instead of criticism.<sup>93</sup> The wish for a coherent line of thinking is tantalizing, but as Anderson says, "Good criticism is rooted in the desire to genuinely encounter and more deeply understand an artwork."<sup>94</sup> For this reason, if theological criticism is presented didactically, the autonomous value of the artwork will become compromised and, as Margaret F. McKerron notes, "the making of art becomes a representative exercise, not a generative one."<sup>95</sup> Thus dichotomous

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<sup>92</sup> Siedell, 14-15.

<sup>93</sup> Timothy J. Gorringer, *Earthly Visions: Theology and the Challenge of Art*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 192. "To read secular art theologically is to insist on questioning, on the dimension of depth, to resist premature attempts at the closure of meaning. It is to situate art within such a tradition of questioning and reflecting."

<sup>94</sup> Anderson, "The (In)visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism," 75.

<sup>95</sup> Margaret F. McKerron, "TheoArtistry: Practical Perspectives on 'Theologically Informed Art,'" *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 18, no. 4 (2018): 358.

perceptions found in the deepening of an artwork's interpretative possibilities must be seen as expansive theoretical options, rather than opposing forces.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, Claire Bishop suggests that a truly democratic sphere of relations is not one of perfect unity but one where, “Conflict, division, and instability. . . are conditions of its existence.”<sup>97</sup> When opposing ideas can be freely presented, the expanse between them becomes a fertile field of possible dialogue.

With connection to that last point, the fourth and final feature is a direct application of the previously mentioned “hermeneutic of suspicion,” which aims towards finding those expansive theoretical options. The skepticism inherent in the hermeneutic of suspicion acts to dissolve religious content into realms of superstition and delusion. However, as a method for producing depth, it cannot be denied that this is an extremely effective critical tool, even if under its current formulations, select world views are obviously disenfranchised. Regardless, what art criticism has accomplished in its existing methodological pantheon is no small feat, and thus should not be so quickly discarded. The challenge in developing a method of theological criticism, therefore, as Elkins and Anderson assert in a recent interview, is the complex task of finding unity within an antagonistic environment without appropriating past critical successes.<sup>98</sup> To aid in solving this problem, the hermeneutic of suspicion requires a new structural formulation and a clear outlet for its application of skepticism. I postulate that this outlet can be found in the mutual fragilization that characterizes secularity as a cultural condition in alignment with Taylors analysis as defined

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<sup>96</sup> Mckerron, “TheoArtistry: Practical Perspectives on ‘Theologically Informed Art,’” 362. “If conversations between church and contemporary artists are impeded by dichotomous perceptions of one another . . . then perhaps a degree of separation between church and the academy permits constructive theological and cultural conversations - with generative results on both sides.”

<sup>97</sup> Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110, (2004): 65.

<sup>98</sup> James Elkins and Jonathan A. Anderson, “The Strange Persistence of Religion in Contemporary Art,” *Image: Art, Faith, and Mystery* 110 (2021): 49–62.

in chapter 1. The critic thus directs their skepticism, not towards the validity of the artist's claimed religious foundation, but towards questioning the theological building blocks that form it. The final methodological feature can therefore be defined as the open acceptance of spiritual identity, followed by the suspicion that numerous spheres within the conditional plurality have contributed to its formation. The challenge in this final feature is therefore placed on the artist themselves, as they must be both confident and careful in how they define their own foundation so as not to be fragilized beyond repair. Structurally, this application of the hermeneutic of suspicion differs from past formulations in that it assumes the critic and the artist to be operating in dialogical harmony rather than opposition.

In structuring a methodology of theological art criticism, the four above mentioned features must operate as guidelines to keep the engagement firmly grounded. To recap, a theological methodology must: 1. Be dialogical, maintaining the artwork as the focus and striving to perpetuate theological *criticism* as opposed to theological *interpretation*. 2. Theological criticism must operate with the intention of increasing depth of possible meaning, thus acting to avoid making subjective truth claims. It should be noted however, that inherent in every religious worldview is a proclamation of dogma, the addressing of which should be essential in any scholarly account but done so from a position of neutrality. The burden thus falls on the scholar in question to maintain a position conducive to inter-religious dialogue. 3. Contradiction is acceptable and should be considered integral as it furthers the agendas of the first two points, increasing dialogical possibilities and depth of understanding. 4. Skepticism is applied in synonymous action with the mutual fragilization inherent in a pluralistic secular condition but refrains from interrogating the foundational belief itself.

### **Application: Considering Viola and Wallinger**

In the remainder of this chapter, I will attempt a limited practical application in two separate case studies. By applying the features of the above outlined method of theological art criticism, I hope to expand on the critical interpretations of the following artworks, *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)*, 2014, by Bill Viola and *The Lark Ascending*, 2004, by Mark Wallinger.<sup>99</sup> The challenge behind this application and the reason for its limited inquiry, is that this methodology is intended for use by critical and theological scholars of which I am neither. As such, in recognizing my own limited expertise in practical application I will refrain from a thorough analysis, opting instead for a general critical overview followed by a theological critique.

The first image for consideration is *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)* by Bill Viola.<sup>100</sup> Presented as a video polyptych on four vertical plasma displays, this installation plays for just over seven minutes depicting four figures, each being related to one of the four cardinal elements through color and formal representation. From left to right, the panels depict *Earth* as green, *Air* in white, *Fire* as red, and *Water* in blue. In addition, each panel includes a literal depiction of its corresponding element through dramatic representation. The posing of the figures similarly is suitably dramatic, recalling the history of early romantic imagery, placing the artwork in an art historical dialogue with conversations around the sublime.

In addition to the compelling visuals the viewer is given several theological instigators, the duality of the title, the artwork's physical location, and the films overall duration, all of which

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<sup>100</sup> Bill Viola, *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)*, 2014, color high-definition video polyptych on four vertical plasma displays, 140 cm x 338 cm x 10cm (55 in x 133 in x 4 in), 7 min., 15 sec. Figure 2.

offer interpretive depth to this artwork. The first point to notice is the title, *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)*. Combined with the imagery, the elemental designation considers the theological perspectives of distinct historic traditions, elementalism and Christian mysticism, both of which engage rather directly with mystical theology. Elementalism centers on the four cardinal elements as the building blocks of all things, where convergence with all four is conceivably synonymous with convergence with the divine. The essential belief here is that when all the primary elements of created reality come together in perfect unity, it becomes a natural connection to God or numinous presence. Christian mysticism, on the other hand, refers to the way one engages with the natural world, aligning it also with a consideration of garden theology found in Genesis, the human effort to return to the perfect harmony found in the Garden of Eden prior to the fall of man.<sup>101</sup> According to the Christian tradition, when sin entered the world, humanity and nature became corrupted, ultimately disrupting their intended unity with each other and with God. Since then, nature has cried out to God for justice to be done and reparations made, thus adding to Viola's imagery of nature's forces being in conflict, instead of unity with the human subject.

