Methodological Issues from the Fields of Art History, Visual Culture, and Theology

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Scholarly methodologies themselves rise from ideological presuppositions. In the field of art history, for example, competing ideological notions of aesthetic autonomy versus aesthetic contingency have given rise, respectively, to disciplinary oscillation between object-oriented and contextual methodologies; these in turn have engendered various art historical "schools" (e.g., the historical, or contextual schools [Ernst Gombrich, Meyer Schapiro] versus ahistorical, formalist schools [Heinrich Wölfflin, Henri Focillon, Erwin Panofsky])[1] over the course of the twentieth century. This process continues today. Not surprisingly, within the particular range of approaches by which scholars have addressed the history of Christianity in the history of art, one finds a varied collection of theoretical and epistemological presuppositions prompting various schools of method. These various methods have arisen from a range of philosophical and theological perspectives. What follows is a summary of these schools and approaches with suggestions for wider application by which to address the subject of Christianity in the history of art.[2]

Methodological interest in the internal development of styles and movements found vibrant practice in the field of art history following the influence of Heinrich Wölfflin in the early twentieth century.[3] Wölfflin

1. Donald Preziosi, *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

2. This summary is meant not to be comprehensive, but representative of the various methodologies employed by English-speaking writers exploring the intersection of art and Christian faith in the last several decades.

3. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: the Problem of the Development of*

systematized art historical analysis with his pictorially driven scheme analyzing works along a Renaissance-Baroque continuum. This served as a powerful impetus for formalism as an art historical method over ensuing decades. Later, Erwin Panofsky, for whom questions of form and style proved inadequate, challenged this methodology. Panofsky developed the practice of iconography, investigating meaning as it was communicated in works of art through signs and symbols.[4] Iconographical analysis employed a vocabulary of cultural signs by which the art historian discussed a work's subject matter in addition to, or beyond, its *formal* properties.

While some may contend that formalist methods are basically indifferent to the history of Christianity and art, at least within the realm of representational work (i.e., an open or closed composition is the same if it is a landscape or the crucifixion), iconographic methods admit issues of religion as significant. One art historian applying an iconographic methodology to the history of Christianity in art is Jane Dillenberger, author of numerous books on art and faith including; *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* (Continuum, 1998); and *Image and Spirit in Sacred and Secular Art* (Crossroad, 1990).[5] Dillenberger has practiced what she terms "spiritual detective work" in discerning religious meaning. This "detective work" is responsible for today's understanding that Andy Warhol was a deeply religious man despite the fact that his religious life was so very secret. Dillenberger found his works "when studied searchingly, yield up their burden of meaning and disclose their religious content" via conventional and modern iconography.[6] This iconography suggested the continuing influence of the Byzantine Catholic tradition of his youth. Dillenberger explores, for example, a series of prints and paintings using egg motifs (the egg having a long history of symbolic associations with immortality); a cross series; and a series based on religious master paintings in which

Style in Later Art, trans. Marie Donald Mackie Hottinger from the 7th German ed. (London: Bell and Sons, 1932; 1st German ed., 1915). Wölfflin composed an analytical scheme by which compositional features (linear versus painterly; planar versus recessed space; closed versus open form; multiplicity versus unity; and absolute clarity versus relative clarity) deemed works Classical or Baroque in character.

4. Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955) 26–55.

5. See *Style and Content in Christian Art,* 2nd ed. (1986; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005); Another example of the perpetuity of the iconographic method is found in the work of Leo Steinberg. See Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

6. Jane Daggett Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* (New York: Continuum, 1998) 11.

Warhol playfully employed spiritually meaningful puns. In *The Last Supper (Wise Potato Chips)* of 1986 a huge Wise potato chip logo offers a striking play upon the notion of sacred wisdom. In *The Last Supper (Dove)*, Dove soap and General Electric logos suggest divinity and purity.

