Art and the postsecular

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Abstract
This article introduces the notion of 'postsecular' as a way of negotiating the work of contemporary and twentieth-century artists whose work has a spiritual content or context. The rejection of spiritual language in art criticism, and the history of its subjugation in the twentieth century, is traced to modernist imperatives that bracketed out its vital influence on key artists. By bringing together a fragmented but growing recent scholarship on art and the spiritual, and suggesting that this forms part of a postsecular sensibility, a new and pluralist language of the spirit can be articulated for the arts. Several modalities of the spirit are presented as particularly useful for approaching contemporary fine art practice, including the shamanic, the esoteric and the transcendent. By avoiding the monolithic framework of understanding in old religion, and exploring the broader implications of the 'postsecular', a fine-grained spiritual criticism of art can be constructed adequate for contemporary fine art practice.

Introduction
Fine art practice in the early twenty-first century is profoundly shaped by revolutions of thought with their origins in the early twentieth century. The radical art of that time increasingly took on the role of challenging the norms of society, of questioning and subverting received assumptions both in the socio-political sphere, and in regards to art itself. The very scope of fine art is on the one hand immeasurably extended by Duchamp's legacy, yet on the other is curiously constrained by the criterion of 'social performativity': art must do good in the world. The latter is generally framed by the legacy of the Frankfurt School and the Marxist suspicion of art itself. Hence contemporary fine art practice is often painfully self-critical and self-aware. It is in this context that an older discourse within culture and the arts is reopened to consider its value to art practice: that which has been largely denied by modernism, and only allowed to creep in at the margins of postmodernity.

Fine art and a lost language of the interior
If we examine the practice and reception of two contemporary fine artists, Bill Viola and Anish Kapoor, we find a certain hesitancy of collective thought, a certain poverty of critical language. This diffidence is focused around the word 'spiritual', used in both cases to hint at a quality and a set of engagements in the work. This article suggests that the historical reasons for skirting around the word 'spiritual' (and what it may denote) have lost their cogency, and we
should reclaim this discourse, both in general, and specifically for art. Historically the notion of the spiritual became suspect after the Enlightenment, and its eventual abandonment as a language of interiority left a vacuum, into which rushed the psychology of Freud and Jung. If, however, we deny the rejection of materiality by religion, and the rejection of its so-called opposite, the spiritual, by modernity; if we allow the joining of materiality/spirituality into a single whole again, then we can regain a lost language of interiority, one that allows us to speak without faltering on the work of such artists as Kapoor and Viola. We suggest that the term ‘postsecular’ can be used to describe such a discourse, one which moves beyond both secular reductionist assumptions and presecular renunciative assumptions. Artist Susan Shantz, Associate Professor for Sculpture at the University of Saskatchewan, struggled to find such a language, as she tells us in her essay ‘(Dis)integration as Theory and Method in an Artmaking Practice’. She came from a Christian Mennonite background, but found that ‘the lack of space in which to speak about the “spiritual in art” in the graduate programme in studio art forced it into subjugation’. Her exploration between the spaces of ‘old’ religion and postmodern art practice has led to a typically postsecular position and language, where the spiritual re-emerges from its subjugation with a fresh and pluralistic articulation. She had found in the Mennonite tradition of handicraft a physical impulse, now expressed as the gathering of twigs, which took her through a journey of new spiritual understanding, and at the same time towards a creativity that easily located itself within contemporary art practice. To articulate her journey Shantz has to use several distinct discourses of the spirit: in this article we identify two of them as shamanic and transcendent.

Before outlining in more detail what this means, let us briefly look at Kapoor and Viola, and the ways in which their work is - hesitantly - described as ‘spiritual’.