Alternatively, it is also conceivable that Viola's human subjects be seen as the literal embodiment of their respective elements. In this approach the disturbed relation between human and nature is emphasized, as the natural forces become figurative martyrs for the glory of God. The narrative thus unfolds that nature, despite being thrown into chaos, stained by sin, and thrust out of union with God because of human rebellion, ultimately refuses to denounce its creator, thus pursuing righteous martyrdom. The created world is therefore understood as being in

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<sup>101</sup> Genesis 1:29-31, remarks the giving of all created things to the stewardship of Adam and Eve, humanity. Gen. 2:1 (NIV). “. . . Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array!” What started off as an ordering of chaos ends as a unified reality.



constant witness to eternal kingship, as stated in Romans: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”<sup>102</sup>

The artwork's physical location and video duration continue to add to the depth of possible interpretations. Set up as a permanent installation at St. Paul's Cathedral, London, *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)* operates as an object of Catholic devotional interest. Viola himself affirms this idea, as Aaron Rosen records in his brief description of the work: “The framing of the polyptych emphasizes the conscious homage that this cutting-edge video art pays to traditional altarpieces, and Viola hopes his works for St Paul’s become ‘practical objects of traditional contemplation and devotion.’”<sup>103</sup>

However, *Martyrs*’ presentation as a durational video suggests a more nuanced understanding. By presenting the work as time based rather than as static imagery, the devotional interest transitions from one of visual contemplation to that of bearing witness to ritual action. With the duration being seven minutes, this ritual action becomes more meditative as the number is religiously significant, since God finished his creation on the seventh day.<sup>104</sup> Applied to *Martyrs*, the duration becomes a symbolic gesture to unity, or the alignment of one's whole self with Divine will.

The success of Viola’s work is in its potential depth, the scale of which makes it impressively deep and theologically compelling. In *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)*, a history

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<sup>102</sup> Romans 1:20-21 (NIV). In the 2011 version of the NIV study Bible it also notes “No one . . . has an excuse for not honoring God, because the whole created world reveals him.”

<sup>103</sup> Rosen, *Art and Religion in the 21st Century*, 243.

<sup>104</sup> Genesis 2:2 (NIV). “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.”

of religious imagery is engaged with, a diverse range of theological material is introduced, and a contemporary handling of media and subject is employed, all while operating in a unified artistic rendering. The only possibly failing of this artwork, however, is its unashamed allegiance with a religious setting and connotation. By openly claiming the work as a devotional object and permanently displaying it within a strictly religious setting, it could be argued that the artist himself has actively limited the scope of the artworks engagement, thus potentially violating both the first and second rules of theological art criticism. Nevertheless, it is also true to say that these specific choices have acted to enhance targeted portions of dialogue and therefore also depth, highlighting the artist's mastery of subject and intention.

The final artwork for consideration is Mark Wallinger's *The Lark Ascending*.<sup>105</sup> Presented as a cinema film with a duration of thirty-three minutes, this artwork is visually minimalistic but incorporates significant sound quality and environment specificity. When the film begins, the viewer is presented with a solid black screen accompanied by sound, which Adrian Searle describes as a, “booming resonance . . . Semitone by semitone, the pitch is raised. At times, the sound is daft - like the talk of *The Clangers* or a tuneless breath across the mouth of an empty bottle.”<sup>106</sup> Over the duration of the film, both the black screen and the thunderous sound transition, the screen becomes white, the booming becomes the harmonious call of a lark. If presented in quick succession, this transition might be jarring, however, played over the thirty-three-minute duration, the change is almost imperceptible. It simply seems to happen though no one can seem to pinpoint exactly when.

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<sup>105</sup> Mark Wallinger, *The Lark Ascending*, 2004, cinema film, 33 min. Presented as a cinema intended film, there is currently no public visual depiction available on record.

<sup>106</sup> Adrian Searle, “Mark Wallinger,” *The Guardian* online, last modified January 21, 2004. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2004/jan/21/1>.

*The Lark Ascending*, despite being rather minimal in nature, offers a surprisingly complex experience. Visually, the black square of the opening image in contrast with the white square in the closing suggests a dualist philosophy, most commonly depicted in Taoist yin and yang. Additionally, the pure squares recall early uses of abstraction, such as in the artistic works of Kasimir Malevich or Ad Reinhardt, both of whom utilized shape and flat color, and were influenced by their individual spiritual interest.<sup>107</sup> The ascending transition in Wallinger's film suggests positive change or the duality of existence. In Taoist religious philosophy, harmony is the truest expression of life, a balance between light and dark, hot and cold, good and bad. Dualist theology suggests that the spirit is split between good and bad, and that it is only the dialogue or engagement with deity that can instigate the spirit's harmonious transition. This becomes even more significant given the sole use of black and white. In western countries, black is synonymous with death and white synonymous with life, however, in some eastern countries, this is essentially reversed with white being worn to funerals and black to weddings.<sup>108</sup> The implication here is a question of ascension versus descension, and the significance of cultural context.

Equally significant to the visuals is the element of sound. Beginning as a booming resonance, the sound in the work shifts and transitions in unison with the visuals, eventually identifying itself as the call of a lark. It is interesting to recognize that the sound is not a

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<sup>107</sup> Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, around 1923, painting, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia, [https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/LESSING\\_ART\\_10310751034](https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/LESSING_ART_10310751034), Figure 3; Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting*, 1963, painting, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States, America, [https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/AMOMA\\_10312309590](https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/AMOMA_10312309590), Figure 4.

<sup>108</sup> Sally Painter, "Mourning Colors in Cultures from around the World," *LoveToKnow*, accessed August 9, 2022, <https://dying.lovetoknow.com/death-cultures-around-world/mourning-colors-cultures-from-around-world>.

multitude of differing sources, but the larks call from start to finish and only manipulated at slower rates and differing frequencies.<sup>109</sup> As such, while the visuals shift from dark to light, the lark seemingly also shifts, finding its own voice within the duration of the composition, further suggesting a theology of harmony as well as of language. In the Abrahamic creation stories, all that is created is spoken into existence, inferring a divine power in spoken language.<sup>110</sup>

Alternatively, the visuals and sounds might be read together as a religious transition of divine proximity, suggesting that changes of the soul or heart happen slowly, almost imperceptibly, while the conclusion is altogether beautiful.

The final significance of the work is the location of its display. Unlike previous works, Wallinger specifically chose to present *The Lark Ascending* in a cinema rather than a gallery. In a gallery setting, viewers can come and go, walk back and forth, interrupt, or experience the work only in part. In a cinema, however, viewers are brought in and seated for the duration, guaranteeing the atmosphere to be constant. The show thus possesses a beginning, a middle, and an ending, one that all viewers consequently experience. The cinema therefore should be read as a ritualistic meditative space, regardless of the viewer's lasting interest or level of comfort. The expectation is given that all will stay till the end. Of course, such etiquette is not official in the cinematic experience, but the air of it is tangible. Viewers are therefore presented with a thirty-three-minute durational film of ascending color and sound upon which a meditation of self and space transpires.

