



Detail, Marisa Portolese, *A Descent into the Maelstrom*, 2010, C-print, 102 × 127 cm.
(Photo: Marisa Portolese)

Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and the Video Works of Sylvia Safdie, Marisa Portolese, Marielle Nitoslawska, and Sarindar Dhaliwal

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The artist must have something to say, for this task is not the mastery of form, but the suitability of that form to its content ... From which it is self-evident that the artist, as opposed to the non-artist, has a threefold responsibility: (1) he must render up again that talent which has been bestowed upon him; (2) his actions and thoughts and feelings, like those of every human being, constitute the spiritual atmosphere, in such a way that they purify or infect the spiritual air; and (3) these actions and thoughts and feelings are the material for his creations, which likewise play a part in constituting the spiritual atmosphere.

Wassily Kandinsky, 1911¹

In 1949, Clement Greenberg, an American art critic who was closely associated with modern art in the United States, categorically ejected religion from modernism by stating that art had to be “uninflated by illegitimate content – no religion or mysticism or political certainties.”² In his essay on modernist painting in 1960, he upheld his belief that none of the arts need religion: “The arts could save themselves from this levelling down only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity.”³

Greenberg’s attention to the formal properties of art, such as line, colour, light, composition, structure, and space, his exacting approach to art criticism, and his understanding of the development of modern art as an unfolding tradition have had major impacts on generations of art critics and art historians. As Donald Kuspit has repeatedly stated, Greenberg’s theory of modernist painting was the final phase in “despiritualizing” art by reducing it completely to a “material medium.”⁴ This was most evident in Greenberg’s argument that “the great masters of the past achieved their art by virtue of combinations of pigment whose real effectiveness was ‘abstract,’ and ... their greatness is not owed to the spirituality with which they conceived the things they illustrated so much as it is to the success with which they ennobled raw matter to the point where it could function as art.”⁵

Although few Western artists today explicitly express an adherence to religious beliefs or congregational affiliations, there has been a resurgence of religious subject matter in contemporary art. The German philosopher and

sociologist Jürgen Habermas adopts the term “post-secular society” to capture the return to the religious ties that had steadily and dramatically lapsed after the Second World War.⁶ In his 2008 essay, *Notes on a Post-Secular Society*, Habermas refers to a society that expects the continuing survival of religious communities where relations between citizens who believe and those who do not produce a “public consciousness.” This development, he explains, alters religious and secular ways of thinking.”⁷

Habermas’s concept has its roots in the writings of key figures who have reinstated theology and religion in contemporary philosophy. Jacques Derrida, for example, considers “a messianism without religion” to mean an openness in one’s commitment to justice and the just treatment of every individual. He calls this a “quasi-atheistic” attitude, differentiating it from the religious messianism of the past.⁸ Paul Ricoeur argues that moral life is inherently creative and has at its centre the primordial human ability to transform historical evil and tragedy through the creation of an ever more radically inclusive moral society.⁹ Julia Kristeva discusses “various means of purifying the abject” that “make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion.”¹⁰

Elsewhere in this issue, I have looked at the secularization of twentieth-century Canadian art and some manifestations of post-secularism in more recent practice.¹¹ In this essay, I look more closely at a set of ideas that have accompanied its current reinvigoration. I refer to the seminal text *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) by Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), in which the Russian-born painter and philosopher, influenced by his upbringing as an Orthodox Christian and by theosophical writings, used abstracted religious iconographical components to create new spiritual perceptions about colour, music, and abstract form.

The resurgence of religious themes in art has sparked a renewal of interest in Kandinsky’s understanding of spirituality.¹² An early, and highly significant, indication of this was the Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (1986), which revisited the origins of abstraction in the paintings of Kandinsky, František Kupka, Piet Mondrian, and Kazimir Malevich, examining the simultaneous influence of non-western religions, mysticism, and the occult.¹³ This rethinking of abstract art refuted the idea that it was narrowly concerned with line, form, and colour.