> The wit and humor of juxtaposing the sacred and the secular engage and startle the viewer. What was Warhol up to here? . . . Dove in word and image is familiar from Dove soap packages, and GE from packaged light bulbs: electricity and soap, thus power and cleanliness. Some will remember the old adage "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." [7]

Dillenberger's work has also employed a formalist methodology to some degree, allowing her to venture religious meaning within style. In the case of Andy Warhol, Dillenberger suggested that the flattened and stylized golden forms of Byzantine Catholic iconography, so present in Warhol's youth, continued to function as aesthetic intermediaries between the secular and the sacred in the chosen forms of his adult artistic career. Silkscreened images, with their depiction of material items in compressed space, she suggested, functioned in a manner reminiscent of stylistically compressed Byzantine icons.[8]

Both formal and iconographic analysis, however, have been under criticism for some time. John Walford's study of Jacob van Ruisdael serves as one example.[9] Prior to Walford, writing on Ruisdael had concentrated primarily on the contribution of the painter to the seventeenth-century Dutch landscape tradition, one associated with low horizons, high clouded skies, and broad expanses offering an interplay of the two. By contrast, Walford preferred to explore landscape from the perspective of religious devotion, asking the viewer to take note of the sacred content of Ruisdael's panoramas and the ideological thrust of vegetative forms and skies. Walford was a student of Hans Rookmaaker who was known for being a forthright Christian and for employing Christian critique in his writings on art. For Rookmaaker, there was no theologically neutral content in art. All content, whether dressed in "religious" subject matter or not, was measured in terms of its biblical truthfulness.[10] Walford furthered

7. Ibid., 92.

8. Ibid., passim. See also James Romaine, "The Transfiguration of the Soup Can: Andy Warhol's Byzantine Orthodox Aesthetic," in *Beauty and the Beautiful in Eastern Christian Culture*, ed. John McGuckin (New York: Theotokos, 2013) 232–42.

9. John Walford, *Jacob Van Ruisdael and the Perception of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

10. Graham Birtwirstle, "H.R. Rookmaaker: The Shaping of His Thought," in *The*

Rookmaaker's Reformed Protestant paradigm of art history, challenging formalist and iconographic methods with art historical analysis mining religious content from pictorial motifs. Ruisdael's landscapes, Walford contends, served as divine revelation, something his practice sought to reveal.[11]

In addition to religious content, interest in the *context* from which form and iconographic phenomena arise has expanded art historical methodologies over the course of the twentieth century and into the present. Venerated art historian Meyer Schapiro pioneered the emphasis on extra-pictorial context, with particular interest in the surrounding social world. His methodology was informed by a moderated Marxism, one rejecting base-superstructure determinism while yet recognizing the impact of material and ideological conditions upon formal features. Up until this time, scholars working from a Marxist perspective had largely ignored style; however, Schapiro's methodology, based on ideological presuppositions shared with Frankfurt School theorists[12] allowed Marxist-inspired inspection that would reveal not only the hidden interests of the dominant class, but also the *mediating* function of art, stressing the analogous tasks of art and social revolution.

Schapiro was influenced by the theories of Theodor Adorno who himself was interested in "the cognitive character of an art that expresses social antinomies in its own rigorous formal language."[13] As mentioned

Complete Works of Hans Rookmaaker, ed. Marleen Hengelaar-Rookmaker (Carlisle: Piquant, 2002) 1:xix.

11. James Romaine, "You Will See Greater Things Than These: John Walford's Content-oriented Method of Art History," in *Art as Spiritual Perception: Essays in Honor of E. John Walford*, ed. James Romaine (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012) 23–38. In his introductory essay in this festschrift for John Walford, Romaine explores possible parallels between Walford's methodology and the creative process that he ascribed to Ruisdael. If this is true, it is an example of how a scholar's methodological assumptions shape the history that they write. As another example of similar method, see Jules Lubbock, *Storytelling in Christian Art from Giotto to Donatello* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Art historian Jules Lubbock has interpreted well-known works of Early Renaissance art as works primarily designed to help viewers reflect upon the ethical and religious significance of biblical stories. He argues that Early Renaissance artists developed their highly innovative techniques to further these religious objectives; innovative and oft-celebrated Renaissance techniques were not ends in themselves.

12. The Institute for Social Research, founded at the University of Frankfurt in 1923: Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin. See Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds., *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1982).