Anish Kapoor
Anish Kapoor was born in Bombay in 1954 of an Indian father and a Jewish mother. These facts speak not just to a richness of cultural heritage, but also to a lineage of spiritual impulses belonging to the two root religions of the world. In Kapoor’s 1000 Names series of 1979–80 we can immediately spot the play of the Hindu in the pigment powders and the Judaic in the interest in the names (of God). We also discern the secular heritage of architectural and biomorphic form: the organic shapes are not those of the shamanic but of cultures that have built great temples and stared down microscopes. Kapoor read C.G. Jung while at Hornsey and Chelsea schools of art, and was drawn to the Duchamp of alchemical obsession. ‘Alchemical’ is a useful clue: it may be used as a shorthand in art criticism for a discrete range of form and purpose, with their roots in the pebbles, sticks and creatures of the shamanic world but abstracted through agrarian polytheistic cultures into esoteric tradition. In fact Kapoor’s work draws forth a criticism that stretches itself over an array of spiritual heritages, a criticism as ‘spiritual literacy’ perhaps, but in that awkward juxtaposition to the intensely secular mainstream so often shown.
Two commentators on Kapoor demonstrate this: Germano Celant,³ originator of the term ‘Arte Povera’ and curator of the New York Guggenheim, and Homi K. Bhabha,⁴ leading postcolonial theorist, born into a Parsi community in Bombay (Parsi being the community of contemporary Zoroastrians, that religion living in the mid-point between East and West). Central to the discussion of Kapoor in both cases is the idea of the void.

Kapoor’s œuvre as ‘alchemical’: does that term pinpoint the spiritual sonorities in this work? Yes, if we understand it as having its origins in the shamanic yet updated through intervening millennia of cultural development. At this same time the sculptural ‘absences’ of his later work speak of a transcendent beyond the alchemical. (Pigments tell us of Hindu festivals, the intuited juxtaposition of form tells us of the shamanic, the geometry of the alchemical, the refusal of narrative of the transcendent, and the ‘names’ a parallel refusal of anthropomorphism.)

Bill Viola

Viola’s exhibition called ‘The Passions’ at the National Gallery in 2004 was accompanied by a catalogue and an exhibition guide (leaflet). The catalogue is edited by John Walsh, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum, and in his introduction we approach Viola’s work through a criticism-as-spiritual-literacy, alluded to above. It is an easy discussion of the world’s religious and mystical traditions as Viola draws on them, a spiritual literacy clearly shared by Walsh and Viola. Walsh records that Viola ‘broke with the prevailing social ideals of art in the 1970s’, quoting Viola: ‘For me, the shift from ideas about social perfection to the idea of self-perfection was a big turning point.’ Walsh continues: ‘The shift resulted in part from Viola’s study of ancient Hindu scriptures and its ideal of perfecting the self, which transmitted through Buddhism, had become the focus of the Zen thought and personal experience that has informed his work.’ The exhibition guide on the other hand made no assumptions of spiritual literacy in the British public: it adopted a neutral art-historical tone. Classicism is certainly one approach to Viola’s show, but that safely puts questions of the spirit within the dead world of the (presecular) past instead of the living and urgent (postsecular) present. Viola himself clearly wants to foster an open spiritual literacy in his public: he instructed the National Gallery to stock not just his exhibition catalogue

⁴ Bhabha and Tazzi (1998).
and closely related publications at the checkout, but a veritable cherry-picking of the world’s spiritual literature. Yet his show leaves one with a question that is very postsecular: what is the relationship between the emotional and the spiritual, between emotional crisis and spiritual crisis? The shaman’s deeply etched lines are the facial record of encounters with the abyss: can Viola’s citizen-actors go beyond a rendition of secular emotions?

Scholar Peg Weiss argues for the shamanic origins of Kandinsky’s underlying iconography, while art historian Roger Lipsey traces it to the esoteric pictures in the Theosophical book *Thought Forms*, owned by Kandinsky and popular with a number of key artists of that era.

Some spiritual critiques
D.T. Suzuki, who introduced Zen Buddhism to the West, has provided one of the gentlest yet persistent and informed criticisms of Western culture and its spiritual deficiencies. His genuine love of the West, combined with his desire to share the best of Zen and Japanese culture, gave him widespread appeal in the post-war period, and we know for example that Ad Reinhardt attended his lectures in the 1950s. The prevailing critical theories of modern art held abstractionism to be a triumph of modernist rational thought; Mondrian as the herald of geometric rationalism, and Kandinsky as the jazz-cool master of improvisation. The Bauhaus had provided a critique of art in terms of the formalisms of colour and shape, and in philosophy the work of Saussure and Levi-Strauss promoted the structuralist analysis, allowing the question of ‘content’ to be avoided. Maurice Tuchman, curator of *The Spiritual in Art - Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (and editor of the exhibition catalogue by the same name) tells us that the pioneering studies of Sixten Ringbom in the 1970s started a re-evaluation of these assumptions, and ‘by the late 1970s numerous scholars had taken up the question of artists’ interest in mysticism and the occult’. Many of those scholars contributed to the Tuchman catalogue, including art historian Linda Dalrymple Henderson, whose interests lie in the fourth dimension and its impact on abstract art through the writings of Minkowsky, Einstein, Bragdon and Ouspensky.