Since this significant exhibition, numerous others have been indebted to Kandinsky’s concepts of art, spirituality, and the spiritual mission of the artist.¹⁴ *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives*, at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art in 1996, attempted to define the sacerdotal role of artists. According to curator Richard Francis, the artists included had

been “making art in their studios in much the same way that monks meditate in their cells.” The substantial essays in the exhibition catalogue explore how artists, as creators, can be propelled from the ordinary into a transformative experience approaching spiritual mystery, religious ecstasy, and the sublime, and how we, as spectators, can respond by deepening our understanding of humanity within both personal and cultural contexts.¹⁵ Among recent exhibitions, by far the most comprehensive was *Traces du Sacré* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2008. Over 350 works of art by nearly 200 artists from the nineteenth century to the present were arranged thematically in categories such as Apocalypses, Nostalgia of the Infinite, Doors of Perception, and Resonances of the Archaic. The objective was to investigate the way that art continues to demonstrate, in our secular world, the quest for spirituality and to explore the multi-faceted reasons for this persistence.¹⁶

Numerous publications on Kandinsky, as well as recent writing about contemporary artists and religion by Brent Plate, James Elkins, David Morgan, Maria Hlavajova, Sven Lütticken, and Jill Winder, have offered ways, both direct and indirect, to interpret and extrapolate from Kandinsky's writings about art,¹⁷ particularly Kandinsky's perception that the artist is capable of transforming the individual and society, his belief that scientific developments can contribute to new artistic discoveries and modes of experiencing reality, and his theory that the communication between artist and the viewer involves the senses and the mind.¹⁸

Differing from these approaches is the argument made by Peg Weiss, author of *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (1995).¹⁹ According to Weiss, Kandinsky's most profound ideas about the spiritual power of art were developed during his travels in the province of Vologda in northwest Russia, which he undertook after studying law, economics, and ethnography at Moscow University. Departing from the premise of her 1979 book, where she considered the German *Jugendstil* to be the origin for Kandinsky's development of abstraction,²⁰ Weiss now argues that Kandinsky's ethnographic education, his involvement with the Imperial Society of Friends of the Natural Sciences, Anthropology, and Ethnography, and his knowledge of shamanism and the folklore of the Russian peoples were seminal experiences. While Kandinsky's Russian heritage and interests in folk and primitive art had been discussed previously by a number of art historians, Weiss provides the first in-depth analysis of his interest in ethnography.

In 1889, Kandinsky embarked on a six-week, 1,600-mile journey to learn about the folk art and customs of the region's native peoples. He took detailed notes and made many sketches that contributed to his merging of the beliefs and images from Finno-Ugric, Lapp and Siberian shamanism with Christian

themes and motifs.²¹ Kandinsky emerged from the journey having discovered the imagery and underlying philosophy that, as Weiss explains, would inform *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and guide his artistic production for the rest of his life.

The ethnographic methodology that led to these discoveries resonates with contemporary art practice. In his *Return of the Real* (1996), Hal Foster devotes a chapter to “The Artist as Ethnographer.”²² Considering the objectives and practices of recent art movements, Foster explores what he calls the “ethnographic turn” since the 1960s. He argues that, with anthropology becoming the new language of artistic practice and critical discourse, artists must resist the tendency to project themselves onto the culture of the other in a search for political truth and cultural identity. Reflexivity, Foster warns the artist, is essential to avoid identifying with a community as though it were one’s own.

Bearing this caution in mind, I am nevertheless struck by the sincerity and seriousness of purpose exhibited by artists who, like Kandinsky, journey to places that they relate to as their own and purposefully connect to spiritually. The first aim of this essay is to consider what Kandinsky defined as the spiritual mission of the authentic artist and then show how this mission can be seen to have been adopted and adapted by four Canadian women artists, Sarindar Dhaliwal (1953–), Marielle Nitoslawska (1953–), Marisa Portolese (1969–), and Sylvia Safdie (1942–).

The second, closely related to the first and informed by Habermas’s notion of today’s post-secular society, is to consider the widespread phenomenon of people who situate themselves at some distance from the religion of their forebears, yet maintain a productive relationship with it. For this too applies to Dhaliwal, Nitoslawska, Portolese, and Safdie and, arguably, to members of their audiences who experienced exhibitions of their work in Montreal.

For these four artists, particular histories and geographies served as points of contact for the evocation of different religious and spiritual experiences. With Kandinsky’s statements from *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and his ethnographic experiences as a guide, I will consider how these artists, in ways comparable to Kandinsky, understand art-making to be a spiritual activity. With each artist, I will explore how different places, whether the Middle East for Safdie, Italy for Portolese, Quebec for Nitoslawska, or India for Dhaliwal, were contributing factors in evoking the “inner necessity” of spiritual experience.

Sylvia Safdie: Abstraction as Spiritual Expression

Sylvie Safdie considers herself to be a “non-practising Jew.”²³ While she participates in family celebrations of certain Jewish holidays, she is not

religious in the traditional sense. In this respect she is like many Jewish intellectuals who connect with Jewish cultural history and identity but not its religious beliefs and practices. Informing her spiritual life and artwork is Safdie's interest in the Jewish history of migration and her strong relationship with nature.

