

Spirituality and contemporary art: the 'religious' experience between artist, artwork and audience

Emily C. O'Hara

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Introduction

In an era where religion has taken a backseat, particularly in Western culture, we can identify other fields such as art that provide gratifications in its place. Many authors, critics and academics have declared that “art – even in its most secular form – has become the religion of the 21st century.” (Hook, 2014) An increase can be seen in the emergence of artists who have contemplated themes with the intention of evoking emotion, playing on human nature, and challenging perceptions, both in the making and reception of their art; artworks of great impact that inspire feelings only able to be described through religious terminology. The comparison of art and religion is not specific to contemporary art, however an increase in spiritual conceptual thinking has highlighted the comparisons between art and religion more than in previous eras. This has facilitated a current discourse surrounding the critique of Western secularity and experiences with art.

This discourse has drawn into perspective the split between art influenced by secular faculties and art born of more conceptual thinking. Carol Duncan argues that a dichotomy exists between places of definitive factual knowledge and those of spiritual devotion, stating “We are, after all, a post-Enlightenment culture, one in which the secular and the religious are opposing categories.” (Duncan, 1995, p.47) My argument resides in the critique of Western secular thinking that places importance on fact and lexis as way of navigating the world, instead of feeling and experiencing. We find it difficult to resist the urge of clear definition, but to artworks upholding values absent of materiality, intended to be experienced not analysed, the juxtaposition of secular and spiritual can both push and inhibit the work of art.

Contemporary art can be characterised by innovation and challenging of the ridged scaffolding of past ideas. In one of the first key texts on the subject of spirituality, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, the modernist Wassily Kandinsky writes: “Every work of art is the child of its time; often it is the mother of our emotions.” (Kandinsky, 1977, p.1) The art world today is facilitating a birth of self and shared societal consciousness and taking steps on a path to a place where the spiritual is no longer viewed as avant-garde in Western creative culture. This is aided by works that defy and question the secular rationale that our Western foundations rely upon and instead foster affective emotion, breaking down the dichotomy between secular and spiritual. Encountering art primarily through feeling and embracing affect, opens up the art world to the wider public as it discards bourgeoisie ideas of pedagogy

that make visits to art galleries and museums daunting for those who have no education in the arts as Pierre Bourdieu discusses in his 1991 book 'Cultural Works and Cultural Disposition'. Therefore, in this essay I take the stance that works engaging spirituality are beneficial to all parties.

The term 'religious' or a divine lexical field is continuously repeated when deliberating upon the profound reactions some have experienced when confronted by the works of artists including Marina Abramović and Agnes Martin, whose work I will explore in this essay. The use of this language to describe more recent works of art as opposed to historical paintings denoting biblical scenes is testament to the power of the visual and the intense emotive reaction one might have when confronted with an artwork, whilst also being indicative of the evolving position of art over time. This essay will look specifically at *The Artist Is Present* and artworks by Agnes Martin produced after 1970. I will also draw on theories including affect and phenomenology, in addition to contexts relating to each artist, such as communism and Buddhism. My intention is to elaborate on the cyclical pattern of connectivity that can be seen between Abramović, Martin, their work, and audiences. A cycle which is woven with feeling and ideas of the spiritual, that ignites strong relationships, drives the passion of practices, and strengthens the position of contemporary art in our culture. By deciphering the way these relationships have been created it will become clear why they are likened to religion and how this is changing the landscape of the art world.

Context

I do not believe that the term 'religious', when attempting to describe artworks, is being used in its most primitive form, but implies a sensation so overpowering and miraculous that 'religious' seems to be the only word capable of describing it. Stendhal syndrome provides example for the magnitude of power art holds: a psychiatric disorder where predominantly tourists, experience physical bodily reactions, such as palpitations and fainting, when in the presence of masterpieces predominantly in Florence. (Stables, 2022) Despite the logic in comparison of behaviours towards religion and art, I would argue that spiritual is the correct term to describe this profound connection between artwork and audience. The term religious is defined as the belief in a superhuman power, gods, or deities. Whereas spiritual, although relating to religion, is classified as something that affects the human soul in a way different to that of physical things. Those who do not follow a religious doctrine are still able to experience spirituality, as it moves beyond specificity, idolisation, and systems of direction, it is alternatively concerned primarily with feeling. In her book *Encountering the spiritual in contemporary art* Leesa Fanning proposes that the spiritual "has a positive, unifying function that serves to bridge differences and bring people together in beneficial ways." (Fanning, 2018, p.33) However due to our Western disposition few are able to submit to the spirituality found in creative mediums.