The true success of this work is its subtlety. Unlike *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)*, *The Lark Ascending* makes no effort to openly claim religious engagement, nor does it make use

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<sup>109</sup> Searle, "Mark Wallinger."

<sup>110</sup> Psalm 33:9 (NIV). "For he spoke and it came to be; he commanded and it stood firm."

of obvious imagery. Rather, Wallinger makes decisions that subtly impart religious meaning. The choice of which conceptually *invites*, as opposed to *directs*, a theologically complex critical dialogue. Ultimately, Wallinger's work plays off of historical practices, engages with contemporary methods, and is situated in a sufficiently ambiguous position without becoming completely lost in abstraction; it invites dialogue without forcing any one perspective.

## **Conclusion**

While the engagement of this chapter was directed towards establishing a sufficiently stable understanding of art criticism for the purpose of outlining the inclusion of theological dialogue, it is also important to note the simplicity of the final formulation. Creating and implementing a method of art criticism capable of genuine engagement with theological artistic content is indeed a monstrous task, and has certainly not been encompassed within this chapter. The goal here, therefore, has been to establish a starting point from which future engagements can progress. The application in the final section between Wallinger and Viola can thus be understood as a methodological attempt to highlight areas of theological significance, not an exhaustive pursuit of theological criticism. Offering a proper art critical analysis in this context would entail following each highlighted point of significance, seeking out a comparative dialogue between one and the whole, while allowing the artistic merit of the artwork to maintain sufficient weight as the source of prime significance. An experimental application in this manner, though necessary for further theoretical development, has not yet been conducted, and remains outside the scope of this thesis' investigation.

The efforts of this chapter have aimed to offer a theoretical foundation for the formation

of a method of theological art criticism, as well as an applied example of its application. In the following chapter, I will again apply the four rules previously established in a critical review of the thesis exhibition, *Altar to the Unknown God*, while seeking a greater depth of critical response than that seen previously in this chapter.

## Chapter 3 Exhibition Analysis

### Introduction

*Altar to the Unknown God* is an introspective interdisciplinary thesis exhibition interested in twenty-first century spiritual and religious identity. It is presented as the culmination of my master's research and investigation at the University of Calgary. The previous chapters in this text have endeavored to expand on the exhibition's literary and intellectual context through discussing rhizomatic philosophy, several significant definitions, and an exploration into contemporary methods of art criticism that incorporate a critical theological component.

The exhibition, as pictured in Figures 5 and 6, is split into two connected sections, a hallway and a main chamber, and is composed of twenty-seven artworks.<sup>111</sup> Figure 5 depicts the entrance into the exhibition: a narrow corridor with walls painted a deep blue, dimly lit, and a single left turn down at the end.<sup>112</sup> The hallway, including the portion around the corner, contain the first four artworks: small, wall mounted assemblages, distinguishable by their internal rotation of LED light. After rounding the hallway's corner, the viewer finds themselves entering the main chamber of the exhibition, depicted in the Figure 6.<sup>113</sup> The main chamber houses the bulk of the exhibition, featuring small and large abstract paintings, wall mounted assemblages, and a central sculptural assemblage mounted on a plinth. The bulk of this chapter will break down the various components of the exhibition, identifying three conceptually significant theological

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<sup>111</sup> J. Klassen, *Altar to the Unknown God* (exhibition detail 1), interdisciplinary, painting and assemblage, Nickle Gallery, Calgary, Canada, 2022, Figure 5; J. Klassen, *Altar to the Unknown God* (exhibition detail 1), interdisciplinary, painting and assemblage, Nickle Gallery, Calgary, Canada, 2022, Figure 6.

<sup>112</sup> Klassen, *Altar to the Unknown God* (exhibition detail 1), Figure 5.

<sup>113</sup> Klassen, *Altar to the Unknown God* (exhibition detail 1), Figure 6.

details and expanding them via the application of defined method of theological art criticism previously defined in chapter two. However, the exhibition itself, when considered as a rhizome, offers innumerable possible areas for theological investigation, as each artwork can be considered individually, as well as being in dialogue with every other artwork. A critical investigation of that magnitude would very quickly surpass the expansive expectations of this paper. Thus, the three features I have chosen to focus this chapter's critical lens on are: the exhibition's title, the consistent use of abstraction (most notably in painting), and the exhibition's layout and floor plan.

### **Exhibition Title**

The title, *Altar to the Unknown God*, serves as the starting point of this investigation, as it both grounds and contextualizes the exhibition and its various works. Before diving in too deep, it is worth noting that the title is grammatically singular, suggesting that the exhibition itself is the “altar” in question. With that consideration in mind, it would be conceivable to suggest that the exhibition is not a collection of twenty-seven artworks, as previously described, but rather is a singular mixed media installation composed of many artistic components. This mentality will help in the next section when we consider the theological significance of the exhibition's layout and floor plan.

In the New Testament of the Christian bible, the book of Acts records the events of the early church following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, which most significantly provides an account for the life and work of the Apostle Paul.<sup>114</sup> Paul is a major New Testament figure in

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<sup>114</sup> Acts, NIV study Bible. Book Introduction, “The book of Acts provides a bridge for the writings of the NT. As a second volume to Luke's Gospel, it joins what Jesus “began to do and teach” (1:1; see note there) as told in the Gospels with what he continued to do and teach through the apostles' preaching and establishment of the church. Besides linking the Gospel



the Christian faith, who is responsible for writing a significant number of the canonized New Testament books, as well as for his efforts in establishing the early church around the Mediterranean and into Asia. In Acts 17, Paul recorded a visit Athens in Greece where he notices “. . . an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.”<sup>115</sup> Thus we find the origin of this exhibition’s title. While it is possible that the Greeks erected this altar out of fear of not wanting to offend that which they did not know or understand, as many commentators note, I would argue that the significance for this exhibition actually lies in the inverse.<sup>116</sup> The building of an altar to that which is unknown is akin to proclaiming a desire to learn, which first requires the knowledge of one's own limitations. To the Christian church, the altar to the unknown god symbolically bears the theological reminder that God is mysterious and beyond full comprehension. There is a two-fold understanding here: that while seeking increased theological discernment is encouraged, no matter the amount learned, an acknowledgement of ignorance towards the infinite whole is ultimately necessary. Paul, in his ministry to the Athenians, similarly notes this recognition of ignorance and uses it at an entry point for intellectual engagement, therefore seeking connection with a differing culture on their terms.<sup>117</sup>

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narratives on the one hand and the apostolic letters on the other, it supplies an account of the life of Paul, from which we can learn the setting and for his letters.”

<sup>115</sup> Acts 17:23, NIV study Bible, “For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.”

<sup>116</sup> Acts 17:23, NIV Study Bible, verse notes. “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. The Greeks were fearful of offending any god by failing to give him or her attention; so they felt they could cover any omissions by the label “unknown god.” Other Greek writers confirm that such altars could be seen in Athens.”