In Safdie's Moroccan video series, created in 2009, we see images of cemeteries and synagogues, the entrance to a Jewish quarter, and portraits and figures of the people currently inhabiting those spaces. Safdie's people came from Syria, where they had lived in a similarly vibrant community, but Syria had long ago been lost to them. Since as a Jew Safdie was unable to visit Syria, Morocco became a catalyst for her to think about her own place of origin and what happens when a society no longer inhabits the place where it lived for many years.

Before embarking on her project, Safdie took on the role of ethnographer, just as Kandinsky did during his expedition in 1889. She did extensive research to deepen her understanding of the history of the Jews in the area, travelling with a guide to the villages and towns around Marrakech and to southern Morocco, where she gathered the footage that led to this project. She interviewed Berber elders, an elderly Jewish scholar who came from a village in southern Morocco, and an old rabbi in Casablanca who had known the Jews who once lived in these places. Safdie learned that in every village and town Jews had inhabited the *mellah*, the Jewish quarter, and had taken part in a symbiotic and respectful relationship with the Berber people. She also learned that the situation in southern Morocco was different from that in the Middle East in that the Jewish population had left voluntarily. Safdie used this considerable ethnographic documentation to create an abstract, poetic essence of her experience.

Her search focused on looking for what Susanne Langer describes in *Feeling and Form* as an "ethnic domain," a place in the non-geographical sense that is fabricated in order to make visible, tangible, and sensible the illusion of a self-contained space.²⁴ An abandoned synagogue in Amzrou, for example, embodies feelings of the sacred and collective. In contrast to what Kuspit describes as Kandinsky's discovery of "an artistic experience of religion and a religious experience of art"²⁵ in the bright and intricately coloured interiors of Russian churches and chapels, Safdie responds sensuously to the few crumbling remains of a Moroccan Jewish community. In *Wall, A Triptych* (2009), a video consisting of three screens or projections, a patch of light travels along the wall of a synagogue, offering a visual expression of the past, present, and future (Fig. 1). A second work, titled *The Guardian* (2009), is arranged in the form of a diptych. It shows Mbark, the synagogue's caretaker, standing in the interior, repeating over and over, almost like a mantra, the names of the eighteen or so Jewish families who used to live in the



1 | Sylyia Safdie, *Wall, A Triptych*, 2009. 6:37 min (continuous loops). Camera: Sylvia Safdie. Editing: Patrick Andrew Boivin, Sylvia Safdie. Music: Arthur Bull. Sound design: Patrick Andrew Boivin. Format: HD. (Photo: Sylyia Safdie)

community (Fig. 2). Rays from above illuminate his face as he appears from and then disappears into the light. Particles of dust from the earth and straw used to make the walls and floor move around him, suggesting the living force and spiritual nature of this ancient religious building.

In these works Safdie focuses on the region's few remaining symbols of Jewish culture, imagining the past through images of the present. In one video exposure, titled *Morning* (2009), the camera focuses on a brightly lit opening at the end of a dark tunnel. A silhouette of a woman with a child on her back, pouring water from a pail, appears and disappears in a mirage-like image. Since the opening was the entrance to the *mellah*, long ago this might have been a Jewish woman.

Safdie primarily uses light to express the objects and beings she discovered in these formerly Jewish places. As a consequence, the faces, figures, walls, floor, and other contained spaces become universal, removing us from the ordinary and placing us in a context that is transformative. In this way her approach can be associated with the spiritual investigations that interested Kandinsky. The abstraction he gave birth to was nourished by a wellspring of religious elements whose underlying premise was that the spiritual world is governed by laws that mirror natural laws and can be expressed in symbols. The spiritual world, like the natural world, is charged with energy. The ethereal properties of light can be understood to awaken the ability to experience the metaphysical. Inherent in this concept



2 | Sylvia Safdie, *The Guardian*, 2009. 3:26 min (continuous loops). Camera: Sylvia Safdie. Editing: Patrick Andrew Boivin, Sylvia Safdie. Sound design: Patrick Andrew Boivin. Format: HD. (Photo: Sylvia Safdie)

is the paradox of the abstract and concrete: the understanding that art cannot simply be derived from abstract universal laws but must also involve concrete particulars, for example, the illuminated dust inside an empty synagogue.²⁶

