

# Hiding in the Open: Religious Art after Abstraction with Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, and Andy Warhol

**Jewell Homad Johnson**

## **Introduction**

It is neither accurate that the making of religious art discontinued, or that it remained visibly the same. S. Brent Plate says as much in *Reports of the Death of Religious Art Have Been Greatly Exaggerated*. In 1876, *The Apparition* by French Symbolist Gustav Moreau (1826-1898), depicted the Head of St. John the Baptist appearing to Salome, surrounded by idols in King Herod's palace. This contrasts the work of Michelangelo Merisi Caravaggio (1571-1610) on the same subject two hundred years earlier, and exists in stark comparison to Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) less than a century following Moreau. Differences in visual approaches do not deny these works narratives use the same Judeo-Christian symbolism. Continuing this specific narrative is what Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) sought to achieve through his Abstraction, as a foundational genre for artists inheriting this visual potential for ideological freedom. One of the New York Abstract Expressionism founders Robert Motherwell declared the consequences of the collapse of religion as society's foundation "is that the modern artist tends to become the last active spiritual being in the great world."<sup>1</sup> Archetypal artists among these were Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, and Andy Warhol whose lives and religio-secular expressions collaborated or crossed paths in early twentieth century art.

---

Jewell Johnson completed a PhD in Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney in 2020 and is involved in the visual and performing arts in Australia and the US.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Motherwell, *The Writings of Robert Motherwell* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2007), p. 29.

## **New Representational Freedom**

A central characteristic of modern Abstraction was how it conceptually altered how representation was perceived or objectified after the Enlightenment ‘artist’ moved away from the Church (and its narratives) to express subjective the newly conceived ‘Arts’ experimental movements. This significant shift began with a predictive overture:

The creation of ‘Art’ appeared as a result of the Italian Renaissance artist, polymath, and original art historian Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), and Age of Enlightenment ideologies and events built upon his understanding of the ‘renowned’ (and male) artist. Vasari’s foundational observations and concepts need to be constantly reconsidered if we are to fully comprehend the ‘Individual’ artist’s creative praxis; general developments in the Arts and ‘Art World’; and the artworks’ depiction of secular societies.<sup>2</sup>

Initially, Abstract Expressionism was not only far less popular than historical documentation suggests, it was the subject of ridicule. As a new genre, art critic Dore Ashton qualified: “I don’t remember any of those guys ever talking about something called Abstract Expressionism.”<sup>3</sup> Further,

They attempted to suspend thought and work in a medium in the hope that the medium itself would evoke feelings, spiritual intimations, and understandings. They attempted to imbue the material with the spiritual, and their work frequently attests to the late capitalist era in which they were working because the materiality of their means is so readily apparent, so clearly trying to transcend itself in the quest for the spiritual.<sup>4</sup>

The after-effects landed profoundly across the total body of the Arts as an influence. A pivotal figure, Russian-born painter and Bauhaus teacher Kandinsky, introduced a religious perspective using a new visual language: Abstraction. Though the German word *geistige* is consistently translated as ‘the spiritual’, Kandinsky archivist and author Jelena Hahl-Fontaine wrote

---

<sup>2</sup> Jewell Homad Johnson, ‘Kandinsky and the Immaterial Frame Methodology: For Ideas, Images, and Histories of the Religious and Spiritual in Modern and Contemporary Art’, (PhD dissertation, University of Sydney, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Edith Devaney, “‘We didn’t think it was a movement’—meet the 1940s critics of Abstract Expressionism’, Royal Academy (6 December 2016), at <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/magazine-meeting-the-critics-abstract-expressionism>. Accessed 5 March 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Hobbs, ‘Early Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism’, *Art Journal*, vol. 45, no. 4 (1985), p. 301.

that secular translations regularly confused or destroyed religion and spiritual contexts.

Kandinsky, thought of as the ‘father’ of a spiritually generic abstraction in visual art for more than a century, wrote in his autobiographical *Reminiscences* (1913): “this conception of art is Christian and that at the same time it embodies the necessary elements for the receptiveness of the ‘third’ manifestation, the manifestation of the spirit.” This introduced Abstraction’s historical paradigm shift by providing visual guises in unrecognisable forms to viewers ignorant of this newly coded imagery.<sup>5</sup> In secular societies, when the religious or spiritual impulse continued within figurative genres in Art, ideological invisibility became increasingly opaque in direct relation to any culture’s viewers’ illiteracy of esoteric symbolism. Whereas Medieval and Renaissance illiteracy was nonetheless steeped in symbolism which was understood as other than book knowledge. What can be categorised as modern and contemporary religious art was/is either subjective and individualistic or interpretive expressions of the ‘spiritual’, or images played the role of religious critique when contextualized by contemporary *naiveté* in this area. Symbolism is vulnerable to scholastic and historical contexts; for example, see how Naomi Klein’s treatise highlighted the “logoism” that became the most reliable global language.<sup>6</sup>