Western culture is characterised by the secular, our need for definitive knowledge and subsequently the written word. As spirituality "eludes a final definition" (Ibid) it is often avoided and branded as a negative 'other'. Hence spirituality, much like religion, has deteriorated and been largely avoided as a topic of discourse in the art world as these experiences cannot adequately be described through a lexis. The affect and feelings that arise when confronted with the spiritual fall short of logical explanation, therefore it can create vulnerability which in our culture is actively avoided. Affect theory may provide explanation as to why religious terminology is used to describe experiences with art. It is in the unknowing and inability to formulate a description of affect that leads us to find logic in religious similes and metaphors. The affective, which is a growing area of discourse in contemporary art, can be seen as a dichotomy to secularity as this state "at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces – visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing" (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, p.1). Affect and spirituality are the same in their nature as feelings of the soul, that as consequence of human nature is desired, but cannot be comprehended. In his book *The Principles of Art* early 20th

century philosopher R. G. Collingwood noted the division in ways of being, writing “it seems that our sensuous – emotional nature, as feeling creatures, is independent of our thinking nature, as rational creatures, and constitutes a level of experience below the level of thought.” (Collingwood, 2014, p163) Collingwood dictates that feeling and experience are the structures upon which knowledge is built. He described a primacy of feeling that could be seen as an early concept of what has come to be known as affect theory. The intriguing friction of spiritual art existing in a largely non-spiritual atheist society ignites a fire for those seeking experiences of the soul. The rarity of true connection and emotive, transcendent moments in time sacralises art that does so.

The decline of spirituality likely lies with modernism’s position as a departure from religion because of their resemblances. In its context of industrialisation and innovation in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, modernism places importance on formalism, however it was not absent of spirituality as Wassily Kandinsky argued. Modernism was a catalyst to abstract art which opened new doors to expressing messages difficult to impart through figuration. The subjectivity of abstraction is the ideal vehicle for spirituality as figuration is tethered to contexts that evoke intellectual analysis. “Liberated from the constraints of depicting the real world, abstract art is free to explore the invisible Other. It can reflect the subjective reality of the spiritual – inner states of being and spiritual presence – through materials, form, and colour alone.” (Fanning, 2018, p.72) Agnes Martin’s paintings clearly portray this idea, whilst Abramović’s performances remain abstract in concept. Their works feed into the thought that our senses and reception of emotion is increased because of the elimination of narratives or elements that awaken secular rationale.

After art became separated from religion as means of portraying its teachings, many comparisons have been made between the substance of art and religion over the course of art history, from atheists such as Gerhard Richter comparing the process of art making to the search for God, to those with faith including Tracey Emin who famously stated in the title of her 1997 exhibition at the South London Gallery: “I need art like I need God”. Abramović and Martin are by no means the first artists to move audiences to such profound emotional states. Rothko was known for provoking tearful experiences in viewers and stated that “The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.” (Hook, 2014) Again, the term “religious” is utilised, evidencing that art as substitute religion is not a concept specific to contemporary art, but has become a more developed subject of enquiry. It is this powerful spiritual connection between the artist and

their work which is received and mirrored by the audience, forming a successful relationship between all parties and what makes the artwork profound. Due to their passion many artists, no matter their discipline, would most likely refer to their practice a personal religion. The very definition of the word 'practice' means that it can be applied to both artistic practices and the practice of religious and spiritual beliefs. Both are alike in concept, guided by passionate devotion, repetition, and sacralisation. Artists need their own practices as much as the people that receive them do. Evidence of this can be seen in both Abramović's and Martin's work.