Kandinsky believed there was a powerful relationship between music and art and was determined to create a synaesthetic equivalence in his art, with lines, colours, and movements mirroring the harmony and rhythm of a musical composition. His objective was to paint music, to evoke the harmonies of a composer such as Mozart by using a “strife of colours” with “unexpected assaults ... broken chains, antitheses and contradictions, these make up our harmony.”²⁷ Safdie achieves this same synaesthesia through the use of moving images and goes one step further by selecting sounds to accompany each video, often collaborating with contemporary musicians. In *Dust* (2009), Malcolm Goldstein responds to the image with violin and voice improvisations. In *The Guardian*, the layering of sounds includes the *adhan*, the Muslim call to prayer that echoes four times a day in the synagogue, the names Mbark recites, natural sounds from inside the synagogue, and Jewish prayers from a Hiloula, an occasion when Moroccan Jews visit a sage’s grave, usually on the anniversary of his death, to light candles and pray for health and prosperity.²⁸ The video offers us a mix of Hebrew sounds, both those that are no longer heard in this particular synagogue and others currently natural to the space. The repetition of words and sounds increasingly reveals the



3 | Marisa Portolese, *Pietà*, 2010. Video projection, 15:26 min. (Photo: Marisa Portolese)

inner harmony of the images, bringing to the fore what Kandinsky refers to as the “unsuspected spiritual properties” of sound.²⁹

Safdie’s spiritual experiences, which have their sources in her personal journeys and philosophies, infuse her approach to Jewish ethnography and history. As she explains, “I do believe one thing, and I think it’s a fundamental thing, I think that we are all connected to the universal energy, and I think that we are all connected to collective energy. Some of us are more open to it than others.” For her, as for Kandinsky, inner meanings can be found in the subtle world of natural matter, where feelings and thoughts exist as material entities. As an artist connected to the energy of life and nature, Safdie crosses cultural and historical barriers. Despite the loss of the Jewish communities in Morocco, with only traces left – the cemeteries and synagogues, houses and streets, dust and fragments – she is intent on showing us that spiritual life, as she defines it, continues in these places.

Marisa Portolese: The Sympathetic Meaning of Relations

Pietà (2010) (Fig. 3), a passion portrait, consists of a fifteen-minute continuous loop video projection that shows the artist and her mother in a body of



water. Portolese is standing waist-deep and holding her reclining mother in her outstretched arms as the two look intensely into one another's eyes. A personal event precipitated its making: a 2007 visit to Italy with her mother to see her grandmother, who had broken her hip and been bedridden ever since, her hip inoperable because of her angina. Portolese's mother had been reluctant to make the journey by herself due to her complicated relationship with her mother. At sixteen, Portolese's mother married and went with her husband to Canada, rarely returning to visit her family. This was because, as Portolese explains: "In 1951, when my mother was five years old she was sent from her native province of Sardinia in Italy to live with her sick aunt in the southern province of Calabria. She never returned to live in her childhood home with her immediate family."³⁰

While Portolese was photographing her bedridden grandmother, she observed that her mother was taking care of her in the same way she must have taken care of her aunt many years ago. The artist realized that her mother had always played the role of caretaker and now needed to be taken care of herself. Portolese went in search of a prototype that evoked her mother's spirit as well as her relationship with her mother. She found it in Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1498–99). She had thought of *Pietà* "because it

is a compassion portrait of the Madonna holding Jesus right after he was crucified, the idea of martyrdom, the Catholic reference, it is all connected to my family lineage, but also to my own mother's experience." Michelangelo's *Pietà*, Portolese explains, "expresses the inner landscape between mother and child. In my adaptation, the roles are reversed, my mother is the one portrayed in a state of vulnerability, alluding to a maelstrom of the intense emotional imbalance she experienced as a child."³¹

Images of Jesus and Mary figured prominently in Portolese's upbringing, especially iconic images of the *Pietà*. Although no longer a practising Catholic, in this work she reclaims her Catholic identity, reshaping it with poetic licence and creativity. Recognizing Michelangelo as a source of ideas for insights into human nature, Portolese was intent on discovering the "inner sympathy of meaning,"³² as Kandinsky puts it, in his *Pietà* that could inspire her own work. Though previously she had always worked in photography, Portolese chose video because she wanted to create a photograph that could express very subtle motion. In the resulting diptych arrangement, water and sky, two separate elements, interact with one another through the bodies of the women. The brilliant light of the moon is particularly compelling, revealing a medley of colours: the silvery white sparkles and deep turquoise of the water, the dark greens of the fog and sky, the lush mauve and black of the women's nightgowns, and the fresh pink tones of their faces and arms. Portolese recognizes, as Kandinsky did in his discussion of the emotional effects of colour in *On the Spiritual in Art*, that feeling needs colour to become consummate and colour needs feeling to have inner meaning,³³ thus the colours in *Pietà* contribute to its emotional intensity.

In *Pietà* the viewer can experience some notion of transcendent reality. While Portolese interprets the religious as something out of the ordinary and spiritually inspired, this expression of a religious concept does not render the image at all religious. Rather, she remakes the religious narrative with poetic licence, introducing significant dimensions of everyday life and the perspective of personal experience.