Religious art continues to be a feature of the world’s great cathedrals and the historical offerings of museums throughout the European West. The connection of art to religion seems almost timeless, as G. Roger Denson explains:

The voice or vision that has moved a community to make it their governing and identifying expression—their mythos—cannot be suppressed. (Think of the Hindu Mahabarata, the Mayan Popol Vuh, the Buddhist Tipitaka, the Hebrew Torah, the Christian New Testament, the Muslim Quran, the Chinese Tao, the Navajo Diné Bahane’, the Egyptian Book of the Dead). Even when genocide has nearly wiped out a population, whatever is beautiful about the communal narrative and its attendant iconography will survive to

---

<sup>5</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Reminiscences* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim, 1945), p. 31. See same page with an explanation on “Russian peasant law ... the Christian ... the heathen, and Roman right.”

<sup>6</sup> Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Toronto: Knopf, 1999).

become disseminated and perpetuated somewhere else, at some other time, perhaps again and again.<sup>7</sup>

To represent this artistic religio-secular archetype, three artists born in the second decade of the twentieth century created what could be called the religious and spiritual in art—*abstractly through representation*—who are consistently positioned in relation to each other or shared concepts: the German Catholic Joseph Beuys (1921-1986); French Rosicrucian Yves Klein (1928-1962); and an offspring from the “ninth century land of the Rus” Ruthenian-American Eastern Byzantine Catholic Andy Warhol (1928-1987). John Lethbridge evidences this showing their communal and ongoing influence in *Imaging the Void: Making the Invisible Visible*:

In examining the evolving autobiographical iconic creation of Marina Abramović as divine diva, this research explores myth-making strategies previously employed by Yves Klein and Joseph Beuys, and must include Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol.<sup>8</sup>

Warhol’s first exhibition at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles occurred the same year as Klein’s death (at the age of thirty-two); Klein and Warhol were both friends with the French Catholic art critic Pierre Restany (1930-2003); and Beuys was photographed by Warhol for his silkscreens. These artists reflected the challenge to what Denson sees as “the history confronting the secular modernists who find that the tropes of religion will not be retired [or] supplanted by science, reason, logic and abstract thought ... It is a matter of artistic beauty.”<sup>9</sup> An essential characteristic of these works’ conceptually (not to be confused with Conceptual Art of the 1980s) contrasts the straightforward representation in landscape and portraiture artworks. Decades earlier the immaterial ‘idea’—or idea of the immaterial—as foundation began manifesting these works; and while their appearance qualifies the visual or performed work, this *physically* was not the primary intention of the artists of this essay.

---

<sup>7</sup> G. Roger Denson, ‘Religion vs. Secularism in Art and How Shahzia Sikander and Jim Shaw Turn Social Alienation Into Spiritual Engagement’, *Huffpost* (23 December 2016), at [shorturl.at/exD35](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/religion-vs-secularism-in-art-and-how-shahzia-sikander-and-jim-shaw-turn-social-alienation-into-spiritual-engagement). Accessed 5 March 2020.

<sup>8</sup> John Lethbridge, ‘Imaging the Void: Making the Invisible Visible. An Exploration into the Function of Presence in Performance, Performative Photography and Drawing’ (PhD dissertation, University of New South Wales, 2016), p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Lethbridge, ‘Imaging the Void’, p. 69.

### **Joseph Beuys: Everyone's an Artist**

Eric Michaud introduced this Catholic German artist in ways most documentation takes pains to avoid:

Joseph Beuys wanted to make art the instrument of resurrection, for the unification of man. The proposal is simple. It enlisted the enthusiastic adherence of his disciples and the mockery of his detractors, but never the indifference of the Germans. In his own country his death was hailed as the disappearance of a 'German phenomenon'; he had been compared to Dürer. The desire to spread Christianity's faith in the possibility of each human being's rebirth excited this apostle of 'the expanded concept of art' just as it had once s the German Renaissance.<sup>10</sup>

Beuys was born and raised in the medieval city of Krefeld, famous for its luxurious silk, velvet, and brocade fabrics. For Michaud, Beuys was an artist for whom "the emphasis" was on "ideas." This was the basis of 'Thinking is form: the drawings of Joseph Beuys' by Ann Temkin for the Philadelphia Museum of Art and MOMA's exhibition in 1993:

The British artist Richard Hamilton has observed of Beuys that 'no artist of his generation so powerfully projected that disposition of his time, legitimized by Duchamp, for the artist's life to be his master-work'. Yet it is necessary to realize that the private life and that of the 'master-work' cannot be confused; both Marcel Duchamp and Beuys (and one might append to Hamilton's statement the American Andy Warhol) precisely orchestrated their public personae.<sup>11</sup>

In Beuys' own words: "The most important thing, for someone looking at my objects, is my fundamental thesis: EACH MAN IS AN ARTIST. There is my contribution to 'the history of art'."<sup>12</sup>

Albeit idealistically, Beuys and Kandinsky acknowledged Christianity's relationship to Humanism as complex; the modern 'artist' is simultaneously in service to human and Church ideology. By remaining Catholic, Beuys's reversed Enlightenment ideas of a secular separation being a rejection of religion; as cults of atheistic Reason; and even Robespierre's Supreme Being. Further, Beuys extended a redemptive role for each human being *as an artist* without exception, and produced

---

<sup>10</sup> Eric Michaud, 'The Ends of Art According to Beuys', trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October*, vol. 45 (1988), pp. 36-46.