<sup>117</sup> William MacDonald and Arthur L. Farstad, *Believer's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1992): 1638.

Outside of the biblical story, it is important to point out that the same inscription seems to have also caught the attention of art and religion scholars in the twenty-first century. The altar to the unknown god, in academic literature, points towards the most foundational of theological questions. For example, Anderson wonders how “human persons, societies, and materiality itself [relate] to the presence or absence of God (or gods).”<sup>118</sup> In this sense, Daniel Siedell remarks, “Altars to the unknown god are strewn about the historical landscape of modern contemporary art. . . But they have too often been ignored.”<sup>119</sup> Siedell seems to be suggesting that in this basic sense, artists and artworks across the modern art world have inadvertently been asking this fundamental question, and thus building their own altars pointing towards the unknown. This is not to say, however, that modern and contemporary art is religious or a kind of religion in nature, but rather is putting forth the notion that those questions previously belonging to the realms of religious investigation now can be found in the advances of artistic thought. If this is true, and I would assert that is, then as culture continues to develop its own enchanted plurality, artists and artworks will continue to all the more openly proclaim questions that require, at least in part, a theological response. As Siedell states, “from a wide array of positions, both secular and religious, there are increasing examples of modern art criticism becoming a realm of theological art thinking.”<sup>120</sup>

The title, *Altar to the Unknown God*, delivers two foundational details for determining the art critical atmosphere of this exhibition. First, despite being a reference to a historical Greek

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<sup>118</sup> Anderson, “The (In)Visibility of Theology in Contemporary Art Criticism,” 67.

<sup>119</sup> Siedell, 11.

<sup>120</sup> Anderson and William A. Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses of Modernism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, and imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2016): pp. 23.

altar, it openly aligns the exhibition with the events of Acts 17, suggesting the underlying motivator to be of a Christian orientation. Second, the title connects the exhibition with the academic endeavor to bring theological content into the realms of art criticism, thus aligning the exhibition as a whole with the topics explored in my first and second chapters. Much like the altar discovered by Paul in Athens, this exhibition title theologically proclaims a simple yearning for *something more*. The altar in Athens showed Paul that the Athenians were aware of their own limitations, both intellectually and religiously, and that they were interested in pursuing that unknown dimension. As an exhibition title, *Altar to the Unknown God* therefore seems to suggest that the works in question, despite utilizing a Christian foundation, are ultimately interested in the contemporary plurality of cultural belief, the seeking of *something more* in unknown theological dimensions. It is important to add at this point that the expressed desire for *something more* is not born out of dissatisfaction or distaste, but rather out of the relational acknowledgment between the finite human and the infinite divine.

### **Theological Abstraction**

*Altar to the Unknown God* employs two primary methods of visual depiction: mixed media sculptural assemblage and acrylic abstract painting. Although the assemblages could certainly be investigated theologically, and would likely procure significant results, for the purposes of this section I will be restricting my analysis to that of abstract painting. Therefore, this section will delve into the theological and iconoclastic roots of abstract expressionists, and will conclude with a contemporary critical analysis on the exhibition's overall use of abstraction.

Early abstractionists such as Malevich and Kandinsky openly proclaimed interest in religious and spiritual subjects. Malevich, through his advances in Russian suprematism, openly

explored orthodox Christian icons in his entirely non-representational paintings (see fig. 3).<sup>121</sup> While Kandinsky aligned his work with the study of how color and form can pursue a depiction of the spiritual dimensions through artistic expression, a subject he would explore in great detail in his book, *Concerning the Spiritual In Art*.<sup>122</sup> The abstract foundation that Kandinsky and Malevich helped form would ultimately come under fire in the North American art scene between the nineteen-thirties and nineteen-fifties, largely due to the formalist developments of Clement Greenberg.<sup>123</sup> Greenberg's inclinations seemed to be grounded in wanting “to leave it all behind, and in so doing he entirely collapsed the (central) role that spirituality played in the work of each of these artists” Pollock, Rothko, and Gottlieb.<sup>124</sup> Even so, the later works of abstract expressionists Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman would hit their stride, finding significant richness in religious study, specifically that of Judaism.<sup>125</sup>

The abstract expressionist movement, though operating at the peak of modern secularity, managed to maintain a grip on its spiritual sensitivities and theological interests, as noted by Anderson and Dyrness.<sup>126</sup> Charlene Spretnak, in her twenty-first century investigation into the

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<sup>121</sup> Malevich, *Black Square*, Figure 3.

<sup>122</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler and Francis Golffing (Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing, 2014); Wassily Kandinsky, *Black and Violet*, 1923, painting, Zürich, Switzerland, [https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/AWSS35953\\_35953\\_31707381](https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/AWSS35953_35953_31707381). Figure 7.

<sup>123</sup> Anderson and Dyrness, 279.

<sup>124</sup> Anderson and Dyrness, 279.

<sup>125</sup> Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1957, painting. The Menil Collection, [https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/AWSS35953\\_35953\\_34184855](https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/AWSS35953_35953_34184855), Figure 8; Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-51, painting. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States, [https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/AMOMA\\_10312309586](https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/AMOMA_10312309586), Figure 9.

<sup>126</sup> Anderson and Dyrness, 283.

spiritual dynamic of modern art, notes both Rothko and Newman possess potent interests in the religious, specifically what she calls, an “allusive spirituality” where “one finds a preference for expressions that allude to the ineffable and that seek to jar our mundane consciousness out of its well-worn tracks into a sense of open-ended, concept-free, interrelatedness with the sacred whole.”<sup>127</sup> Rothko, on the one hand, liked to talk about his paintings as welcoming viewers into a similar kind of religious experience as he had when painting them.<sup>128</sup> Newman, on the other hand, actively investigated Jewish mysticism, even to the point of incorporating several “teachings of the Kabbalah” into some of his works.<sup>129</sup> As a point of connectivity, Judaism functions as an aniconic religious tradition, meaning that it does not allow the production of representational religious images, as this would be seen as a violation of the Second Commandment.<sup>130</sup> The Jewish worldview thus aligns with the imagery produced by the abstract expressionists, making it an obvious outlet for investigation. Additionally, contemporary artists have found value in the study of negative theology (or apophatic theology) which comes from the developments of Christian mysticism, which is sympathetic to the aniconic position.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Spretnak, 125.

<sup>128</sup> Spretnak, 129. “The people who weep before my pictures are having the same kind of religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point.”

<sup>129</sup> Spretnak, 129.

<sup>130</sup> Exodus 20:4-5a. “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them . . .”

<sup>131</sup> Ronald R. Bernier, *Unspeakable Art of Bill Viola: A Visual Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014): 5. “The theological framework I will engage here begins with the ancient tradition of apophatic, or negative, theology . . . that seeks to describe God only in terms of what may not be said about God, what God is not.”

Apophatic theology, when applied to the visuals of artistic production, encourages the pursuit of divine imagery by a means of negation. If God is truly the creator of all things, then typical conventions of human language will always fail to encompass him in any attempted description. They will always fall short. Therefore, the goal is a depiction of nothing that is yet something.