At the same time, given its interpretative approach, *Pietà* has the potential for expanded meaning for those who understand the theology behind it. Portolese's narrative, following the spirit of Michelangelo's, is a symbolic representation that adds a fresh dimension to our analysis of a complex religious theme. Because Christ's body does not display signs of the Crucifixion, it has been suggested that the sculpture is not a depiction of death.³⁴ Instead, the calm face of Jesus may be interpreted as the acceptance of his abandonment. A comparison can be made with the serenity emanating from Portolese's mother, despite her abandonment as a child.

Portolese's religious symbolization offers inspiration for change. Like Kandinsky, she is determined to reaffirm the spiritual, to explore the idea of



4 | Marisa Portolese, *A Descent into the Maelstrom*, 2010, C-print, 102 × 127 cm.
(Photo: Marisa Portolese)

transcendence that involves an experience inseparable from the cosmos at large and includes a renewal of the self in defiance of a disturbing reality. The act of holding her mother in water refers to baptism, which in turn refers to renewal. This rite of passage involves the cleansing away of old attitudes and opening up to inner possibilities. Portolese's mother, devalued in Italy, can escape to another country where she can eventually become a strong person in her own right. With the help of her daughter, who has adopted the role of the all-embracing mother, she has the chance to gain the strength to redeem, recover, and change her identity.

Reflecting on the similarities between Kandinsky's ideas and Portolese's work, it is interesting to read Kenneth Berry's important insights in *The Paradox of Kandinsky's Abstract Representation* (2005).³⁵ Berry explains that Kandinsky is not just a painter but a visual poet who uses "imagination and poetic license to explore both ambiguity and paradox." The creative thinking disclosed in his art often involves transforming common interpretations. For example, the motif of horse and rider chosen for the cover of the *Der Blaue*

Reiter almanac of 1912 played a significant role in the symbolic world and iconography of Kandinsky's oeuvre. Taking as his source the images of St. George fighting a dragon that appear in Russian icons and folk paintings, he used this motif as an allegory of artistic struggle and the victory of the spirit. Kandinsky also reshaped his ethnographic experiences in order to explore his concept of an all-encompassing universal aesthetic experience. The 1889 journey transported him beyond time and space into a primal landscape, "absorbing myself in my surroundings and in my own self."³⁶

Portolese similarly uses the imagery of the *Pietà*, baptism, her experience with her Italian family, her contact with Michelangelo's work, and a cosmic landscape of water and sky to reach into her inner being and that of her mother. It is significant in this respect that in *Pietà* Portolese and her mother evoke a female psyche and sexuality. This can be seen as profane, given the sensuous contact of mother and daughter and the voluptuous qualities of their bodies in the wet nightgowns, and at the same time as sacred, their expressions, movements, and gestures having been choreographed to mirror Catholic images of idealized femininity. In the dark night, under a cloudy sky and partial moon, mother and daughter seem to be in a trance, caught in a state of contemplation of the interior world. Implicit in this dreamlike image of sensuous forms straining to remain motionless is the notion that redemption requires corporeal sacrifice and suffering.

Portolese reveals how dream-work can be prospective, as well as retrospective, in the working through of past experiences. A companion photograph that hung in the next room of the gallery, *A Descent into the Maelstrom* (Fig. 4), represents the emotional and spiritual survival that is the aftermath of *Pietà*. The title comes from a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, in which a man recounts his survival of shipwreck and a whirlpool.³⁷ In *A Descent into the Maelstrom*, the night is over, dawn has come, and mother and daughter have emerged from the water and rest under a willow tree by the river's bank. Their roles are now reversed, with the mother watching over her daughter. Portolese's body is heavy and limp, having taken on the burden of her mother's grief at being sacrificed, as Christ is shown to have done in paintings of the Descent from the Cross. The image is hopeful in that both have survived the past and can now simultaneously play the roles of mother and daughter in the present and future, communicating and connecting with one another.

Marielle Nitoslawska: Sensations of Sacred Space

Marielle Nitoslawska's *Possible Movements* (2010) is a layered cinematic exploration of a religious space, the Chapel of the Sisters of Charity,



5 | Marielle Nitoslawska, *Possible Movements*, 2010. Conception and supervising: Marielle Nitoslawska. Digital animation and stereoscopic imaging: Alison Reiko Loader. Compositing design: Suzie Synnott. Management and curating: Jane Tingley. Video screen detail. (Photo: Marielle Nitoslawska)

commonly known as the Grey Nuns, which is the centrepiece of the Roman Catholic community's Mother House in Montreal.³⁸ The innermost strata contained a virtual architectural model of the chapel, built in 1879 by Victor Bourgeau, created by scanning various materials, including the original plans and drawings as well as renovation plans. An assortment of photographs and films were then added, such as new films and archival footage found at the Cinémathèque québécoise. The resultant stereoscopic projections made it possible to see multiple representations of the chapel in simultaneous time.