<sup>11</sup> Ann Temkin with Bernice Rose and Dieter Koeplin, 'Joseph Beuys: An Introduction to His Life and Work', *Thinking is Form: The Drawings of Joseph Beuys* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art/The Museum of Modern Art, 1993), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Michaud, 'The Ends of Art According to Beuys', pp. 36-46.

politically forceful projects as a result of his ideological concerns. Michaud saw Beuys “fundamental thesis” as meaning “form” as nothing but the unbetrayed “idea.”<sup>13</sup> Beuys saw “the human-being-as-artist is the creator”<sup>14</sup> while the dedicated artist possesses more capacity than a general creative/artistic impulse in all human beings. Beuys’ concern for the spiritual in life arrived through the concept of creative “form”:

is invisible, is a purely spiritual substance [and] what I call ‘social sculpture’ ... invisible substance is my domain. At first, there is nothing to see [then] it appears initially in the form of language.<sup>15</sup>

The book *What is Art? Conversation with Joseph Beuys* clarified that what the artist was doing, was, literally, not what they appeared to be doing.<sup>16</sup> ‘What you see *isn’t* what I want you to get’ is clear in Beuys’ conversation with Jörg Schellmann who published the catalogue *raisonne* of Beuys’ *Multiples* between 1971-1985). Here, the material object appeared in contradiction with the viewer’s reception in regards Beuys’ discussion of his conception of “Substance”:

No one asks whether I might not be using this grey, felt element, to invoke the whole world of colour in people as a counter-image. In other words, to provide in them as counter-image, a world of light; a clear, light filled, in certain circumstances supersensible, spiritual world, through something that looks quite different ... So it’s not right to say I’m interested in grey. That’s not right. Nor am I interested in dirt. I am interested in a process that extends much further.<sup>17</sup>

Recalling Krefeld’s reputation for liturgical textiles, this is an expected exploration of what Beuys transformed as works and installations, yet, understanding Beuys’ symbolism requires theological sources. This went some distance with friend, editor and priest Volker Harlan’s explanations of this artist’s religious/spiritual intentions through conversations with Beuys, and Harlan’s own prose is the book’s connective tissue preventing misleading conjecture. Having studied with Beuys, Shelly Sacks noted:

---

<sup>13</sup> Michaud, ‘The Ends of Art According to Beuys’, p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> Michaud, ‘The Ends of Art According to Beuys’, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Michaud, ‘The Ends of Art According to Beuys’, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Beuys, *What is Art? Conversation with Joseph Beuys*, ed. Volker Harlan (East Sussex: Clairview Books, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Beuys, *What is Art?*, p. 106.

Harlan brings to this discussion an intimate knowledge and understanding of things that Beuys clearly shared, such as art as sacrament ... and a Goethean approach to science whose methodology perceives the dynamic being in things.<sup>18</sup>

When Lasse Ekstrand and Monika Wallmon discuss the cultural and aesthetic politics of Beuys they make no mention of his Catholicism or even a generic reference to Christianity, stating instead that Beuys' "affinity with anthroposophic philosophy ... is well documented" but as a "social sculptor" he was driven by notions of anti-institutionalism and self-governance.<sup>19</sup> How this motivated Beuys' engineered mystique is expressed in his dramatic arrival in New York City:

On 21 May 1974, a man arrived at John F. Kennedy airport on a flight from Germany. He was dressed in a fedora and fishing vest, and had his hand over his eyes. At Immigration he was subject to the usual barrage of questions. 'What is your profession?' 'Sculptor'. 'What kind of sculptor?' 'Social sculptor'. Allowed at last to enter the US, he was approached by two men, who wrapped him from head to toe in felt, placed his swaddled body on a stretcher and lifted it into an ambulance. Lights flashing, siren wailing, he was driven to the René Block Gallery in Manhattan, where he was wheeled like a parcel through the doors.<sup>20</sup>

Such myth-making gestures recall the tendencies of Kandinsky *interpretively* positioning himself beyond his confirmed religious ties.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, Hagen Lieberknecht's understanding of German myth is in an obligatory relationship to religion:

Isn't it obvious that this mythology was the vessel specifically prepared to welcome Christianity in order to accomplish—with both vessel and its content—the development of Western human thought, the consciousness of what is transformative [*das Umgestaltende*], to its limit?<sup>22</sup>

Beuys' relationship with mythology re-pronounces Kandinsky's own relationship with myths, *Jugendstil* ('youth style', the German

---

<sup>18</sup> In Beuys, *What is Art?*, p. xi.