Within the exhibition, *Altar to the Unknown God*, numerous examples of abstract imagery can be seen in the substance of large abstract acrylic paintings, as well as in the form of several assemblages. The works in this exhibition pull inspiration from the aniconic teachings that were so important to Rothko and Newman with an additional consideration towards the directives of apophatic theology. Within the main chamber of the exhibition space, several abstracts stand out for theological consideration: *A Safe Space to Pray* (fig. 10) and *I Feel This Emptiness Howling Out, Comp. #1* (fig. 11).<sup>132</sup> Both of these artworks display as large abstractions relying primarily on acrylics, though each employs a slightly different technique. *A Safe Space to Pray*, as the larger of the two, presents the most commanding presence. It is also far more minimal in its palette, and far brighter overall with red iron oxide, shading gray tones and limited use of phthalo blue. As an additional difference, this piece also utilizes a subtle application of gold leaf to create seven thin concentric circles of varying sizes across its surface. In contrast, *I Feel This Emptiness Howling Out, Comp. #1*, is a much darker painting built up through the use of many glazed layers. The palette is much freer with its use of color, creating areas of diverse brightness amidst the dark shading. Across its surface are several consistent uses of form through basic shapes such as circles and x's, many of which fade into the darkness of the canvas. While the two images appear quite different in many ways, they offer one connective

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<sup>132</sup> J. Klassen, *A Safe Space to Pray*, 2021, acrylic and gold leaf on sheetrock panel, documentation photograph from personal archive, Figure 10; J. Klassen, *I Feel This Emptiness, Howling Out, Comp. #1*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, documentation photograph from personal archive, Figure 11.

detail that links them, the use of a similar form as the main feature of the composition. Looking around the exhibition, variations of the same form are depicted in solitude, and multiples in every abstraction.

This form is born out of personal consideration of constant forms throughout art history. In western art history, the halo features prominently to denote divine orientation on saints and the like. Similarly, circular forms seem to present fairly commonly across other areas of history, denoting a comparable heavenly association. Besides the circular form, squared forms also feature commonly as representing some manner of earthly or grounded orientation. The consistent forms depicted throughout this exhibition were constructed from a meditative consideration of both the heavenly association of the circles as well as the earthly orientation of the squares, thus seeking something more towards the middle. Theologically, these paintings utilize an apophatic and aniconic orientation, suggesting that while they are non-representational, they are, on a meditative level, investigations into abstract divine imagery. Thus, each artwork connects with the *something more* proclamation of the title, as the human artist struggles to depict, and therefore inch just a bit closer to the substance of the divine.

### **Exhibition Layout and Floor Plan**

To recall the earlier exhibition description, *Altar to the Unknown God* is separated into two distinct areas, a dimly lit corridor or hallway, and the main chamber, as can be seen in Figures 5 and 6.<sup>133</sup> The hallway is L-shaped and dimly lit, with its walls painted a deep blue, before opening up into the more brightly lit space of the larger chamber. Within the hallway are four wall mounted assemblages, each of which feature interior LED illumination that slowly

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<sup>133</sup> J. Klassen, *Altar to the Unknown God* (exhibition detail 1), Figure 5; J. Klassen, *Altar to the Unknown God* (exhibition detail 1), Figure 6.

transition across nine shades of the RGB color spectrum. Beyond their internal lighting, these pieces also share a variety of interactive mechanisms, as well as the unique composition of their titles, all of which notably come in the form of a question.

Upon entering the main chamber, a mixture of wall-mounted artworks line the exterior, including several interactive assemblages, as well as abstract paintings of varying sizes. Most significantly, the center of this room is occupied by a plinth-mounted sculptural assemblage, roughly 2ft<sup>3</sup>, as seen in Figure 12.<sup>134</sup> The underside and top of the box are painted black, while each of the four side panels feature darkly rendered abstractions. Additionally, bored into each panel is a central convex lens situated at roughly eye level, allowing the viewer to peer into the lit interior of the assemblage.<sup>135</sup> While the lens mounted in each panel partially disrupts the viewer's vision by inverting the interior image, through careful inspection, the complex interior composition is ultimately revealed. Inside the box, the viewer will find a collection of twelve figurative sculptural objects arranged in a circle on a decorative metal grate (inverted), a central wooden cruciform whose proximity to each lens further acts to disrupt the viewers line of sight (not inverted), and that the inside of the box is lined with four full length mirrors, transforming the space into an infinite reflected environment. The mirrored interior additionally serves to connect the piece conceptually to its individual title, *That Infinite Inner Room*. While the official footprint of the exhibition consists of two primary spaces, I will furthermore assert that the interior of the cube acts as a conceptual third significant space. The exhibition layout and floor

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<sup>134</sup> J. Klassen, *That Infinite Inner Room*, 2022, mixed media painted assemblage, Nickle Gallery, Calgary, Canada, Figure 12.

<sup>135</sup> J. Klassen, *That Infinite Inner Room (interior detail)*, 2022, mixed media painted assemblage, Nickle Gallery, Calgary, Canada, Figure 13.



plan, as described above, thus offers two distinct areas of theological significance, the hallway and its contents, and the triune connection of these three areas.

The first area that requires a more in-depth examination is the described hallway. Situated at the entrance into the exhibition and coupled with the low level of lighting and the transitioning LED color of the assemblages, the physical space of this entryway takes on an appropriately contemporary atmosphere. When entering the hallway, the viewer is confronted firstly with an acute awareness of proximity. The corridor is only four feet wide, and the assemblages, though wall mounted, are three dimensional. Some of the assemblages even protrude into the space nearly ten inches. The effect of this design is one of an inescapably close encounter with the works, thus establishing the connective conceptual component that links the spaces varying theological signifiers, but I'll get back to this in a moment.

Upon taking a closer look at each of the four assemblages, three details stand out for theological consideration: the unique interactive mechanisms of each work, the odd tension that seems to occupy their compositions, and how each title exists as a question. The first assemblage encountered in the hallway, as pictured in Figure 14, is titled, *Why is this Home a House but not of Worship?*<sup>136</sup> The physicality of this piece depicts three distinct overlapping layers, the two closest to the viewer being mounted on sliders that allow for their free movement from side-to-side, which either enhances or decreases the overlapping composition. The various components of each layer—which I will refrain from describing in exhaustive detail—thus exist in a variety of possible orientations. Some components are open, with room to breathe, while others are more closed, enhancing the work's compositional tension. The open-ended orientation of the title's question seems to be in dialogue with the compositional tension, thus suggesting a spiritual

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<sup>136</sup> J. Klassen, *Why is this Home a House but not of Worship?*, 2022, interactive mixed media sculptural assemblage, documentation photograph from personal archive, Figure 14.

significance in the grappling with the question itself. This idea is enhanced, given the forced proximity of the artwork, insinuating an urgency or necessity towards it.