In 1986 the biographer of art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, Roger Lipsey, published the first systematic account of the spiritual in twentieth century art, drawing as much from an understanding of Eastern spirituality as Western religion. In 1992 Professor Mike Tucker at Brighton University published *Dreaming With Open Eyes: The Shamanic Spirit in Twentieth-Century Art & Culture*, followed by an introduction to an Alan Davie retrospective in 1993 that brought out Davie’s links to shamanism.
In 1995 Frances Stonor Saunders, drawing on such material, presented the case for the spiritual origins of modernism in a Channel 4 documentary called *Hidden Hands*, commissioned by Waldemar Januszczak. Tuchman, in his 1986 catalogue essay, traces the fluctuating fortunes of the spiritual critique in modern art. Apparently the influences of esoteric groups like theosophy, anthroposophy, Mazdaznan and Gurdjieff/Bennett/Ouspensky on Mondrian, Kandinsky, Malevich and others was well reflected in art histories up to the 1930s. However the association of mystical and esoteric beliefs in the 1930s and 1940s with the Nazis - who drew on variants of Theosophical beliefs to support the theory of Aryan supremacy - led to an increasing suspicion regarding the spiritual in general, and so the word became an unhelpful association for an artist, particularly in the United States. Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art, took art history into a different direction, ignoring the obvious spiritual influences on abstractionism and focusing instead on aesthetic formalisms as a genealogy of influence, or on the process of painting. Clement Greenberg inherited and extended this approach in respect of the American abstract expressionists, and for decades since then art history has reflected this emphasis (Sally J. Morgan usefully recapitulates some of this history in a 2003 JVAP article). The *Hidden Hands* programme set out to debunk the rationalist view of modern art, drawing on extensive material showing the origins of abstract art in esoteric and mystical thinking.

In the same year (1995) art historian Peg Weiss published *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman*. This work seems to have been written and researched quite independently of Tucker’s authoritative analysis of shamanism in twentieth-century arts and culture. That year also saw the hosting of a panel session, ‘The Subjugation of the Spiritual in Art’, by the College Art Association in Texas, leading to the publication of essays edited by Dawn Perlmutter and Debra Koppman entitled *Reclaiming the Spiritual in Art* in 1999 (containing Susan Shantz’s essay).

In 1999 the Tate Britain presented ‘The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art’, a lecture series by art historian Sarah O’Brien Twohig, and in 2000 John Golding published *Paths to the Absolute*, which explicitly recognizes the spiritual influences on Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still, while avoiding overtly spiritual language. In 2001 the group Poeisis presented ‘The S Word’ discussion forum at the ICA, bringing art, science and the spiritual together, through thinkers like Don Cupitt (Sea of Faith), Satish Kumar (editor of the nature and spirituality journal *Resurgence*), Margaret Boden (writer on AI and creativity) and Rupert Sheldrake (radical biologist). In 2002 Lynn Gamwell published *Exploring the Invisible: Art, Science and the Spiritual*, which brings out the important third strand, science, and its relation to art and the esoteric. (This three-way analysis is prefigured in an ISEA conference paper in 1997 and a Leonardo article in 1998.) The year 2004 saw Bill Viola’s *The Passions* exhibition at the National Gallery, raising questions about the relationship between the spiritual and the emotional.
Joseph Campbell describes the shaman as one who has undergone a personal spiritual crisis. Have we the language to understand this as something related to but different from a personal emotional crisis? Viola’s work can ask these questions if considered in a postsecular context.