<sup>19</sup> Lasse Ekstrand and Monica Wallmon, 'Basic Income Beyond Wage Slavery: In Search of Transcending Political Aesthetics', in *Aesthetics and Radical Politics*, ed. Gavin Grindon (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> Olivia Laing, 'Fat, felt and a fall to Earth: the making and myths of Joseph Beuys', *The Guardian* (30 January 2016), at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jan/30/fat-felt-fall-earth-making-and-myths-joseph-beuys>. Accessed 5 March 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Ekstrand and Wallmon, 'Basic Income Beyond Wage Slavery', pp. 42-55.

<sup>22</sup> Ekstrand and Wallmon, 'Basic Income Beyond Wage Slavery', p. 44.

materialisation of Art Nouveau), and Russian folklore and emphasised how both artists contextualised their own Christian worldviews creatively. *Jugendstil* differed from other Art Nouveau manifestations in that it “included mythological creatures and religious aspects in its posters and design work” including “cherub angels” and “ethereal light.”<sup>23</sup> Kandinsky’s view of the spiritual or religious in art was not denominationally elitist, his concern being most aligned with the individual artist’s commitment to the inspiration needed for to produce these works:

In an obscure and puzzling way, the artist develops a work of art. As it gains a life of its own, it becomes an entity, an independent spiritual life, which as a being, leads the life of material realism ... and actively forms the above-mentioned spiritual atmosphere.<sup>24</sup>

Beuys remains tied to Steiner and Anthroposophy more than is warranted, though Beuys did refer to this inspiration: “Rudolf Steiner, about whom I had to think over and over again since my childhood. I know that he has left me the mission to sweep away gradually, in my own way, the alienation and distrust people have toward the supersensible.”<sup>25</sup> David Adams notes this in addition to the discrepancy of Beuys becoming an ‘official’ member of the Anthroposophical Society (1973) as a completely unorthodox association. In too many aspects, Anthroposophy was not a good fit, but captions such as provided by the Tate Modern advertise this while failing to acknowledge Beuys’ Catholicism:

His extensive work is grounded in concepts of humanism, social philosophy and anthroposophy; it culminates in his ‘extended definition of art’ and the idea of social sculpture as a *gesamtkunstwerk* [universal artwork], for which he claimed a creative, participatory role in shaping society and politics.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout Beuys’ works and installations, the editors of *ARTnews* viewed the artist’s *Multiples* exhibition as “off-putting—anti-academic,

---

<sup>23</sup> Sophie Tabone, ‘Jugendstil’, *History of Art* (2 February 2016), at <https://sophietabonehistory.wordpress.com/2016/02/03/jugendstil/>. Accessed 5 March 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Hilla Rebay (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1946), p. 91.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Beuys with Martin Barkhoff and Elaine Busby in *Joseph Beuys: His Art and Rudolf Steiner*, ed. and trans. Marion Briggs (West Hoathly: Anthroposophical Society, 1995), p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Joseph Beuys’, *Tate*, at <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/joseph-beuys-747>. Accessed 5 March 2020.

anti-market, and anti-modernist.”<sup>27</sup> This is not a negative in Beuys’ case. Beuys’ use of wool felt is counter-intuitive to represent something esoteric or immaterial, which is in character to be the point of these works by Beuys. By virtue of its composite materiality though, these could be associated in quixotic terms with the Sufi mystic being understood as a “wool-wearer” in that *suf* is Arabic for ‘wool’.<sup>28</sup> While the tall hats of Turkish dervishes are handmade of sheep or camel wool, there is no verifiable history detailing this in relation to Beuys’ use of this fabric.

### Yves Klein’s *Immaterielle*

A French Rosicrucian born in Nice, Yves Klein (1928-1962) was a founding member of the Group ZERO (1957-1966) a movement that aimed to “serve as ground zero and starting-point for a fresh awareness of our surroundings,” and lead a prodigious though remarkably short life, suffering a third heart attack and dying in his Paris home at the age of thirty-four.<sup>29</sup> In 1960, Pierre Restany wrote the *Nouveau Realism Manifesto* for a group whose original members, including Klein were seeking “new ways of perceiving the real.”<sup>30</sup> A Rosicrucian Catholic, Klein’s faith as well as his interest in alchemy, mysticism, and extrasensory perception influenced his work.

Oliver Watt’s began ‘Yves Klein and Hysterical Marks of Authority’ with a description of what he calls Klein’s “Prayer to the Void,” the *Ex-Voto of Saint Rita* (1961):

In 1961 Klein anonymously deposited an ex-voto at the Convent of Santa Rita in Cascia, Italy ... The offering took the form of a small see-through plastic box containing five compartments: one filled with blue pigment, one with pink pigment, one with gold leaf, and the other two

---

<sup>27</sup> The editors of *ARTnews*, ‘Artist, Academic, Shaman: Joseph Beuys on Mystical Objects, in 1970’, *ARTnews* (20 March 2015), at <http://www.artnews.com/2015/03/20/academic-artist-scholar-shaman-joseph-beuys-on-his-mystical-objects-in-1970/>. Accessed 5 March 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Often taken to have influenced the name for these mystics, the basis for this is the assumption that those who were spiritually more developed lessened their attachment to the earthly, and thus were physically cold.