There are countless similarities between religion and art, with the physical resemblances and behaviours in reception. The design of buildings, the journey to witness events, the sacralisation of objects and people, devotion in repetition, and the ability to evoke strong emotion, are just some of the parallels between the two fields and all their contributors. In her book *Civilizing Rituals* Carol Duncan points out that "our supposedly secular, even anti-ritual, culture is full of ritual situations and events – very few of which (as Mary Douglas has noted) take place in religious contexts." (Duncan, 1995, p.8) Despite dictating that the secular and spiritual are binary oppositions, the book highlights their similarities. As this discourse has become a pillar of contemporary critique, more academics have promoted the parallels and questioned the direction of contemporary art. "Venice Biennale and Basel art fair could even be seen as glamorous reinventions of a trip to Mecca or jaunt to Jerusalem. Are art schools post-modern monasteries? Is Charles Saatchi the new post-pop pope?" (Gavin, 2007) These comparisons go beyond that of the physical world and into deeper rooted behaviours which I will explore in further detail, although I will make clear that whilst links can be made to religion in terms of structures and behaviours, the artworks themselves and reactions to them should be described as spiritual.

Marina Abramović

Marina Abramović (born 1946, Serbia) is a figurehead of contemporary art, known predominantly as a conceptual and performance artist. Her work delves into relationships with the audience and tests the limits of the body and mind. From the 14th of March until the 31st of May 2010 the artist delivered one of her most celebrated performances *The Artist Is Present* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The performance lasted for 716 ½ hours over the course of three months which enabled the artist to engage with over 1500 members of the public. (Heartney, 2018, p.254) *The Artist Is Present* required the participants to interact in a silent experience sitting across from the artist, an act which moved many participants to a state of intense emotion. It differs from Abramović's other works as the element of shock was absent, which provided space for deeper contemplation and purer feeling, aligning more with theories of affect rather than effect. The subtlety in this less dramatic performance along with Abramović's clever manipulation of time allowed for the most authentic human connection and emotion to be evoked.

Abramović is infamous for driving participants to powerful emotional responses as shown in Marco Anelli's documentation of participants in *The Artist Is Present* (figures 1, 2 & 3). The performance provoked many members of the public to tears, or in some cases more extreme responses. The reaction was not because they believed the artist to be a godly figure but because some part of the connection touched them. In an interview with *The Observer* Abramović stated "I did almost nothing, but they take this religious experience from it. Art has lost that power, but for a while Moma was like Lourdes." (O'Hagan, 2010) These individuals sought out a space in which they can release their inner most feelings and connect to their soul, just as one might attend church to do. Those who experienced extreme catharsis may therefore have been predisposed to profound responses as they actively chose to participate as an outlet for suppressed emotion. Abramović stated herself, "I gazed into the eyes of many people who were carrying such pain inside that I could immediately see it and feel it". (Ibid) Some participants however could be seen to take joy in the simple experience of human connection, evidencing Abramović's ability to play on human nature, as we actively seek out experiences and interactions that move us. Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments outlines that emotions are the fabric of society and therefore it is of paramount importance that we connect to one another. "His agonies...when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder

at the thought of what he feels.” (Smith, 1759, p.3) This performance provided a skeleton for a unifying, shared experience between artist and audience.

The Artist Is Present can be seen as kindling to the flame of human connectivity that the online age threatens to extinguish. “Why do we hunger for such experiences? Why give time, when we feel we have so little, to wait and have a silent conversation with someone we do not know? (Jacob, 2018, p.263) Art is a reflection of the social, political, cultural, and other wider contexts of our time, thus the answer to Jacob’s question lies with the lack of physical contact that exists in the age of the internet and the plethora of imagery available in the digital age of globalization. The art world offers what the public has become deprived of , as “museum visitors are invited to undertake a pilgrimage to art museums in search of the Holy Grail of originality and authenticity.” (Groys, 2014, p14)

Subversion of power relations can be seen as one of the defining characteristics of contemporary art as the idea of the passive viewer is being rejected. Abramović’s performances have been impactful because they destroy the concept of aesthetic distance. Participatory art breaks down the barrier that separates artwork and viewer, making it easier to leave an emotional impression that may even be distressing, unlike traditional mediums where the physical distance reminds the viewer of their separation from narratives. As Boris Groys stated, “the contemporary museum realizes the modernist dream of a theatre in which there is no clear boundary between the stage and the space for the audience”. (Groys, 2014, p.10) Performance artists such as Abramović emerged from discourse surrounding relationships with the viewer in the late 1950’s, her predecessors the likes of Yoko Ono, whose 1964 *Cut Piece* has resemblances to Abramović’s performance *Rhythm 0*. Participatory art also feeds into the idea of experience economy which is becoming increasingly prominent. *The Artist Is Present* can also be classified as relational art, which Bourriard describes as “an art taking at its theoretical horizons the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space”. (Bourriard, 1998, p.14) The duration of the performance meant that for the artist it became life itself, pushing the boundaries of art as she so often does and could be analysed as a social experiment or as microcosm of human connectivity.