Introducing the postsecular

One should be cautious in advocating yet another ‘post’ in our vocabulary, but the term ‘postsecular’ seems to capture something in the zeitgeist not reached by other terms. It can be simply defined as a renewed openness to the spiritual, though one is obliged to immediately acknowledge the problematics of that word, particularly in the context of contemporary fine art. Many favour alternatives such as ‘non-materialist’, or ‘non-reductionist’, which demonstrate a perception that the secular world has drawn its boundaries too tightly, and at the same time that we often couch what is missing in the negative.

Professor Michael Tucker (Brighton University) puts it well:

... ours is the first culture to proclaim with hubristic certainty that history and politics together constitute the sole ground of our being, and that any sense of the ‘vertical’ or ‘cosmic’ dimension in life is but a reactionary remnant from the irrationalities of pre-Enlightenment thought.\(^{23}\)

Tucker points out that Marxist- and Durkheimian-inspired sociology dominate the discussion of cultural issues in art (the J\textit{VAP} article by Malcolm Miles on Mel Chin and PLATFORM\(^{24}\) might serve as an example). Art that is not dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism nor to the more recent imperative of saving the environment is suspect, but in real life art goes about its business on a thousand imperatives. This is not a plea to abandon any existing imperative or critique, but simply to let one more into the fold: a recognition of what Tucker has called the ‘vertical’, or, to use the term that causes much nervousness, the spiritual.

The term ‘postsecular’ suggests a critique of secularism, along with a three-way historical perspective. The logic of the sequence: presecular, secular, postsecular suggests two important and novel analyses. One looks at evidence for the postsecular, and the other examines the origins of the secular mind. We will follow this logic here by firstly examining evidence for the postsecular, drawing on seven different fields; then briefly outlining the origins of the secular mind; then returning to the implications of the postsecular for art; and finishing with the implications of art education for spiritual education.

\(^{24}\) Miles (2001), pp. 71–79.
Contemporary postsecular contexts
If we take a provisional definition of the postsecular as ‘a renewed openness to questions of the spirit’, then we can search for it in a wide variety of fields including the visual arts. We suggest that evidence can be found in seven different contemporary contexts: physics, consciousness studies, transpersonal psychology, postmodernism, the arts, environmental issues, and the New Age. These overlap somewhat, but provide useful approximate boundaries. We find in each of these that a language of the spiritual (or a non-materialist, non-reductionist inclination) emerges differently, and on different timescales throughout the twentieth century. Consciousness studies as a discipline is the most recent (and has impacted on the mainstream through David Lodge’s novel Thinks ...), but its origins are unimaginable without the new sciences of quantum theory, relativity and chaos theory. There is no space here to rehearse these issues, other than to say that the publication in the 1970s of Capra’s Tao of Physics and Zukav’s Dancing Wu Li Masters flag the hypothetical start of the postsecular sensibility. Though the birth of quantum theory took place in scientific discoveries in the late nineteenth century, it created little cultural impact until these texts. The fact that the 1970s brought forth both key works on art and the spiritual and the pioneering comparisons between physics and Eastern mysticism lends some credence to the idea that we can date the beginnings of the postsecular era to that decade.

We can briefly run through the seven postsecular contexts to show how the spiritual emerges in each. (1) The results from physics have arguably had more impact on culture than on the other sciences (biology remains notably the most reductionist with its pursuit of genetic determinism). Positivism is loosening its grip on the academy, assailed by the indeterminacy of quantum theory. (2) Consciousness studies has a strongly reductionist side drawing from neuroscience, yet its journals are full of articles on Buddhist insights, for example. (3) Transpersonal psychology has its birth with Freud: alongside his fiercely reductionist and anti-religious materialism, there developed the archetypal psychology of Jung and the spiritual psychology of Roberto Assagioli, both early disciples of the new psychoanalysis. Transpersonal psychology became an international movement in the 1960s due to the work of Maslow and Grof; and its practitioners, who believe that a psychology of health must include the spiritual, are beginning to be accepted in mainstream psychiatry. (4) Postmodernism, in rejecting the shibboleths of modernism, also permits a scepticism towards the assumptions of atheism, while retaining a deep Continental hostility towards metaphysics (read ‘religion’). Within this it is fashionable to be receptive towards the ‘negative theology’ - that part of the Christian tradition exemplified by mystics like Eckhart and the author of The Cloud of Unknowing. (5) The visual arts have also demonstrated this ambivalence through the twentieth century: on the one hand rejecting the perceived authoritarianism of mainstream religion, while retaining an interest in the spiritual. Brancusi at the start of the twentieth century and Viola at the end both drew inspiration from Buddhism, for example. Matisse considered himself to be ‘something of a Buddhist’.