13. Eike Gebhardt, "Introductory Note," in ibid., 204.

above, style had up to that point been ill-treated in the Marxian tradition, seen as the derivative effect of a dominant economic base. However, Schapiro, like Adorno, sought within style, clues to a society's impulses for change. Where acrobats, shopkeepers, wild beasts, and foliage swirled around highly ornamental Romanesque columns, Schapiro proposed shaping factors startlingly social in origin. He interpreted the sudden, distinct display of fantasy creatures and forms in Romanesque sculpture as expressive of an "underground," urban, secular spirit emerging in Western European civilization.[14] Donald Kuspit recognized Schapiro's interest in the significance of the zigzag style seen in dialectically tense figures of Romanesque sculpture; such discoordinate structure, Kuspit claimed, evidenced not only social tension and contemporary conflicts with theological heresy, but also "tension between a self-proclaimed universal institution [the Christian church] and . . . an individual struggling to articulate his own existence and possibilities in the face of this institution."[15]

Schapiro countered an overly spiritualized view of Romanesque art with analysis that included the socio-historical context from which form and iconographic phenomena arose. What Schapiro and others to follow recognized was that writing through a formalist or iconographic lens alone carried with it risks that a widened methodology disallowed. What was at risk was the failure to recognize the full import of a piece.[16] Writing on "The Conditions of Artistic Creation" in an essay of that title in 1974, T. J. Clark called for "a critical history, uncovering assumptions and

14. In his 1939 essay "From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos," his interest was in "the *critical correlation of the forms and meanings* in the images with *historical conditions* of the same period and region." The result of this particular study was to show "how new conditions in the Church and the secular world led to new conceptions of the traditional themes or suggested entirely new subjects" (Meyer Schapiro, "From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos," in *Romanesque Art: Selected Papers* [New York: Braziller, 1977] 28–101, esp. 29). John Williams later refuted Schapiro's approach. See John Williams, "Meyer Schapiro in Silos: Pursuing an Iconography of Style," *The Art Bulletin* 85 (2003) 442–68.

15. "In medieval times the institution was the Church; in modern times . . . it is Capitalism" (Donald B. Kuspit, "Meyer Schapiro's Marxism," *Arts Magazine* 53 [1978] 142–44, esp. 144).

16. For an example of this methodology, see T. J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848–1851* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1999), which explores the failure of revolutionary art in mid-nineteenth century France. The generation of 1848 did not promote and support revolutionary artists because forces of order prevailed via state institutions of art.

allegiances." Clark asked "[W]hy should art history's problems matter? On what grounds could I ask anyone else to take them seriously?"[17]

Indeed, resurgent empiricism in the latter half of the twentieth century moved the discipline of art history from primary interest in the internal development of styles and movements, to interest in the social history those styles and movements represented. Art historian Debora Silverman offers one such example. In her well-known study of art nouveau, she explored what she claimed to be the "counter-socialist impulse" of the movement. Art nouveau bridged handcraft to aristocratic culture, she claimed, avoiding perceptions of a "democratizing" art of the sort championed by William Morris in England.[18] More recently, in her study *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art*, Silverman has claimed that *religious* concerns "can be treated with the nuance and historical complexity that scholars have shown in reconstructing the class ambivalences, shifting markers of social perception, and gendered assumptions of avant-garde painters and their visual forms." She has proposed new readings of some of van Gogh and Gauguin's major paintings in light of theologically specific assumptions "broadening the historical field to include religion as part of a social analysis of modernist art."[19] Silverman closely inspects for example, van Gogh's *The Sower* (1888), which presents a peasant laborer in the act of tossing seeds. In light of van Gogh's strain of Dutch Protestantism, she suggests a reading of the painting that takes into account the painter's "labor theology" and the anti-supernaturalism of his particular Christian tradition.[20] She explores what she suggests is a correlated emphasis on maximum materialization of the painting surface, manipulation of craft optical tools, and other "labor forms of paint." This arises, Silverman claims, from emphasis on the primacy of *enacted* faith, in imitation of Christ, and faith-based appreciation of the sanctity of lowly labor.[21]

On the other hand, Silverman suggests that Gauguin's Catholic formation led him to explore contrasting themes—themes of ascent and visionary subjectivity. In *The Vision After the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling*

17. T. J. Clark, "The Conditions of Artistic Creation," in *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Eric Fernie (London: Phaidon, 1995) 249.

18. Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siécle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style,* Studies on the History of Society and Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

19. Debora Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000) 13.

20. Ibid., 6.

21. Ibid., 7–8.

with the Angel (1888), Gauguin developed practices to *de*materialize the narrative, in an approach opposite that of van Gogh. "Heads bowed, eyes closed, and hands locked together, they projected the contours of their inner vision onto a dream landscape . . . an unmistakably 'non-natural' color field of 'pure vermilion.'"[22] Gauguin emerges in the study as a penitent sensualist who turned to painting to address the irresolvable questions of the Catholic catechism. The ways each of the two painters approached theologically specific assumptions, problems, and preoccupations explains "the differences between them even as they tried to work together on similar subjects in similar sites."[23]

While art historians such as Debora Silverman have turned to sociologically and theologically inflected questions to expand art historical methodology, theologians as well have broadened their interests, seeking to address visual art with greater rigor. Gordon Graham in *The Re-enchantment of the World: Art versus Religion* (2007; 2010)[24] cited what he called a "significant void" in the treatment of art and religion, a void he said demanded further attention. Graham and others have joined the task of furthering understanding of the ways in which Christian consciousness is embodied in works of art past and present—a consciousness that Graham and others claim has been insufficiently mined to-date.[25]

22. Ibid., 49.

23. Ibid., 4.

24. Gordon Graham, *The Re-enchantment of the World: Art versus Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

25. One of the early pioneers of this tasking of bridging art and theology was John Dillenberger. This theologian's influential texts on art and faith include *Images and Relics: Theological Perceptions and Visual Images in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), a study that provides distinct religious contexts for the works of Matthias Grunewald, Albrecht Durer, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Michelangelo, Hans Holbein the Younger, Hans Baldung Grien, and Albrecht Altdorfer. Other important works by Dillenberger include *The Visual Arts and Christianity in America: From the Colonial Period to the Present* (New York: Crossroad, 1989; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004); *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: The Visual Arts and the Church* (London: SCM, 1986; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004); and with Jane Dillenberger, *Perceptions of the Spirit in Twentieth Century Art* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1977). Other pioneers include John W. Dixon Jr. (see *Images of Truth: Religion and the Art of Seeing* [Atlanta: Scholars, 1996]; *The Christ of Michelangelo: An Essay on Carnal Spirituality* [Atlanta: Scholars, 1994]; and *Art and the Theological Imagination* [New York: Seabury, 1978]; and Doug Adams (with Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, Adams edited *Art as Religious Studies* [New York: Crossroad, 1987], a collection of essays revealing Judeo-Christian meanings in works of art past and present). Diane Apostolos-Cappadona would go on to publish voluminously in the field, producing numerous studies on the intersection

Catholic theologian Richard Viladesau, author of *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art* (1999) has provided a helpful overview from the field of theological aesthetics (the practice of theology in relation to sensible knowledge—sensation, imagination, feeling, and the arts). He begins his survey with Mary Gerhart's contention that "a sea change is needed in the field of religious studies, one that must take place in the nexus of the field of theology, the field of art, literature and religion, and the field of science and religion."[26] Viladesau observes this interdisciplinary engagement has indeed begun. "Within religious studies, there has been increasing scholarly engagement with religion as ideology and as spirituality, with a correlative interest in the aesthetic and communicative dimensions of religious practice and thought."[27] Viladesau gives particular examples from within the English-speaking world of those who in the past several decades served in the vanguard of such practice.[28]

The field of theological aesthetics, as described by Viladesau, is guided by the following central concerns: the impact of nonverbal expression (as apart from scriptural revelation); the conditions whereby art acts as a site of divine revelation; the nature of representation; the revelatory power of representation; and the notion of transcendence. These central concerns suggest methodologies promising for those taking up the history of

of art and Christian faith.

26. Viladesau cites Gerhart's article "Dialogical Fields in Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no. 4 (1994) 997–1011, in his preface to Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics. God in Imagination, Beauty and Art* (New York: Oxford, 1999).

27. Ibid. Viladesau, Associate Professor of Theology at Fordham University, is also author of *The Beauty of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts from the Catacombs to the Eve of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford, 2008); and *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2000).

28. Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics,* preface. Viladesau cites pioneers of the field of theological aesthetics: Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, vol. 1 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics,* trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983); Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991); Richard Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God* (London: Mowbray, 1993); J. Daniel Brown, *Masks of Mystery: Explorations in Christian Faith and the Arts* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997); and John J. Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1996).