In Genesis 32 of the Judeo-Christian Old Testament, Jacob is described as physically wrestling with God before reentering the land of Canaan.<sup>137</sup> This story teaches an uncomfortable biblical truth. Jacob thought in his return to Canaan, he would have to contend with the powers of his brother that he had slighted, as well as the powers of other human principalities.<sup>138</sup> However, God himself intervenes, teaching Jacob that while the flesh tends to be concerned with fleshly things, he must struggle against his humanity to connect with a higher power. The theological principle of fundamentally existing in aligned struggle with the divine is a concept shared by many traditions, not just the Abrahamic. In Buddhism, for example, humanity operates in the cyclic existence of samsara, the antithesis of nirvana.<sup>139</sup> In pursuit of nirvana, practitioners learn to empty themselves, cutting off all connection to the human self, which is the source of samsara, in an effort to smother the source of samsara's flame and thus achieve nirvana.<sup>140</sup> In this sense, the Buddhist religious process of achieving nirvana possesses a remarkable connective

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<sup>137</sup> Genesis 32:24-28, "So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. The man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

<sup>138</sup> Genesis 32:24, NIV Study Bible, verse notes, "Now, as he was about to reenter Canaan, he was shown that it was with God that he must "wrestle" - not with Esau or any other human being."

<sup>139</sup> Damien Keown, *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, version Current Online Version: 2004 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): "The attainment of nirvana marks the end of cyclic existence in samsara, the condition to which it forms the antithesis."

<sup>140</sup> Damien Keown, *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, version Current Online Version: 2004 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): ". . . nirvana as a gradual process, like cutting off the fuel to a fire and letting the embers die down."

symmetry with the Judeo-Christian theological teaching previously noted. Both theological principles identify the human self as a force naturally in opposition to their desired states of existence. For the Christian, the goal is to move past the principalities of the flesh so as to align oneself with the principalities of the divine, thus achieving a state where one can *wrestle* with God. For the Buddhist, all life exists in samsara, a physical existence of cyclical rebirth where the fuel for negativity is associated directly with the flesh, thus the process of achieving nirvana involves the emptying of oneself to achieve alignment with the infinite. It's worth noting here that what uniquely differs the Christian claim from other similar theologies is that God's wrestling with Jacob can be understood as a divine promise that although we struggle, God himself will struggle along with us.

The tension in each of the hallway's assemblages, their interactive mechanics, and the open-ended question in each title all operate together to offer direction for a theological reading. The condition of the hallway is one of confrontation, tension, and an open-ended seeking for something more, thus connecting the hallway to the exhibition title. As one moves down the hallway and encounters the different artworks, they are confronted with different forms of imagery. Some are overtly religious, and some are more in line with a general spirituality. If we consider the theology around *wrestling with oneself*, the principalities of flesh or the samsara, then the circumstances of this hallway can be interpreted as simultaneously bearing witness to and representative of that struggle. On a simpler and possibly more inclusive note, the hallway could more generally be understood as proclaiming the uncomfortableness inherent in starting a spiritual journey.

This now opens the door to the second detail emphasized by the layout of this exhibition, the existence of three distinct spaces, the hallway, the main chamber, and the inner room of the

central cube. After the viewer exits the hallway, they immediately enter the main chamber at the center of which stands, *That Infinite Inner Room*, the third space. After entering the main chamber, two details are worth noting. First, this main area is heavily occupied by a variety of artworks, and while some are interactive assemblages, like those in the hallway, none of them are titled as questions. Second, the third space of the cube is a distinctly inaccessible space, with only small lenses around its exterior through which one can peer. The intrigue in this detail is that the *inner room* thus suggests the third space to be one that is personal but not quite private.

The first temple was called the tabernacle and was constructed during the Exodus account, when the people of Israel were wandering the desert after escaping from Egypt.<sup>141</sup> The people of Israel at this time were destitute and without claim to any land. In the ancient world of the Near East, the many powers of the time all possessed their own well-established pantheons and a general theological understanding around their geographical orientation.<sup>142</sup> The basic assertion here is that the gods of the Near East and beyond made their homes wherever they pleased, but once established they rarely moved. The God of Israel, however, had no place to dwell amongst his people and thus commanded the creation of one. Over the course of Old Testament history, the tabernacle would transition from a mobile tent-like structure, as we read in the Exodus story, to a physically established temple in Jerusalem built by King Solomon.<sup>143</sup> Throughout its history, the Jewish temple was built and destroyed several times, but whenever

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<sup>141</sup> Exodus 25:8-9. “Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.”

<sup>142</sup> W. F. Albright, “The Ancient near East and the Religion of Israel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59, no. 2 (1940): 102.

<sup>143</sup> Exodus 25-30. These five chapters details concerning the construction of the tabernacle are delivered as well as for the various devotional objects and items that will occupy it; 1 Kings 6. Solomon builds the Temple.

rebuilt, it always followed the same general floor plan: outer court, inner court, and holy of holies. To the Jewish people, each court was only accessible by certain classes of people, while the holy of holies was off limits altogether except for the high priest. The significance of three distinct spaces, with the innermost being entirely off limits to all but one, offers the exhibition an interesting theological connection to draw upon. That said, by continuing to advance this line of thought into the developments of Christian theology in the biblical New Testament, a more appropriate theological connection can be made.

In the Christian New Testament, the figure of Jesus arrives on the scene causing massive theological change and the eventual divergence of Christianity from Judaism. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is recorded saying, “Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.”<sup>144</sup> As you can probably imagine, this caused quite the outrage amongst the people. However, as the author in the Gospel of John explains just a few verses later, Jesus was not talking about the stone walled temple physically before them, but rather was talking about his own body, thus making a claim towards his eventual biblical resurrection.<sup>145</sup> In New Testament temple theology, the temple itself is replaced with the human body. The original construction of the tabernacle was to offer a place for God to dwell among his people, which remained in effect for much of scripture. But with the death and resurrection of Christ, that dwelling was overturned, and a new permanent space was proclaimed within the physical bodies of God’s people. As the Apostle Paul remarked to the Corinthians, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”<sup>146</sup> In this context, the outer court,

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<sup>144</sup> John 2:19.

<sup>145</sup> John 2: 20-22.

<sup>146</sup> Acts 6:19-20

inner court, and holy of holies from the typical temple structure could be redefined like so: the outer court is the body, the inner court is the soul, and holy of holies is the spirit. The exhibition floor plan, which features three distinct spaces, could theologically be broken down in a similar manner: the outer court/body is the hallway, the inner court/soul is the main chamber, and holy of holies/spirit is the interior of *That Infinite Inner Room*.