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27 Zukav (1979).
Environmentalists from founding-figure John Muir in the mid-nineteenth century to contemporary eco-philosophers at the start of the twenty-first century have presented Nature in lyrical, even mystical terms that compare with the writings of Zen and Taoism. Lastly, the New Age as a term encompasses the projection of the Romantic impulse (as originating in Blake for example) into the late twentieth century, an impulse rejecting industrial capital, yet retaining to itself a spirituality independent of church.

Evidence from these seven postsecular contexts might suggest, singly, that the spiritual holds some currency in contemporary society. The question we are open to here is that, taken together, does the evidence from these seven contexts suggest a wholesale shift in culture?

The origins of the secular mind
We suggested earlier that a postsecular analysis requires an inquiry into the origins of the secular mind. For the committed secularist this is pointless, as the historical process by which we rid ourselves of superstition and ignorance is only a question of inevitability. From the postsecular perspective however, it becomes a key question because the secular world-view can no longer be seen as the inevitable historical destination of cultural change. The precise origins and anatomy of the secular rejection of the spiritual become vital in probing the blind spots of modernity, and the key issue turns out to be the absolutism of the Western religious tradition. This absolutism, or its ‘totalizing’ impulse as Levinas calls it - central to the three Western monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) - is largely absent in the East (Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism). Uniquely in world religions only the Roman Catholic Church features the centralized control of doctrine, a feature that may account for the depth of anger still echoing in Continental (French) philosophy. There is no doubt that the French philosophes of the eighteenth century suffered worse than their Enlightenment counterparts in the rest of Europe and we can read much of the ongoing attack on metaphysics in Derrida for example as a hysterical cultural response. (By ‘hysterical’ we mean a delayed over-reaction.) The vituperative atheism of writers like Gore Vidal and Polly Toynbee, and the crusading anti-religionism of scientists like Richard Dawkins, Peter Atkins, and Francis Crick might be attributed to the same source.

Because the secular Western mind only knows the Western religion, one which systematically rooted out all competing forms of spirituality, it equates spirituality with the absolutist or totalizing forces opposed to religious freedom. The most problematic equation in the secular mind however is the identification of religion with ‘God’. This is a natural result of the monotheisms which violently eradicated their forebears (shamanism and polytheism), and which controlled doctrine through terror (imprisonment, torture and murder). The Western secular mind is generally unaware of the fact that, while half the world’s religions may be theistic, and assume a language of a single ‘God’, the other half are non-theistic or polytheistic. While warfare, imperialism, patriarchy and internal oppression seem to be univer-
sal consequences of agrarian societies (post-hunter/gatherer) religious absolutism is not: witness the religious diversity of the Roman empire, and the extraordinary spiritual melting-pot of India (prior to the arrival of Islamic monotheism). We only assume the equation between ‘God’ and spirituality because of the accidents of European history. The equation of religion with oppression was of course set in stone by Marx, building on the tentative revolts against monotheism in the eighteenth century.

**Varieties of spiritual impulse**

A book-length analysis covering both the history of Eastern and Western spiritual development is required to adequately treat this subject, but for now we want to take two points from this brief introduction: first, that the secular rejection of the spiritual arises from a series of historical accidents in the West, principally the absolutism of its dominant religions and second, that we have as a result no detailed contemporary articulation of the spiritual impulse. The persecution of what Christianity refers to as ‘paganism’ not only created the impression of its profound error, but also that there was any singular entity to so name and vilify in the first place. Both the word ‘pagan’ and the word ‘heathen’ have an etymology meaning ‘of the countryside’ and demonstrate nothing other than the prejudice of the city-dweller towards rural forms of spirituality, particularly shamanism. In fact the Mediterranean at the time of Christ was home to a vast range of spiritual forms, as we still see today in the spiritual heritage of India. These can be understood or taxonomized as a limited number of fundamental spiritual impulses, though expressed in a larger number of outward forms. There is not the space to even begin this analysis here, so we will focus on just two forms: the shamanic impulse as expressed for example in Native American culture, and the transcendent impulse as expressed for example in the Christian tradition of the *via negativa* (the negative theology). Both of these impulses are of interest to modern art because we can trace the workings of them in American abstract expressionism.