Christianity in the visual arts. These issues are indeed primary in the work of theologian David Brown, for example, whose five volumes contributing to the field of theological aesthetics were the subject of a 2010 conference at the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts (ITIA), St. Mary's College, St. Andrews University.[29]

That being said, it has largely been within the field of art history that methodologies addressing theological issues have arisen, while maintaining focus on actual works of art. One such example is Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver's *Rembrandt's Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age* (2009).[30] In this study, Perlove and Silver shift traditional emphasis from Rembrandt's skill as a Baroque painter, to his *theological* insight. They argue that Rembrandt was keenly aware of, and interested in, religious issues of his day. He was a serious student of the Bible, exploring connections between Hebrew scripture and the New Testament. He drew upon these connections in planning his works. This, the authors contend,

29. September 2010 Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts (ITIA) Conference, "Theology, Aesthetics and Culture: Conversations with the work of David Brown," St. Mary's College, St. Andrews University, 4–6 September 2010. See David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Other scholarship that points to renewed discourse between visual art and Christianity on the part of theologians includes that of John DeGruchy, author of *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008 [2001]); John Drury, author of *Painting the Word: Christian Pictures and Their Meanings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); William Dyrness, author of numerous studies including *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); Andrew Greeley; and Robin Jensen, Professor of the History of Christian Worship and Art at Vanderbilt University Divinity School (see Robin M. Jensen and Kimberly J. Vrudny, *Visual Theology: Forming and Transforming the Community through the Arts* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2009]; and Robin Jensen, *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004], which examines portrayals of divinity in early Christian art, raising broader questions about the relationship between art and theology against the backdrop of Roman portraiture. Jensen's works include *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); and *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

30. Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

explains his predilection for especially "Pauline" subjects such as The Stoning of Saint Stephen, a subject unconventional for Netherlandish art; and the many images of the Samaritan Woman whose conversion "became one of Rembrandt's favorite themes—indeed a virtual obsession—during his critical period of the mid 1650's," one that highlighted the perspective of the Jews in Jesus' day.[31] The authors contend that Rembrandt's images were inspired by formulations derived from cross-referencing the Old and New Testaments, study that stimulated fresh imagery by which to display Christian principles based on Jewish tenets.

Another who has brought theology to bear upon art historical conversation, while yet maintaining focus on actual works of art, is critic Eleanor Heartney. Heartney's *Postmodern Heretics* suggests a Catholic sensibility at work in much contemporary art. Debora Silverman claimed Gauguin was agitated throughout his life by problems associated with being a "lapsed Catholic."[32] Heartney similarly claims that a "Catholic imagination" haunts many artists today, compelling them to explore the sensate body. This arises out of a particular Catholic mindset of "fleshliness" "which celebrates the body and emphasizes the physical and sexual aspects of human experience."[33] While explorations of the body (one thinks of the work of Andres Serrano, Chris Ofili, Robert Mapplethorpe, Karen Finley, and David Wojnarowicz) often evoke the ire of religious fundamentalists, Heartney claims that the work of these "postmodern heretics" as she calls them "provides striking evidence that it is time to move beyond the long standing but erroneous belief that avant-gardism is by definition antithetical to religious sensibility."[34]

Contemporary accounts such as Heartney's benefit from the methodological shift that has expanded the range of perspectives available to historians exploring the history of Christianity in the visual arts. As a result, writers such as Heartney are able to bring attention to religious content where it might otherwise have been missed. In the process, historians have also come to appreciate the *limits* of historical interpretation, which itself has spawned new appreciation of religious content. Essentially, many historians have come to realize (with input from sociology and anthropology) that cultural fields themselves reside within fields of discourse

31. Ibid., 41.

32. Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin,* 5.

33. Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (New York: Midmarch Arts, 2004) 22.

34. Ibid., 23.

and power.[35] Seeing works of art as visual "sign-systems" allowed Eleanor Heartney to recognize in artists she calls "postmodern heretics," markers of Catholic sensibility. The point recognized by many, is that aesthetic experience, like language, is an inter-subjective practice subject to continuing inflection.