With consideration to the above theological assertion, *Altar to the Unknown God* can be understood as a physical artistic manifestation of the artist himself, essentially making it a portrait. Under such a formulation, the hallway can be interpreted as depicting the artist's early spiritual journey, likely drawing connection to the personal narrative detailed in this paper's preface. Additionally, the hallway is the outermost court/body, existing the furthest away from the divinely connected center, making sense of why the assemblages in this space exist as questions. This is where there is theological confusion. The main chamber then opens up and offers an expanse of artworks. This space is the artist's soul, the space between the spirit and the body and therefore tormented by both. The works in this area are meditative, established, possibly confident, but not without their confusion. Inside the Jewish temple, the inner court was typically reserved for priests and members of the tribe of Levi. This space in the exhibition may then represent the realized religious self, connecting the artworks directly to the artist's professed identity. The final and arguably most significant space is the inside of the central cube, the artist's spirit and holy of holies. To return to a previous comment, the cube is a distinctly inaccessible space, with only small lenses around its exterior through which one can peer. The intrigue in this detail is that the *inner room* thus suggests the third space to be one that is personal but not quite private. Though, if this space is meant to be representative of the holy of holies, the literal dwelling place of God, then why is the viewer capable of peering in and

catching glimpses of its contents? It is here that we go full circle and draw the rhizomatic connection back to Taylor's discussed plurality.<sup>147</sup> As one of the defining features of contemporary secularities, As noted by Anderson and Dyrness, pluralism is the mutual fragilization synonymous with the condition.<sup>148</sup> Thus, the penetrative fragilization of secular plurality can be considered so intimately powerful that not even the holy of holies of a devout spirit can pass it unscathed. While the contents of *That Infinite Inner Room* remain still difficult to perceive, it is not altogether out of reach. While peering into the box, it is important in this moment to note that the viewer may find themselves confronted by the only true Christian religious symbol in the entire exhibition. The cross, despite the distortion from the lens, is clearly perceived, and unlike the rest of the interior objects, is viewed right side up. Despite secularism's pluralistic fragilization, the clearest symbol of the artist's religious identity remains centered and firm.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Taylor, 19.

<sup>148</sup> Anderson and Dyrness, 28.

<sup>149</sup> Schneiders, 179, In considering the pursuit of inter-religious dialogue, “. . . we must enter the area of dialogue with our own faith tradition behind rather in front of us. In other words, we do not advance as onto a field of battle with our tradition as shield against heresy or paganism or, worse yet, as a sword with which to vanquish the other. Nor, however, do we check our faith tradition at the door of the conference room and enter as a religious tabula rasa. Rather, we enter undefended, securely rooted in our Christian faith tradition which we have internalized through study and practice as our own living spirituality, knowing that our truth can never be ultimately threatened by the truth of the other. What will surely be threatened and must eventually be surrendered are the non-essentials we have absolutized. Beyond that, much that we had never encountered or that we had ruled a priori because we thought we understood it will probably be added to our picture of reality.”

## Conclusion

This chapter has been structured around attempting a minimal application of a theologically informed analysis of the exhibition, *Altar to the Unknown God*. The successes of this investigation may be defined in the connective theological tissues identified as running throughout the overall structure and layout of the exhibition. The analysis of the title, for example, proved to provide invaluable knowledge and support information for the interpretation of the individual artworks and design components of the exhibition. However, after conducting this investigation, despite noting at the beginning that it would not be exhaustive in nature, it would seem that the failure of this investigation lies in its inability to sufficiently analyze multiple works together. This additionally points towards rhizomatic philosophy as an awkward pairing when applying a method of theological art criticism. Although the goal of expansion and the forming of connections allow for moments of success, it would seem that overall, it tends to overload the critical engagement with too many potential areas of investigation.



## Concluding Remarks

*Altar to the Unknown God*, presented as a thesis exhibition and support paper, was built on a general interest in expanding knowledge concerning twenty-first century spiritual and religious identity. This investigation, through the definitional considerations of Chapter 1, and the theoretical formulations of Chapter 2, has produced, at the very least, a starting point upon which further research can be conducted. For example, the definitions and research context produced in Chapter 1, although satisfactory for the purposes of this paper, would greatly benefit from a more robust attempt at expansion. The terms *spirituality* and *religion* in particular, are by no means conclusively determined, either in this paper or the broader academic spheres. Even so, a directed interrogation of the two terms, one that sought cultural diversity in its inquiry, would undoubtedly be a massive benefit to the field.

The endeavors in Chapter 2, and the directed analysis that followed in Chapter 3, offered several significant insights. The first and foremost being that the method of theological art criticism, despite demonstrating some success when applied to individual artworks, under its current limited structure very quickly fails in a larger application, such as in the case of an exhibition review. Ultimately, the methodology has proven that while the theological criticism of artworks is indeed essential in the twenty-first century, the critical structure must possess a framework for directing theological criticism in a more concise manner.

And finally, in regard to the exhibition itself, although I consider it largely successful, I have two main critiques for future studio consideration. The first being an issue that became clear during the analysis in Chapter 3, that the applied temple theological relation requires a more developed conceptual application. Certain components during the analysis and

consideration of temple theology were relatively successful, such as the final comparison of the artwork, *That Infinite Inner Room*, and the temple structure's central chamber, the holy of holies. Ultimately, though, a better conceptualized application would be an obvious benefit. The second critique is that the diversity in both artworks and conceptual components could be streamlined for future exhibitions. For example, an exhibition displaying twenty abstractions, even of various sizes, with only one or two assemblages accenting the exhibition would better enhance specific conceptual features, as well as create a more harmonious exhibition environment. That said, the diversity of exhibited works and conceptual applications in this case did succeed in providing ample opportunities for the establishment of inter-religious dialogue and general conversation on the state of religious and spiritual identity.

Ultimately, this thesis investigation has successfully fostered the creation of a diverse collection of artworks backed by numerous avenues of contemporary investigation. The achievements of this endeavor will easily carry forward in career development and continued application in the studio.

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## Figures List

**Figure #1:** Andres Serrano, “Immersion (Piss Christ),”1987, Cibachrome print, 154.4 x 101.6 cm (60 x 40 in.).



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**Figure #3:** Kazimir Malevich. around 1923. Black Square. painting. Place: State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, inv Sch-9484.. [https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/LESSING\\_ART\\_10310751034](https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/LESSING_ART_10310751034).



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**Figure #5:** Klassen, J., *Altar to the Unknown God* (exhibition detail 1). Interdisciplinary, painting and assemblage.

Place: Nickle Gallery, second floor. 2022.



**Figure #6:** Klassen, J., *Altar to the Unknown God* (exhibition detail 1). Interdisciplinary, painting and assemblage.

Place: Nickle Gallery, second floor. 2022.