**Shamanism**

We now turn to American abstract expressionism as a case study within which to demonstrate just what the postsecular critique offers to perhaps an already over-theorized moment in twentieth-century art. The influence of theosophy and anthroposophy on Mondrian and Kandinsky can be understood in terms of a direct relationship between the iconography of the occult and abstraction of form as a carrier of occult meaning, treated at length in the Tuchman catalogue. This iconography draws in part on a tradition of esoteric illustration going back to the Renaissance, and to experiments in art and imagery by the theosophists and anthroposophists. All of this is ignored however by Peg Weiss in her detailed exposition of the shamanic influence on Kandinsky, showing perhaps that scholarship around art and the spiritual is fragmented, and also that the whole language of the occult is distrusted (as detailed earlier).
For similar reasons the American painters after the 1930s did not draw directly from occultism, yet they were exposed to a wide range of such spiritual influences. These operated alongside ideas in psychology and philosophy, all of which, including the spiritual, generally originated in Europe. Theosophy was international, but its offshoot, anthroposophy, firmly central European, while so were the pioneering psychoanalysts, Freud and Jung, and the philosophers read by the American painters. Uniquely American however was the heritage of vast horizons, physically in landscape, poetically in Walt Whitman, and heroically in the work of Joseph Campbell. Also present was a key spiritual influence impossible in Europe: the near-vanquished but ubiquitous inner life of the Native American. This culture was being re-examined in the light of a diminishing Christian hegemony of thought. Christianity's insistence on the 'savage' and 'idolatrous' incalcitrance of the native rang less strident in the mid-twentieth century, and painters in particular had anyway rejected Church dogma. A landmark exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1941, 'Indian Art of the United States', impacted powerfully on the painters of that time, prepared for it conceptually by the work of C.J. Jung, and subsequently reinforced in its mythic dimension by Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in 1949.

The influence of Native American art on the abstract expressionists is well documented, for example in the Tuchman catalogue through an essay by Jackson Rushing, by Tucker in *Dreaming With Open Eyes*, and by Golding in *Paths to the Absolute*. (Interestingly Lipsey's chapter on the spirituality of the abstract expressionists is oblivious to the shamanic, demonstrating again the fragmentation of this field of scholarship.) Early works by Pollock, Rothko, Gottlieb, Still and Newman show the shamanic influence, while the British painter Alan Davie, following these American painters, retained the direct shamanic influence throughout his career. What was not possible in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s was to understand this influence in cultural terms, as other than an *exoticism*. All this was to change in the 1960s with the emergence of transpersonal anthropology, catalysed by a chance remark from a professor of anthropology to a young Master's student. He told the class that anyone who researched the indigenous peoples of the area would automatically receive a grade 'A', resulting in the disappearance and eventual return of Carlos Castaneda in 1967 with the draft of his famous New Age novel: *The Teachings of Don Juan*. The shock waves split the American Anthropological Association, creating the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness in 1974 and a whole new awareness of the shamanic heritage of North America. It became popularized rather than ignored; trivialized rather than reviled. However the serious art historians like Weiss and Tucker parallel the serious anthropologists since Castaneda: the world-view of the shaman is no longer that of the exotic ‘other’ but one to be honoured or even revered. (In the environmental movement the shamanic world-view is considered by some to be central to the re-engagement with Nature necessary for our very survival.)

The shamanic can reassert itself in contemporary culture to the degree that Christian prejudice against it recedes and acceptance of indigenous
cultures grows. But stacked against it are all the cultural forces that subscribe in one way or another to the idea of progress. Progress as technology, progress as spiritual or political philosophy in Hegel and Marx, progress in Darwinian terms, all of these newcomers to Western thought chemically bond themselves to the ancient Western teleologies of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Against the written ‘Word’ of the progressive the shamanic is irreducibly visual, oral and ahistorical in its culture. But it is precisely the timeless dimension of shamanism that leads scholars like Rushing, Tucker and Weiss to assert its deep significance for art in the twentieth century.