This "linguistic turn" in methodology has inspired the phenomenological approach employed by a number of art historians today, an approach that concentrates on the inter-subjective process of subject/object relationship, making the experience of the spectator, rather than that of the creator, the point of departure for art historical writing. Furthermore, this recognition of the limits of historical interpretation has spawned not only a diversity of historical practice but has also expanded an appreciation of the correlative roots of religious belief and aesthetic experience.

Art historian Ronald R. Bernier is one who has worked from awareness of epistemological limits as the starting point for an art historical methodology. As Bernier explains, the inadequacy of language—something apothatic theology and postmodern deconstructors have in common[36]—brings with it the consolation that something transcends our ordinary and finite phenomenal being.[37] An art historical methodology based on the "unrepresentable" promises important perspectives for today's art historians. As Bernier explains of his use of the "sublime" as an analytical starting point, contemporary notions of negation in continental philosophy correspond strikingly with the Christian tradition of the *via negativa* by which the divine is appreciated as ineffable, abstract experience.[38] He has evoked this notion to address religious content in video artist Bill Viola's series *The Passions*. The series is composed of more than two hundred video pieces chronicling various human emotions; each is made from 35-mm film shot at high speed and then drastically slowed down. In the process, layers of human emotion and expression that would otherwise be imperceptible, appear to the spectator. Bernier suggests that Viola's interest in representing what is normally "unrepresentable" to our perceptual faculties corresponds to apophatic descriptions of God by

35. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, for example, has explored ways in which aesthetic "disposition" is created by surrounding elites. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

36. Ronald R. Bernier, *Beyond Belief: Theoaesthetics or Just Old-Time Religion?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010) 64.

37. Ibid., 7.

38. Ibid., 65.

which God is seen in "traces" but is essentially ineffable, understood only in abstract terms.

One thinks of Robert Rosenblum's earlier account of Romanticism in which Rosenblum described the northern Romantic tradition "as if the mysteries of religion had left the rituals of church and synagogue and had been relocated in the natural world."[39] Moody Romantic landscapes, contemplative individuals pitted against the vastness of nature, and sublime skies seemed to fulfill the transcendental expectations of religion. Rosenblum explained that the religious sensibility of the northern Romantic tradition continued well into the twentieth century as abstract artists such Mondrian and Kandinsky sought meditatively to penetrate beneath the material surfaces of things.

Indeed, in addressing the spiritual potential of abstract art, Donald Kuspit has cited the numinous effect generated by the negativity of silent abstraction of the sort found in the work of Agnes Martin, Robert Irwin and James Turrell.[40] Claiming that when art is reduced to ordinary communication it loses its spiritual power, Kuspit goes on to explain that the "spiritual integrity of abstract art depends on a certain degree of 'silence.'" Kuspit reminds us that Ad Reinhardt connected his own painting with "a long tradition of negative theology in which the essence of religion . . . is protected . . . from being pinned down or vulgarized."[41]

On the other hand, practitioners of visual culture, a field emerging in the mid-1990s, have explored the intersection of art and religion in a significantly different manner.[42] These practitioners both challenge and cross the historical boundaries of what has been considered visually and spiritually meaningful. "Art," with its hierarchical connotations, is replaced with "visual culture" or "material culture," allowing for a wider,

39. Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) 14.

40. Donald Kuspit, "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art," in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985,* ed. Maurice Tuchman et al., 313–25 (New York: Abbeville, 1986) 317.

41. Ibid., 319. Theologian David Brown, mentioned earlier as the subject of a 2010 ITIA Conference, also incorporates the theological sublime in his interest in the ways religious experience is mediated through the arts. Finding aesthetic experience a means of addressing what he calls the inadequacy of present theology, he calls theologians to employ and appreciate the role of aesthetic metaphors to express divine truths that are not apprehensible through scripture alone.

42. See Whitney Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

more participatory frame by which to discuss objects of visual encounter. Sally M. Promey has explained, "art history itself, especially in the process of canon formation, can be seen as an inherently 'iconoclastic' discipline, granting standing, and thus visibility, to some visual practices and denying it to others."[43] A visual or material culture methodology admits into discussion a wider range of spaces and objects that indeed facilitate, or give record of, religious conviction.