The unusual combination of the discipline in her communist upbringing and her spirituality has moulded Abramović’s practice as the works can be seen as a reaction to the communist ethos. In the documentary surrounding *The Artist Is Present*, she recalls being raised in a

household void of love and affection, despite this Abramović was close to her grandmother who herself was spiritual and attended church. The warmth that her grandmother provided is likely a contributing factor in the artist's interest into the spiritual, and context to the positive essence of *The Artist Is Present*, whilst her communist roots can be seen in her self-discipline but has had a greater influence in other performances such as *Rhythm 5*. The absence of relationships in her childhood may be why the artist places so much value on relationships to her audience. The connection between the artist and audience within Abramović's practice is like blood to the body, the participants sacralise and use the artist as a system for self-realisation and gratifying their own needs, but the artist, as she has reminded us, also needs her audience. The artist is subject to her own work as evidenced by her experience with Ulay during the performance (figure 4), in which she was visibly touched by their confrontation. The artist took a moment of introspective reconciliation between sitters so that she could remain engaged with everyone equally which proved to be an exhausting process and caused pain (figure 5), however after pushing past it she entered another state of being where she felt no division between the physical self and the environment, stating it was "kind of holy". (Akers, M and Dupre, J, 2012)

This performance can be seen to emulate aspects of religious rituals, such as the compositional style which is similar to a catholic confession, or the pilgrimage audiences must take to witness the work. One reviewer wrote: "I was reminded of the pilgrims who, centuries ago, travelled to see... (and perhaps have their lives changed by) the ascetic saints who – perched on poles, dwelling in caves – claimed to have found God in discomfort and...solitude in the desert". (Prose, 2012) Eventually the table was also removed as the artist felt it was an obstacle in connecting to her audience, to which Klaus Biesenbach proclaimed "the priest doesn't need the cross". (Akers, M and Dupre, J, 2012) The performance was sacralised through its isolation and installation in the gallery space, creating a form of spectacle. The separation of artworks in the contemporary layout of galleries removes the viewer from the constraints of the present and transports them to a timeless space without distraction, thus forming a space where audiences can be overcome by feeling. "In philosophy, liminality became specified as the aesthetic experience, a moment of moral and rational disengagement that leads to or produces some kind of revelation or transformation." (Duncan, 1995, p.14) Liminality is precisely what Abramović aimed to achieve with *The Artist is Present*; she created a space and experience where time feels as though it has slowed down, to provide an atmosphere for fruitful thought, and bring the

audience into a unifying atmosphere with herself. The immediacy of the act challenges the participant to give themselves to the experience of the work. The possibility of being in the present is difficult with the challenges of life, the pressures of time and wandering of the mind. Similarities can be seen between *The Artist Is Present* and her series of performances *Nightsea Crossing*, completed partially with Ulay, between 1981 and 1987. Not only are there resemblances in visual language through the positioning of figures opposite one another at a table, but in the concept of passivity. The static nature of these performances acts in antithesis to the myriad of activity, fast pace and encouraged industrious behaviour in the current era. (figure 6)

Agnes Martin

Transcendence and spirituality are themes explored in the works of Agnes Martin (born 1912, Canada and died 2004, New Mexico) through considerations in form, creating works that have “the quality of a religious utterance, almost a form of prayer.” (Kramer, 1976) The artist contemplates perfection, happiness, and serenity, finding positive equilibrium through a sense of stillness in the consistency of her imagery, evoking a state of mindfulness both in their making and reception. Martin moved away from the New York art scene in 1967 after a stay at a psychiatric hospital and relocated to the tranquil Taos in New Mexico where she gained a heightened awareness of non-western spiritual systems. After several years without painting Martin returned to art and adopted a change in visual language. Uniformity is certainly a term that can be used to describe her work, favouring measured, straight-lined compositions, and working on mostly six-foot squared canvases until her age no longer permitted her. Her work also uses subtle colour, if any, contributing to sublime and peaceful imagery that draws in the viewer. (figure 7)