The architectural model, including cross sections, interiors, and exteriors, was entered into the computer and wire meshing was used to connect the many plans and drawings (Fig. 5). The lines were then programmed to move, fall apart into fractals, and fly away. In this way the spatial infrastructure of the building was transformed, suggesting the spiritual and otherworldly atmosphere of a church through the magical appearance and disappearance

of the lines as well as the movements of the photographs and films of the building's interior and the people occupying the space.

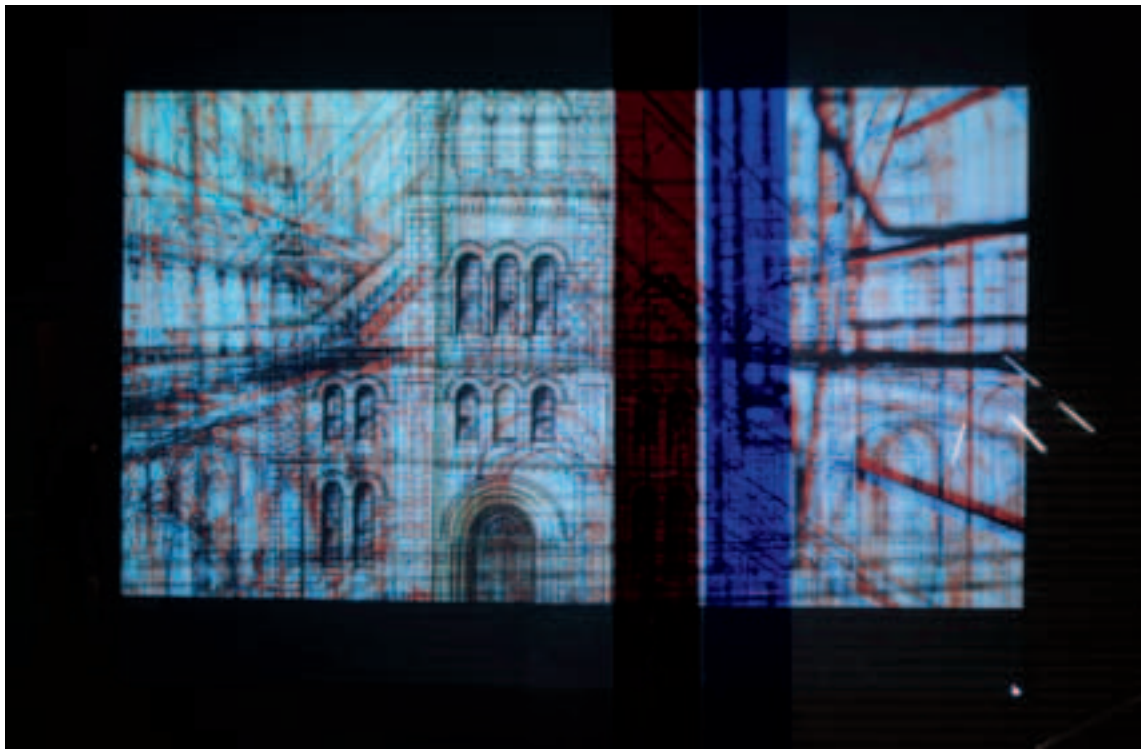
The first time Nitoslawska walked into the chapel, she said, "I would like to fly around in this space."³⁹ These moving images and forms not only allowed her to achieve her desire but also uncovered what she refers to as the "fourth dimension," based on Russian filmmaker and master of montage Sergei Eisenstein's concept of the cinematic overtone that occurs when space and time are unified in the virtual reality of a screen projection.⁴⁰ Using lines, film animations, colour, and light, Nitoslawska hoped to convey the transcendental experience that can occur in religious and sacred spaces.

The sensations Nitoslawska sought to project in her artistic interpretation of the chapel are similar to the emotions Kandinsky felt upon entering a church and was determined to express in his paintings. Kuspit points out: "it was an artistic experience of religion and a religious experience of art – a sense of the easy and seamless merger of religious and artistic experience, their inevitable reciprocity."⁴¹ Kuspit emphasizes that the bright and intricate colours in the interiors of the churches and chapels were what Kandinsky appreciated and hoped to evoke in his works. For him, the convergence of these colours with feelings of inner life fused sense and spiritual experience.