Along with Promey, David Morgan has explored the ways in which religion happens "materially" and how the act of looking, widely understood, contributes to religious formation. Morgan's study *The Art of Warner Sallman* (1940) countered the mistaken assumption that Protestantism lacks significant visual practice. Popular reception of Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ* for example, provided an iconographically distinctive image deployed widely in Protestant communities. In addition to wide distribution of his ubiquitous portrait of Christ, Sallman's publishers provided images for bookmarks, calendars, prayer cards, tracts, Bibles, lamps, clocks, plates, buttons, stickers, stationery, and illustrated Sunday School materials.[44] As Morgan explains, Sallman's imagery achieved a normative stature; his image of Christ informed at least two generations of mid- to late-twentieth-century Christians in North America and abroad.[45] Instead of dismissing these images as "bad art" Morgan sees this imagery and its wide dissemination as a "crucial part of a cultural system that has shaped religious piety and social identity among millions of American Protestants."[46]

Those working from the perspective of visual culture offer a challenge to historians of differing methodologies who by implication must make the case for the epistemological underpinnings of what is traditionally

43. Sally M. Promey, "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art," *Art Bulletin* 85 (2003) 581–603.

44. David Morgan, *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman,* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996) 19.

45. Promey and Morgan served as co-directors of a multi-year interdisciplinary collaborative project, "The Visual Culture of American Religions," funded by the Henry Luce Foundation and the Lilly Endowment. Their culminating text, *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) is a collection of essays exploring the lived religion of ordinary people through messages conveyed by means as broad-ranging as murals, billboards, postcards, and television portrayals. This study furthered the notion that visual culture does not merely reflect belief but is instrumental in *constituting* it.

46. Morgan, *Icons of American Protestantism*, 2.

deemed "art." The field of "visual culture" begs the question. If art historians continue to operate under the assumption that the work of art is indeed a special object set apart from the rest of material culture, a demonstration of such is in order.

Scholarship on Christianity in the history of art stands in need of its own methodological reflection. This reflection will require 1) consideration on the part of art historians and theologians of imagery that does not appear to "fit" within the bounds of traditional religious discourse, necessitating a widened awareness of what makes for sacred Christian content,[47] 2) a reconsideration of what is considered "fit" for professional discourse on art on the part of art historians and critics, along with the willingness to cross certain ideological boundaries (i.e., Christianity and postmodern thought) and 3) theological insight afforded by interdisciplinary borrowings. It may also be important to ask how adequate religious understanding may be inserted without falling into religious "dominion."

It is the hope of this study that methodological dialogue on the subject of Christianity in the history of art will not only benefit an understanding of that history, but suggest wider applications within the fields of history and criticism than may appear at first glance. What may be most challenging is an understanding of the trajectory of art history as less a history of autonomy from religion (as if the two were in competition), than a dialectical history of both continuity and rupture. In the modern process of stating *why it can't be* (in regard to religion) we have failed to recognize *where it in fact is*. At points, sometimes where it is least expected, and as recent scholarship has demonstrated, the dynamic of religious engagement will be readmitted in the historical narrative where modern scholarly habit may have effaced its existence. At other points, rejection of Christian faith as it has been lived out in the West will be more fully read, having acknowledged the continued presence of holy sensibilities. Rather than treat sacred and secular distinctions in binary opposition, they may be admitted as inseparable components, each nurtured by the very structures they seek to suppress.

The *Art for Faith's Sake* series of which this study is a part, was initiated by Cascade Books to bring attention to aesthetic material of interest

47. Margaret Miles notes that most of our accounts of Christian history are based on verbal texts, which tend to be written for privileged in society. Frequently these have been monastic authors—male, and highly educated. This leaves out the contributions of those whose cultural contributions are not verbal . . . and the latter are arguably the larger part of the human race. See Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 16.

to faith communities. The series is meant to expand reflection on liturgical art and to provide resources for its interpretation. Particular to the project of *ReVisioning* is the work of scholarly reflection on methodologies useful when writing about works of art with Christian content. Much like *liturgy* (the Greek roots of which refer to "work" or "service"), the task of addressing works bearing religious themes constitutes a sobering charge. Challenges include developing an eye for theological relevance; moving into consideration of "affective space" without sacrificing scholarly rigor; and maintaining religious perspective without overly inflating that perspective. It is the hope of co-editors James Romaine and myself that this volume will contribute to the task of re-visioning that will be required by scholars responsibly taking up this charge.