So what does it mean to look at the art of indigenous peoples (as a source for many early pioneers of abstract art in the twentieth century) through the lens of the shamanic as opposed to the primitive? It is Jung that gives us the language to explore this: the language of individuation. Miró, Kandinsky, Pollock and Rothko do not represent the fanfare of rationalist modernism, but responses to the crises of modernism: crises produced by the terrifying alienation of the loss of ‘God’, industrial-scale warfare, and the severing of ties to the earth. With Freud and Jung the ‘savage’ - in different ways - became the source of self and healing. The shaman becomes iconic of the ‘individuated’ human, one who has attained mastery over life and death by working through a personal crisis or ‘dark night of the soul’.

Jackson Pollock read esoteric works like Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine* when young, and attended lectures by Jiddu Krishnamurti: his instinctive search for a language of interiority had found inspiration in these sources. Later, suffering from bouts of alcoholism and violence, Pollock entered into psychoanalysis. Joseph Henderson, Pollock’s Jungian analyst in the late 1930s, persuaded Pollock to search into his unconscious, and to learn from Native American art. He did so on the basis of two of Jung’s dictums: that all genuine art originates in the unconscious, and that colonizing people inherit the racial memory of the natives they displace - the latter implying to Henderson that native imagery was already in Pollock’s unconscious. But Pollock had been exposed to the Native American spirit as a child, and through the twelve-volume set of the *Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, bought in the 1930s. These influences show explicitly in works like *Guardians of the Secret* (1943) and *Totem Lesson I* and *II* (1944–45).

Peg Weiss details for us Kandinsky’s ethnographic researches in the 1890s; Tucker recounts Miró’s conviction that the land around the Catalanian farm of his father was the cure for his nervous breakdown; Rushing reports on Pollock’s Native American sources. All three artists went through personal crises reflected in their art, and in each case we can understand their journeys in shamanic terms. In the language of the first half of the twentieth century however, the term used was ‘primitive’ - an awkward admission of sources that could at best be justified in psychoanalytical terms. In the last 20–30 years however, in what we call the emerging postsecular era, the acceptance of ‘shamanic’ as a better, unpatronizing descriptor opens up a new analysis of abstractionism in painting.
We can clearly see shamanic iconography in the early work of both Rothko and Pollock. Yet these evolved into work very different from Kandinsky’s: can we usefully understand the American abstract expressionists as pursuing an erasure of reference akin to the ‘negative theology’ in Christianity?

The negative theology

The discovery of shamanism by the secular mind has resulted in the subsuming of all other spiritual impulses and phenomena to it by some of its theorists. This not only strains the definition of shamanic, but also invites a scepticism to the spiritual in general. Instead, by articulating spiritual difference, we can not only locate the shamanic within a broader spectrum of spiritual impulse, but also provide a schematic for analysing abstractionism. We have already hinted at the evolution from the shamanic to the esoteric in iconographic terms (as they work out in Kandinsky for example), but we now introduce a second major spiritual impulse: the transcendent. Susan Sontag, cited in a monograph on Ad Reinhardt, puts it well:

As the activity of the mystic must end in a via negativa, a theology of God’s absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowingness beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the ‘subject’ (the ‘object,’ the ‘image’), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence ... Therefore, art becomes estimated as something to be overthrown. A new element enters the art-work and becomes constitutive of it: the appeal (tacit or overt) for its own abolition, and, ultimately of art itself.33

This passage hints at how the transcendent spiritual impulse informs the abstraction of the mature works of the American abstract expressionists, and at the same time it demonstrates the limits of shamanism for theorizing abstractionism. While Miró and Alan Davie, and perhaps also Kandinsky, pursue imagery throughout their mature period that contains within it shamanic purpose and iconography; Pollock, Rothko and Newman leave it behind in their later work. Their visual language is no longer bound to the world of earth, spirit and animals, but has begun a process of erasure with many parallels and often explicit reference to the via negativa. While this term in Christianity means a route to ‘God’ through the negation of attributes, related non-theistic concepts are found in many other traditions: ‘sunyatta’ or emptiness in Buddhism for example (the ‘void’ in reference to Kapoor).
Essential to abstract expressionism is an erasure of reference and a movement towards a transcendence that is both the destination of the shamanic and the start of a different language of spirit. While it is de rigueur for Continental philosophers, particularly the French, to oppose mainstream Christian thought, it is relatively acceptable to explore the negative theology (*via negativa*). This is because it eliminates the bugbear of the philosophers, the anthropomorphic ‘God’ and leaves instead a principle to which a vector of transcendence can be ascribed. Derrida contemplates these issues in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’, complaining predictably that the negative theology is ‘still a theology’. Yet he is intrigued by the transcendent language, in this case of Meister Eckhart, and in Levinas. The Rothko room at the Tate has long been the most visible cultural icon of transcendence, that word being the natural response even for the most secular of minds, and the work in fact also one of the most popular in modern art for theologians.