<sup>29</sup> Irmgard Berner, ‘Artist Group Zero: The Ideal Of Pure Light’, *Goethe Institute*, at <https://www.goethe.de/en/kul/bku/20372381.html>. Accessed 5 March 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Kerstin Stremmel, *Realism* (Cologne: Taschen, 2004), p. 13.

with the prayer text and three gold bars from his sale of the Void. This object is clearly animated by belief.<sup>31</sup>

Of his *Ex-Voto dedicated to Saint Rita* it has been said his “devout Catholicism ... compelled him to create a contemporary votive offering, which he quietly donated to an Italian monastery.”<sup>32</sup> For Phillippe Vergne, co-curator of Yves Klein: *With the Void, Full Powers*, Klein’s religious orientation was central to his interest in curating his work:

I wanted to know how the Mother Superior, as a religious person, understood ... Yves Klein. She told me, ‘Oh, that’s totally normal—it’s faith. He had faith, and he called it immaterial sensibility’. For her, nothing was surprising.<sup>33</sup>

Watts chiefly agrees with art historians Benjamin Buchloh and Yve-Alain Bois in calling for a reconsideration of Klein’s relevance today, with Bois noting “he shows us how to deflate the spectacle of the culture industry by staging an even greater hoax.”<sup>34</sup> What is best taken from Bois is not his subjective view of Klein’s work, but what he saw in Klein’s relevance by quoting Theodor Adorno:

As spiritual entities, works of art are not complete in themselves. They create a magnetic field of all possible intentions and forces, of inner tendencies and countervailing ones, of successful and necessarily unsuccessful elements. Objectively, new layers are constantly detaching themselves, emerging from within; others grow irrelevant and die off. One relates to a work of art not merely, as is often said, by adapting it to fit a new situation, but rather by deciphering within it things to which one has a historically different reaction.<sup>35</sup>

We can see this in Klein’s famous photographic double-exposure appearing to ‘fly’ from a Paris rooftop over a boulevard (preceding Photoshop) in *Leap into the Void* (1960) as with his sale of gold leaf, which was scattered into the Seine river for the performance piece *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* (1959-1962).

---

<sup>31</sup> Oliver Watts, ‘Yves Klein and Hysterical Marks of Authority’, *COLLOQUY*, vol. 20 (2010), p. 57.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Yves Klein and the patron saint of lost causes’, *Walker Art Centre* (27 January 2011), at <https://walkerart.org/magazine/yves-klein-and-the-patron-saint-of-lost-causes>. Accessed 5 March 2020.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Yves Klein and the patron saint of lost causes’.

<sup>34</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, ‘Klein’s Relevance for Today’, *October*, vol. 119 (2007), p. 93. See also Watts, ‘Yves Klein and Hysterical Marks of Authority’, p. 61.

<sup>35</sup> Adorno in Bois, ‘Klein’s Relevance for Today’, p. 76.

Pepe Karmel explains Klein's correlation of 'the void' with his art (and not incidentally Klein's infamous 'International Klein Blue' pigmentation) as the result of his engagement with the epistemics of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, adopting Bachelard's phrase "first there is nothing, then there is a deep nothing; then there is a blue depth' as representative of his creativity."<sup>36</sup> Karmel saw Klein's projects as important and more than sensationalist: In 1958,

Klein had exhibited an empty gallery. In 1960 he published a fake newspaper. In 1962, he sold certificates for non-existent works of art. He is a forerunner, if not a founder, of installation art, conceptual art and institutional critique.<sup>37</sup>

Karmel drew a connection to Joseph Beuys in that both artists saw themselves as a shaman; both were perceived in a twentieth century context to be 'prophets'; and explained that "everyone who knew Klein seems to have considered him a genius," reflecting the opinion in the artist's diary in 1955.<sup>38</sup> John Lethbridge noted that:

The costume of the performance-self is a second skin of power and a prominent feature in the performative photographs of the case study artists. Yves Klein's shamanic costume of the performance-self, formal black dinner suit and tuxedo was established a few months before Joseph Beuys appeared in his trademark shamanic costume of the fishing jacket, felt hat, and sulphur boots.<sup>39</sup>

Though not an acolyte of the young artist, Karmel does refer to the twenty-year-old Klein's affection for a translation of Max Heindel's *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* and Klein's "pure pictorial sensibility" which ultimately qualified his art as an "extrasensory experience." Karmel still felt, however, that "most of Klein's ideas about art are complete bunkum, and the attempt to establish him as a significant theorist of postmodernism is doomed to failure."<sup>40</sup> Were that the point of Klein's projects this would matter.