The chromatic intensity in the Grey Nuns chapel is manifested in the red and blue of the stereoscopic image, best seen through glasses available at the exhibition. This technique, used in photography in the 1850s, was developed for film in 1920 by Sergei Eisenstein,⁴² who used two films, one painted red and the other blue (or green), projected simultaneously to create a sense of three-dimensional images. In Nitoslawska's screen projections the resulting optical uneasiness stemming from the contradiction between the strangely illuminated images and the empty surrounding space creates a dreamlike phenomenon rich with evanescent light and colour.

The interface between colour and line and the abstraction of a three-dimensional space on a flat screen is also in keeping with Kandinsky's spiritual thinking. Kandinsky describes exactly this in *On the Spiritual in Art* when he discusses the importance of "using the material plane as a space of three dimensions in order to create an ideal plane" through line and colour. He writes: "The thinness or thickness of a line, the placing of the form on the surface, the overlaying of one form on another may be quoted as examples of artistic means that may be employed. Similar possibilities are offered by colour which, when rightly used can advance or retreat, and can make of the picture a living thing, and so achieve an artistic expansion of space."⁴³

As if following Kandinsky's advice, Nitoslawska produced a multilayered abstraction of the chapel that was linear and colouristic. The layers of different images suggest not only the aura of this sacred place but also the



6 | Marielle Nitoslawska, *Possible Movements*, 2010. Conception and supervising: Marielle Nitoslawska. Digital animation and stereoscopic imaging: Alison Reiko Loader. Compositing design: Suzie Synnott. Management and curating: Jane Tingley. Video screen detail. (Photo: Marielle Nitoslawska)

meta-narrative that describes the history of the Grey Nuns and their role in Quebec culture. The emphasis on movement also partakes of Kandinsky's interest in adapting forms to bring forth "their motion in the picture, their inclination to material or abstract, their mutual relations, either individually or as parts of a whole."⁴⁴ The first of the seven screens accomplishes this through a cubist-like geometric expression of the various architectural plans. The next four screens refer to the history of the Grey Nuns and the effect of the Quiet Revolution, which is represented abstractly, as when the chapel benches where people are sitting dissolve into space. The last two screens are more specifically an homage to the Grey Nuns. Here the nuns are shown spinning, as if fully involved with their bodily movements and their spirit, in the church service (Fig. 6). The paintings of the chapel are also spinning, evoking the transcendence of the space as well as the fact that the chapel is trapped in history, referring particularly to the gender roles imposed on the nuns.

7 | Sarindar Dhaliwal. *Mother with Family*, 2010, Chromira print, 35.56 × 139.7 cm. *Olive, Almond & Mustard Series* (2010). (Photo: Sarindar Dhaliwal)



In dealing with the Grey Nuns, Nitoslawska felt “the weight and burden of this history.” She started to work on the Grey Nuns project years ago, when she became aware that their culture and even their space were disappearing. The building has already become part of the past, although there is one last group of nuns still inhabiting the space before Concordia University claims it for university use. The artist’s ethnographic viewpoint is similar to Kandinsky’s, who immersed himself in the visual evidence of religious culture during his journey to Russia’s interior. While not a Christian in the sense of adhering to traditional rituals and practices, Kandinsky was inspired by what he witnessed and keenly interested in theosophy.⁴⁵ His aim was to depict a mystical, transcendent realm that transmitted his personal experience of spirituality. In the same vein Nitoslawska has trouble identifying with the structure of the Catholic Church, although she was brought up Catholic, considers herself to be of Judeo-Christian heritage, and continues to associate with that heritage.

Nitoslawska’s awareness of her own spirituality, like Kandinsky’s, was affected by ethnographic experiences. As a child growing up in Montreal she rejected her Polish heritage, as many children of immigrants do. In 1977, however, she moved to Poland and stayed for ten years, studying at the Polish National Film School in Lodz. It was there that she started to make what are now referred to as experimental ethnographic films: “We spent years going around the Polish countryside and filming the last generation of potters and naive artisans ... I always thought that if I wasn’t a filmmaker then I could have maybe been an anthropologist. I’m always interested in disappearing cultures.”



Despite her dedication to “disappearing cultures,” Nitoslawska understands, as Hal Foster has emphasized in his writing on the “artist-ethnographer,” that engaging with anthropological ideals or attempting to have a collaborative relationship in which the artist recreates the “otherness” of a particular society is not really possible.⁴⁶ Her ethnographic intervention could not pretend to replicate the intimacy of the Grey Nuns community but this exhibition allows viewers to experience a work of art that is a response to the intersection of religion and history in the Grey Nuns chapel. The chapel appears as an illusion, with transcendent plastic symbols of a once-inhabited religious world. Within this perceptual semblance is the memory of a sacred place that is no longer what it was throughout its long history.