Susan Shantz demonstrates another journey between the shamanic and the transcendent, having discovered one of the great Christian texts of the *via negativa*, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, yet obliged by the impulses of art, feminism, and creativity to engage with the materiality of her environment. She cites the alchemical, as does Kapoor, to be the spiritual expression of this engagement, yet her twigs hint at the shamanic.

If we look for a ‘violence’ that might fuel Derrida’s forensics, then we do not have to look further than that meted out to the shamanic by the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It is not surprising then that the anthropologists and practitioners of shamanism in turn reject Christian spirituality, even its own marginalized *via negativa*. But the spiritual history of the East, prior to the arrival of Islam, is one of pluralism, traditions in which the meaning and connotation of ‘heretic’ are almost unknown. Hence the unthinkable in the West is manifest not just once in the East but several times: we find a meeting between the shamanic and the transcendent in the Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist traditions, and within the inscrutability of Taoism (though is not suggested that within the iconography of Tibetan Buddhism for example we would find a direct parallel with abstract expressionism). The destruction by the Taliban of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001 was a reminder that monotheism has its roots in the persecution of idolaters, and that the cultural expression of this violence was and remains acts of iconoclasm (as Iain Biggs so eloquently reminds us in his valedictory *JVAP* editorial). In its positive aspect however it becomes - ironically - the *via negativa*, and in modern art perhaps its greatest expression was with Barnett Newman.

Susan Shantz: *Hibernaculum*, 2002 (permission: artist)

Shantz found the spiritual in her graduate art course ‘forced into subjugation’. Her reclaiming of the spiritual in art started with the *Cloud of Unknowing* as inspiration, and gathering twigs as practice. Was the latter a response to the shamanic, echoing in the American psyche and art, and waiting for the ‘negative theology’ to give it space for expression?
Conclusions
If the concept of the postsecular opens up questions of the spirit that have taken a cultural back seat for the last two or three centuries, then those questions are obviously inflected by the intervening cultural shifts. Art, though it may not have overthrown capitalism or secured us against environmental catastrophe, has been at the forefront of those shifts. Which are? Pluralism. Or différance if you prefer (although these are not elidable, they hint at the same avoidance of the monolithic and the totalizing). We suggest then that questions of the spirit for the postsecular era are framed by a pluralism, one that can be informed both by the secular culture of the West and the spiritual culture of the East. The different modalities of the spirit introduced here, the esoteric, the shamanic and the transcendent (three out of many), all find adherents who wish to subsume all other modalities to themselves. (This totalizing impulse in Western thought is found for example with Joseph Campbell who appears to conflate all spiritual modalities to the mythical.) By resisting this we find a language which begins to do justice to the complexities of the spiritual influence on abstractionism in twentieth-century art. This starts by reframing the ‘primitive’ as the ‘shamanic’, an act that redeems our patronizing past within a present dialogue of equals.

Art education, in turn, can inform the spiritual. Although Tucker rightly suggests that Marxist and deconstructionist theorizing has dominated art college teaching, in practice the open-ended nature of art has allowed art education to absorb more directly the notions of student-centred learning than say, physics or maths. In this environment, students are expected to construct their own project and to search out the contextual material for it. The art instructor, while operating out of their personal and varied theorizing, and within a certain framework of permitted art modalities, acts as facilitator: sensitive to the students’ impulses artistically and culturally. In a postsecular era that sensitivity will include the spiritual, not exclude it, while in turn the spiritual will look at art education and say: ‘Here is good practice.’

Works cited


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