Martin chose geometric visual language as a means of conveying the transcendent as it “is a mathematical system of order and perfection that exists in the ideal realm.” (Fanning, 2018, p.94) Her work such as the series *On a Clear Day* (figure 8) consisted of gridded compositions, although resisting the use of squares, but her style later progressed into arrangements of horizontal bands. The empty space surrounding the grids pull the viewer in, before becoming further absorbed into the smaller sections. Narrowing of the mind through these compositions is what allows audiences to connect to spiritual senses. In this way Martin’s practice is paradoxical; the use of secular systems to convey the spiritual. “For artists whose work is realized in the corporeal sphere even when it aspires to spiritual transcendence, these divisions provide the creative tension that drives their work.” (Heartney, 2018, p.224) Her obsession with perfection, precise calculations, and straight lines could be a result of her training as a teacher. Her work is stated to have engaged minimalist and modernist ideas however the works embody a feeling, therefore “her personal sensibility and her attempt to convey metaphysical and meditative experiences on canvas were rather remote from the objectivity of the minimalists.” (Ilias, 2021, p.256) The artist’s emotions are present thus aligning her work better with the traits of abstract expressionism, although it could be said that no art can truly be without feeling, as “art remains subjective and concerned with feeling, even when artists explicitly reject such qualities...art such as

minimalism facilitates reflection on feeling and its complicated role in the reception of art precisely because of the efforts to expunge it". (Best, 2011, p1)

The works are embodiments of positive emotions through the elimination of the impure, using exact measurements, line, and simplified colour palettes. In this way Martin can be compared to Abramović as she aims to remove distractions or complications, much like Abramovic's removal of the audience from the constraints of the outside world. Meditative making was an underlying concept in Martin's work as she spent a vast amount of time in solitude and silence, and it was through this simple lifestyle that she was able to convey a strong sense of transcendence. The seclusion and devotion to practice demonstrated by Agnes Martin is almost a mirror to the life of a monk, although outside of a specific doctrine. Her paintings are "visibly reliant on her own manual labour; the slow inscription of precisely drawn and painted webs and bands can be compared, with not too big a stretch, to Zen acolytes' sweeping of monastery floors." (Princenthal, 2019, p.89) The compositions themselves came to Martin as visions, complete images that only needed to be realised. It is easy to imagine how repeating bands such as those in *White Flower II* (figure 9) was a peaceful creative process. Much devotion went into this process as her studio contained many sheets covered in calculations in order to execute the works on her iconic large scale canvases. This size was arrived at as means of engaging the viewer, making them "feel like stepping into it" (Martin in Princenthal, 2019, p.84), becoming entranced into their purity. The artist also suffered from paranoid schizophrenia which makes it unusual that she was able to have such clarity in vision, although this desire to depict transcendent order could be a reaction to the disorder she found in her mind, helping her achieve mindfulness. As the works are conceived by a stream of consciousness, and not through intense thinking, they are inherently experiences and not objects for rational analysis.

Agnes Martin's works are void of figurative distraction, or in fact anything that could be analysed too deeply, they capture a moment, a feeling that is supposed to be embraced as a spiritual experience. Despite the artist herself denying these claims, many have considered the geometry and horizontal lines of her visual language to have been subconsciously influenced by the vast barren landscapes she grew up in and eventually settled with. "Martin's ruled lines resonated with the hum of the physical world...her work is inarguably grounded in visual experience." (Princenthal, 2019, p.9) It is certainly possible to see these similarities however as the artist has argued, her practice is absent of any figurative associations and solely about the experience and feeling in its formlessness.

Perhaps it is again Western predisposition which has ignited the search for secularity and clarity of meaning in the paintings. Martin is noted for her love of nature and the peace and beauty she found in its surroundings, and although it did not impact the imagery of her work, the feelings of transcendence nature provided her, was the emotion she aimed for her work to arouse in others. The artist states "Nature is like parting a curtain, you go into it. I want to draw a certain response like this, drawing. Not a specific response but that quality of response from people when they leave themselves behind, often experienced in nature, an experience of simple joy." (Wilson, 1966, p49) The viewer becomes at one with their sensations as they would if they were immersed in nature.