Post-conceptual digital artist and theoretician Joseph Nechvatal confirmed the shared relevance of Klein, Beuys and Warhol when he wrote that while "Zen philosophy and Judo" (which Klein had done in Japan) had

---

<sup>36</sup> Pepe Karmel, 'Yves Klein: Art and Alchemy', *Art in America*, vol. 98, no. 5 (2010), p. 117.

<sup>37</sup> Karmel, 'Yves Klein: Art and Alchemy', p. 113.

<sup>38</sup> Karmel, 'Yves Klein: Art and Alchemy', p. 113.

<sup>39</sup> Lethbridge, 'Imaging the Void', p. 87.

<sup>40</sup> Karmel, 'Yves Klein: Art and Alchemy', p. 117.

their share in “Klein’s trajectory” he was ultimately convinced by Rosicrucian metaphysics and named a Knight of the Order of Archers of Saint Sebastian:

Klein easily brought his theoretical concerns around space, color and painting into the theatricality of conceptual and performance art and thus negated and undermined the classical work of art object, dissolving art into action and thus styling himself into an artistic personality in a way that anticipated the strategies of Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys and Orlan.<sup>41</sup>

Klein’s exclamation in the *Chelsea Hotel Manifesto* (1961) “Long live the immaterial!” reveals source concepts driving the ephemeral universe alluded to in his performances.<sup>42</sup> Klein, like Warhol, reflected a mid-twentieth century environment whereby the artist’s concepts could have esoteric roots while presenting aesthetically as the opposite. In relation to Beuys, mysticism, and Klein’s own ‘immaterial’ intentions:

resonances in Klein’s own religion, Catholicism, as not only a symbol of the Holy Ghost, but also as the shade traditionally used in the depiction of the Virgin Mary’s robes in Renaissance paintings [appeared].<sup>43</sup>

*The New Yorker*’s art critic Peter Schejdahl pronounced Klein as “the perpetrator of such audacities,” confirming:

some quality of ego-transcending devotion persists through all Klein’s work. Though beguiled by Zen and other Eastern philosophies, Klein was a pious Catholic, with eccentric trimmings. He was a knight of a Christian chivalric fraternity, the self-styled Order of the Archers of St. Sebastian. (He loved wearing the fancy uniform.) He also communed by mail for five years with the headquarters of the mystical Rosicrucian society, in Oceanside, California, excited by the group’s belief that physical space is suffused with spirit. Spirituality was Klein’s long suit.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Nechvatal, ‘Yves Klein: Corps, Couleur, Immatériel’ (2007), at <https://post.thing.net/node/1175>. Accessed 5 March 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Yves Klein, *Chelsea Hotel Manifesto*, at <http://www.yvesklein.de/manifesto.html>. Accessed 5 March 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Guy Hepner Gallery, ‘Yves Klein Tables and Sculptures’, at <https://guyhepner.com/artist/yves-klein/yves-klein-tables-sculptures/>. Accessed 5 March 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, ‘True Blue: An Yves Klein retrospective’, *The New Yorker* (28 June 2010), at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/06/28/true-blue-3>. Accessed 5 March 2020.

French art critic and philosopher Pierre Restany (1930-2003) explained the “symbolic and ritualistic correspondences” throughout *Fire in the Heart of the Void* (1982) positioned Klein seeing himself as an ‘initiate’ who worked scientifically as well as artistically “in perfect accord with God’s calling.”<sup>45</sup> The Catholic Restany noted “initiatory knowledge is not passed on like a mathematics lesson. Only inner work permits the adept to find his path and code”—this resonates with Kandinsky’s concept of ‘inner feeling’.<sup>46</sup> Further, this suggests how unexplored interests in how Religion and Science have, could, or do collaborate as with the inclinations of the artists discussed here. Carole M. Cusack wrote:

It is argued that in late modernity imaginative practices, including visual and performing arts, and fiction, provide alternative meaning templates that meet requirements that were once considered unique to religion. To do this, the artistic or fictional text must draw upon and adequately reflect human concerns, and afford space for contemplation allowing the individual to devise or extract personal meanings from the narrative.<sup>47</sup>

Restany saw the symbolism of Klein’s ‘fire’ series as his expression of “the alchemist of fire meant to apprehend light as a true believer” [and] the “path of the “indefinable” dear to Delacroix.”<sup>48</sup> It is not unusual, then, that fellow artist and Abstract Expressionist Motherwell commented that Delacroix’s diary was “the decisive art book of my life.”<sup>49</sup>

Without specifically looking for the religious or spiritual in art during the twentieth century—*when one saw it*—seems more likely to be an example of Modern Art’s amusements, as in the case of Klein explaining the ‘transcendent’. The opposite artistic approach demanded knowledge of religions and their symbolism to be recognised, even from agnostic or atheist artists (like American Jim Shaw). Buchloh had little nice to say about Klein, though the paradox of the art critic as friend, confidante, and editor is clear as Restany was eulogized by Jürgen Claus thus:

---

<sup>45</sup> Pierre Restany, *Yves Klein: Fire in the Void*, trans. Andrea Loselle (Washington D.C.: Spring Publications, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Restany, *Yves Klein: Fire in the Void*, p. 137.