**Figure #7:** Wassily Kandinsky. 1923. Black and Violet. Painting. Place: Zurich: Coll. Bechtler (Han & Walter)..

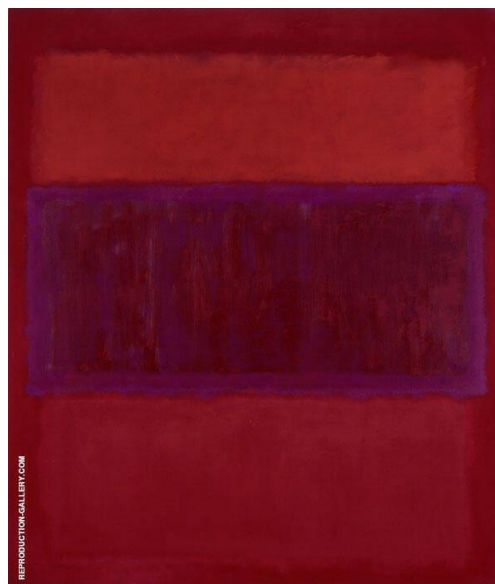
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**Figure #8:** Mark Rothko. 1957. Untitled. Painting. Place: The Menil Collection, Anonymous gift in honor of Mr.

and Mrs. James A. Elkins, Jr.. <https://library-artstor->

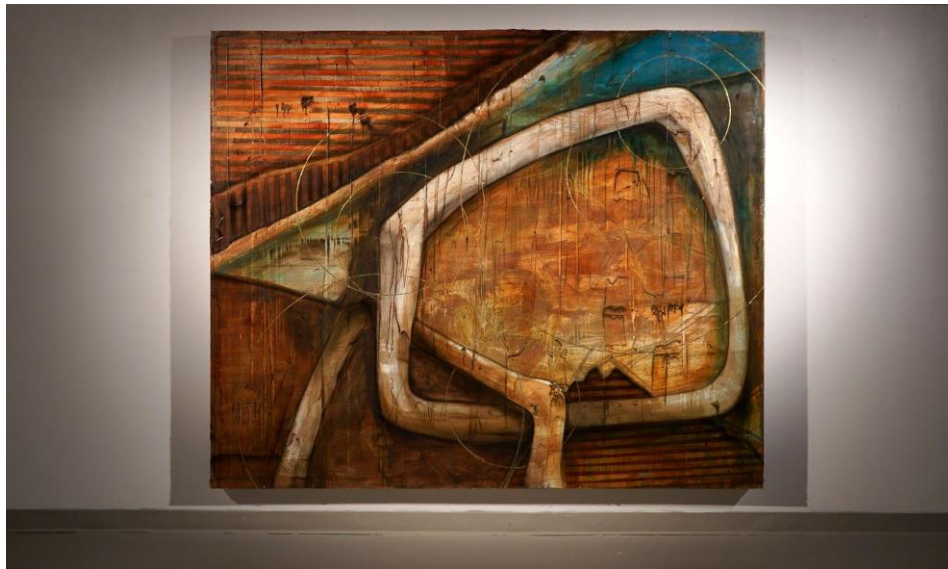
[org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/AWSS35953\\_35953\\_34184855](https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/asset/AWSS35953_35953_34184855).



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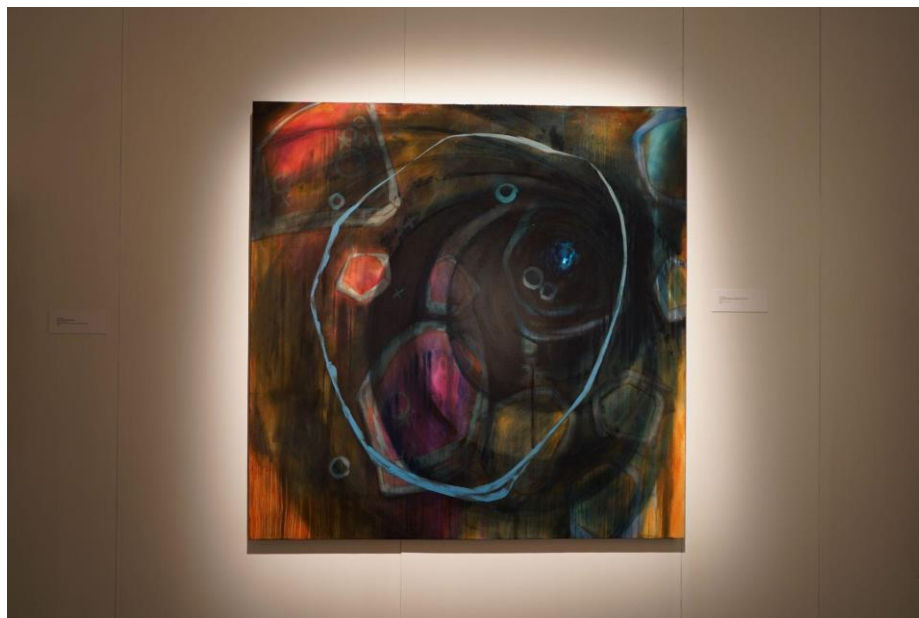


**Figure #10:** Klassen, J., “A Safe Space To Pray” Acrylic and Gold Leaf on sheetrock panel, 2021, documentation photograph from personal archive.



**Figure #11:** Klassen, J., “I Feel This Emptiness, Howling Out, Comp. #1” Acrylic on canvas, 2022, documentation

photograph from personal archive.

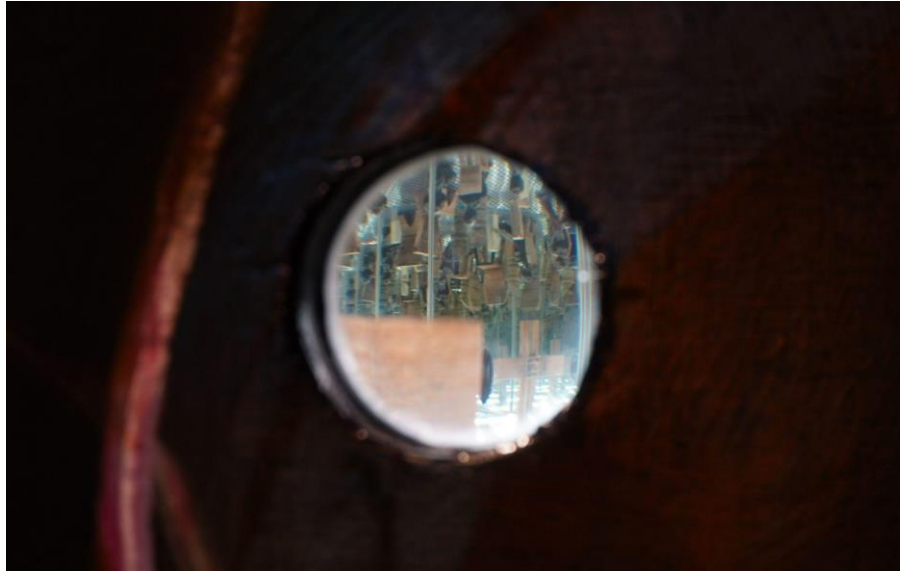


**Figure #12:** Klassen, J., “That Infinite Inner Room,” Mixed media painted assemblage, 2022, (taken while installed at the Nickle Gallery, on the second floor).



**Figure #13:** Klassen, J., “That Infinite Inner Room (interior detail),” Mixed media painted assemblage, 2022, (taken

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**Figure #14:** Klassen, J., “Why is this Home a House but not of Worship?” Mixed media sculptural assemblage [interactive], 2022, documentation photograph from personal archive.