It is the artist's Taoist and Buddhist influences that call for the works to be received bodily instead of through secular contemplation. Martin points out that the relationship of the viewer to the artwork should exist through bodily feeling as that which engages the spiritual is meant to be felt. "It is from our awareness of transcendent reality and our response to concrete reality that our minds command us on our way – not really on a path or to a gate – but to full response." (Martin, 1977, p.26) In his book *Phenomenology of Perception* Maurice Merleau-Ponty criticizes René Descartes philosophy of "I think, therefore I am", which denotes the Western mindset, and instead moves towards ideas of experiencing artworks inspired by the Buddhist teachings on emptiness. He wrote on phenomenology which, much like Collingwood's theories, is "a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins...and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world". (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.vii) Buddhism is a noted influence on the development of the American art scene, specifically in abstraction, with other artists such as John Cage working with its ethos since the 1950's. Martin achieves spiritual transcendence for example through the elegant pale lines in *Untitled #5* (figure 10) which bring the viewer into the meditative process of the artists own resonance with Buddhist methodologies. The artworks open a door to feelings that are already present but are difficult to grasp.

The viewer is further engaged by the fact that the works are not exclusive to the artist's personal experiences, they are universal. As influenced by Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Dylan Evans states "I argue that emotions constitute a kind of 'universal language' that binds humanity together...Our common emotional heritage goes deeper than the cultural differences that set us apart." (Evans, 2003) Abstraction and purity in Martin's work enable their sense of feeling to be widely received, placing them in opposition to the

cultural theory of emotion that states those from different backgrounds experience different emotions. As the works were not fabricated under specific visual contexts, they can be received mutually across cultures, contributing to aforesaid ideas of unity. Even though the artist was influenced by certain methodologies “she expressed great disappointment and even anger that her painting was considered by some to be an expression of Eastern spiritual beliefs. In fact she was cautious about embracing spiritual beliefs from the start.” (Princenthal, 2019, p.87) I believe that Martin did not want her work to submit to societies needs to categorise, hence she became frustrated when specific contexts became associated with her practice as it could inhibit the full soulful response she aimed to inspire.

Conclusion

After exploring the works of Marina Abramović and Agnes Martin, I believe that art should be received in a manner that aligns with the aforesaid Buddhist way of feeling, particularly artworks that aim to embody a feeling of spirituality; artworks should not always be deliberated on with our Western need for the definitive, as this takes away from the connection between the audience and the work. In some ways art is supposed to be analysed as it is an embodiment of a message, encoded with semiotics and means of provoking thought, however it should be considered that impactful yet subjective works such as those included in this essay, should be left undisturbed by secular urges. If secular thinking is our primary method of receiving art, then emotion is inhibited due to the distance it creates, and therefore the impact of the work is not as successful.

Differences between the work of Abramović and Martin are perhaps indicative of the subtle progression of contemporary art and evolution in the understanding and acceptance of art engaging non-secular ideals. What defines these successful artists is their ability to make audiences experience the emotions they felt themselves and have thus embodied in their work. Abramović and Martin's lived experiences and meditative transcendence can be felt through their work and inspire a similar state of mind in their audience. Value should be placed on artworks such as theirs due to their cognitivism, their ability to enhance understanding and open up the mind, creating interesting discourses such as those I have discussed. We learn from experiences of the soul and these powerful epiphanies that can be evoked in art should be of equal significance to secular learning as "art is a source of understanding". (Graham, 1997, p.58) In this sense both the artists' practices provide services to the audience and are servants to higher means of being. In the online age it is of paramount importance that we form and maintain connections to each other and material objects, experiences like those demonstrated by the strength of connection between artist, artwork and audience in the case studies of this essay.

In conclusion, the use of religious terminology when describing experiences of contemporary art is a result of the profound emotions that exist in both realms, thus when we are unable to grasp an explanation of spiritual art because of its affective nature, our Western secular disposition causes us to pull at the logic of metaphors. The line between the religious and the spiritual has been blurred as they share many similarities, however the works included in this essay are themselves spiritual, whilst the behaviours surrounding the creations and

reception of the work can be seen as alike to religious ritual. The works included in this essay are not religious in the traditional sense and the comparison has led to some controversy, for example art historian Timothy Clark proclaimed, "I will not have anything to do with the self-satisfied Leftist clap-trap about 'art as substitute religion'". (Elkins, 2004) It cannot be dictated that art is replacing religion or that art does indeed supply this spiritual feeling, as each individual encounter is inherently idiosyncratic and will elicit different emotions, if any, dependent upon predisposition, circumstance, and other personal factors. It can be said however, that secularity and its stance as opposition to spirituality, affect and emotion, is being challenged through contemporary art and may enhance the way in which audiences interact with artworks.

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