<sup>47</sup> Carole M. Cusack, ‘Fiction into Religion: Imagination, Other Worlds, and Play in the Formation of Community’, *Religion*, vol. 46, no. 4, (2016), p. 577.

<sup>48</sup> Restany, *Yves Klein: Fire in the Void*, p. 137.

<sup>49</sup> Mary Ann Caws, *Robert Motherwell: With Pen and Brush* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), p. 86.

Pierre was a born concentrator. He possessed an instinct for manifesting artistic ideas, concentrating the free-floating ideas of an artist into a sculpted paradigm. He was as close to his artist friends as one can be; he brought into (verbal) life what was until then unverbilized artistic magma ... Klein became the artistic center of the constellation that Pierre followed during the next decades.<sup>50</sup>

Restany appears to have been an exception for twentieth century artists with 'crosses' to bear in an art world hostile to the religious or spiritual by any definition. While Beuys' and Klein's religious ideologies were known at the time, both artists also appeared to cover their religious tracks through *quasi* dual subterfuges. It was Restany who suggested Collette Allendy see Klein's work, and in whose gallery he was first exhibited in February 1956. Restany wrote that his real 'initiation' (Paris 1957) had to do with the conquest of immaterial pictorial sensibility by Klein's transformation of the superstitious as a form of divine symbolism. By praying to Saint Rita: "Yves mean[t] to create a direct, but privileged path of relation with God ... Saint Rita symbolizes thereafter the controlling power of God's over pictorial, immaterial sensibility."<sup>51</sup>

Restany, while clearly biased as a fellow Catholic, provided a credible and intimate source for artists' works, religion, and their differing material cultures' meanings and subtexts. In these cases, 'bias' is a crucial to essential resources in these areas of study when balanced. Restany, often a companion of Klein, accompanied Warhol to the opening of his *Last Supper* paintings in Milan. Both instances demonstrate where confidences were shared of what would otherwise remain unknown (as many intimacies surely still are). In this way Restany is similar to art critic, poet, and former professor of art history Donald Kuspit's consideration of Kandinsky as part of the *Spiritual in Art* (1986) exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), or the *New Yorker's* allowances for Peter Schjeldahl's balanced views of the religious and the secular evolution within the Arts in its publication.

---

<sup>50</sup> Jürgen Claus, 'Pierre Restany: A Man in Rhythm with His Time', *Leonardo*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2004), p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> Pierre Restany, *Yves Klein: Fire at the Heart of the Void* (New York: Journal of Contemporary Art Editions, 1992), p. 25.

## The Byzantine Andy Warhol

As one of the final *zeitgeists* of the twentieth century, nowhere does a sacred impulse in religious or spiritual Art seem more at odds with cultural change than Andy Warhol's secular-religious paradox.<sup>52</sup> Seemingly shallow, the Pop Art imagery of this former commercial artist's works transformed objects of convenience from postwar materialism in American life. It was eleven years after his death that Jane Daggett Dillenger published *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* (1998), though I contend all of Warhol's works are religious works disguised behind brash masques of Pop Art's simple distractions, and were virtually impossible to recognise during his lifetime. As I have written elsewhere:

Two decades later, Dillenger saw Warhol's 'Electric Chair' in a different light: 'The Chair is transformed from a grotesque instrument of death into a numinous object, suggesting transcendence, much as the cross, which was used for a particularly cruel kind of execution, is seen in Christian art as a symbol of salvation'.<sup>53</sup>

Even in America, Warhol's *Last Supper* series of the mid-1980s were not taken seriously when contextualised by his fame for decades of dynamic and constant change. Though populated with secular items and individuals, Warhol's work obfuscated religious symbolism, ironically, by using incredibly simple imagery in often gaudy colours. In deep contrast to The Factory's reputation, this 'Pope of Pop' kept the sacred cards in his hand hidden from most beyond his soup kitchen volunteerism, even those in his Manhattan church. While Dillenger's focus was on Warhol's "religious" art, over two decades later it is unviable not to see this manifesting throughout the totality of Warhol's works. Yet, any recognition of this in his and other artists' work again requires prerequisite knowledge of religious symbolism Studies in Religion and Theology can verify. Without this foundation, Warhol's sly interpretive insights remain obscure. Regardless of how impossible Warhol was to culturally ignore, his Pop Art did not suit the taste of most of the populace while attracting media interest. Instead, Warhol was Pop's truly 'Renaissance Man':

---

<sup>52</sup> Followed by the nihilism of bands like Nirvana and others in the late 1980s to 1990s.

<sup>53</sup> Jewell Homad Johnson, 'Medieval Pop: Warhol's Byzantine Iconography', *Art and Mysticism: Interfaces in the Medieval and Modern Periods*, eds Louise Nelstrop and Helen Appleton (New York: Routledge, 2017), e-book; Jane Dillenger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* (New York: Continuum, 1998), pp. 70-1.

Given Warhol's background as a Byzantine Catholic, the historical impact of both post-modern and Byzantine models remain unavoidable influences on his work reflecting Western and American culture, contextualized by the peculiarities of the Eastern Byzantine Church's traditions [he] reconsidered.<sup>54</sup>

Warhol's fixation with popular culture suited the radical re-envisioning of religious themes that can be extracted from his work's symbols of popular American daily life denoting transformative aspects of his own faith. As a result, Warhol provides the most convincing religio-secular art of the twentieth century. As a Russian Byzantine Catholic 'Slav', Warhol's Representational/Figurative art relocated pre-Renaissance sensibilities within after Enlightenment events, and popular postmodern culture. This manifested Alexis de Tocqueville's America in Pop's mirror: "In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country."<sup>55</sup> Indeed, what else could twentieth century art give birth to while being double-teamed by materialism and American capitalism?<sup>56</sup> Byzantine Catholic beliefs are primary to appreciate what Warhol subverted in his work by retaining "the freedom found in Catholic Orthodox ontological aesthetics which unify the sacred and the secular such that rather than reducing religious to secular iconography, Warhol transforms the secular via the religious."<sup>57</sup> Often cryptic, Warhol put all dogs off the scent, and repelled the traditionally bound through their failure to see his semiotics as a result of religious discipline while remaining safe for those with an allergy to religion.

Warhol's artworks ontologically demand surprisingly rigorous contemplation for works of Pop Art, though Anne-Marie Carr's understanding of the Byzantine icon, and that: "Their style and type thus in theory, must remain immutable" seems stretched to its boundaries by Warhol archetypal new 'icon' or double entendre as in *Gold Marilyn Monroe* (1962). Little appreciated beyond the few fellow Catholics of his inner circle, like collectors and philanthropists John and Dominique de

---

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, 'Medieval Pop'.

<sup>55</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Reeve, 12<sup>th</sup> edn (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1998), p. 121.

<sup>56</sup> Johnson, 'Medieval Pop'.

<sup>57</sup> Johnson, 'Medieval Pop'.

Menil, Dillenberger's book was beyond mainstream knowledge at the end of the 1990s (and for the most part, where it continues to remain).

It is easier to detect the influence of American mass production on Warhol's use of popular culture to express religio-secular materialism in retrospect. Pamela Smart chronicled this influence in *Sacred Modern: Faith, Activism, and Aesthetics in the Menil Collection* flourished in Texas with the Menil's support of a Houston college where "Buckminster Fuller, Andy Warhol, Leo Steinberg, Marcel Duchamp, Jean-Luc Godard and René Magritte, to name just a few of the guests that the de Menils brought to St. Thomas."<sup>58</sup> The Warhol Foundation gifted *The Last Supper Camouflage* (1986) to the Menil Collection after his death, where Beuys, Klein, and Warhol are all represented. Warhol became close with Fred Hughes (1943-2001) first at University of St. Thomas, then surrounding (what could best be called) the beginnings of today's Menil Collection, and travelled with Warhol to meet Pope John Paul II in 1980. These projects suggest Warhol reflected cultural influences in Pop's mirror and influenced American culture's changes. For all the attention Warhol received, he expressed the desire for his tombstone to read: "figment."<sup>59</sup> No more, and no less.

### **Conclusion: Kandinsky's Broadening Legacy**

Beuys, Klein, and Warhol reinvented representative religious imagery as more than the Virgin, crucifixion crosses, and saints while conceptually deviating as inheritors of Kandinsky's non-representative Christian art as the visual introduction of Abstraction. Abstraction provided an atmosphere for infinite interpretation to propel Beuys' singular approach to objects and installations; Klein's 'events', objects and performances confronting both Materialism and Immaterialism; and Warhol's manifestation of the Byzantine in what amounts to a Pop face for the medieval. Abstraction's 'spiritual in art' also meant these artists were archetypal of a figurative and non-figurative potential for the religious to be represented in unexpected ways and broadened the potential to include new; agnostic; atheist and

---

<sup>58</sup> Pamela Smart, 'Without Servitude to the Past, Nor Recklessness', *Sacred Modern: Faith, Activism, and Aesthetics in the Menil Collection* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), p. 99.

<sup>59</sup> Jason Farago, 'Even in death, Andy Warhol gets his 15 minutes—this time from a webcam', *The Guardian* (6 August 2013), at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/aug/06/andy-warhol-fame-webcam-grave>. Accessed 5 March 2020.

*Hiding in the Open*

secular religions could be ideologically and visually expressed. If art could subjectively express ideologies as abstract, representative, or symbolic impulses; then religious *and* non-religious art could be any combination of these qualities. As archetypes, Beuys, Klein, and Warhol contributed how Kandinsky's 'abstract' representation had laid a foundation for artists potential to emanate from any ideological position.