Sarindar Dhaliwal: Traditional Reconnections in a Journey Home

In 1956, when Sarindar Dhaliwal was three, her family moved from Birbansian, a village in India’s Punjab, to Southall, a borough of London,⁴⁷ as part of an influx of Sikh Punjabis brought about through a friendship with a British Indian Army office during the Second World War. Dhaliwal grew up in Southall and was fifteen when her family decided to immigrate to Canada.⁴⁸

Olive, Almond & Mustard ... (2010) is Dhaliwal’s first film/video projection after years working in painting, photography, and multimedia installations.⁴⁹ A narrative without dialogue, the work is a triptych of still and moving images accompanied by popular English and Punjabi songs. The artist wished to evoke the people and places she knew growing up in Southall and others

8 | Sarindar Dhaliwal,
Mother and Child:
Dissonance, 2009,
 Chromira print, 35.56 ×
 180.34 cm. *Olive, Almond*
& Mustard Series (2010).
 (Photo: Sarindar Dhaliwal)



she rediscovered as an adult when she returned to Birbansian for the first time in 2002.

The film/video projection begins with grey images of Dhaliwal's childhood environment in Southall: rooftops, factory chimneys billowing smoke, streetscapes, children playing, and a fast-moving city bus. As the dull images of Southall stream across the screen, grey clouds of factory smoke turn vibrant yellow, orange, green, pink, and purple. They give way to more images of Southall, this time shops, trains, railroad stations, and row houses. Finally, a diaphanous red curtain closes on a formal family picture of Dhaliwal as a child, her siblings, and her mother (Fig. 7). Folds of deep red fabric spread across the screen to suggest that at this juncture in the story a new chapter is beginning, one marked by the ethnic things and practices that characterized Dhaliwal's home life: a bottle of bright orange olive oil, multicoloured jars of spices and preserves on shelves, cooking pots in a shower stall, and intricately embroidered cloth.

As the images unfold, intermittent and abstract expressions of colour evoke timeless space. While Dhaliwal's colours are initially attached to or contained in the objects of her home, they soon become a subjective interpretation of her vision of reality by also appearing to exist independently. The qualities of the domestic objects, however, remain important and are reminiscent of Kandinsky's correlation of the inner power of art with the traditional material culture of the home. Inspired by the colours and ornaments of the peasant houses he saw during his ethnographic expedition, he wrote: "I shall never forget the great wooden houses ... In these magical houses I experienced something I have never encountered again since. They taught me to move within the picture, to live in the picture."⁵⁰ Kandinsky's encounter with the objects and spaces of these houses was instrumental in his discovery of the ideals of a transcendent aesthetics.



For Dhaliwal, the affinity of aesthetics and spiritual awareness is not so straightforward. Enamel kitchenware placed around the drain of a shower stall represents her mother's preparations for washing Dhaliwal's hair. Soon we see a young girl performing the role of Dhaliwal having her hair washed and braided. She is clearly unhappy (Fig. 8). Dhaliwal says that her mother washed her and her sister's hair with yogurt, and afterwards applied olive oil to the long tresses. In the video we see the yogurt dripping down the girl's legs and the look of anguish on her face as her mother scrubs her hair and the stinging yogurt finds its way into her eyes. Dhaliwal recalls how the girls at school refused to play with her and her sister because their hair was greasy and smelly. As a child her insecurities were shaped by her feelings of not being wanted by the English society around her and of never seeing herself reflected in that world of beauty.

Dhaliwal's mother would say, "You can't do that ... We don't want you to," and Dhaliwal would ask, "Why?" and her mother would tell her, "We don't want you to do that." At an early age she figured out that the "we" her mother spoke of was not her or her mother, but the Punjabi community, made up of a tightly knit network of kinship ties. She realized that this community, this kinship, was never going to let her do what she wanted, that she would always be dominated by the "we." Her mother's answers consistently invoked Sikhism, the monotheistic religion of the rural people of Punjab, which stresses the importance of maintaining strong family connections and engaging in the practices of everyday life.⁵¹ Kinship and family are considered to be the best institution for fulfilling the Sikh ideal of contributing to the development of society.

When Dhaliwal turned 50 she recognized that all her efforts in life came down to pulling away from her mother and it was time to return to her place of origin in Birbansian to affirm her connection to her late mother

and to better understand herself. Dhaliwal began to realize that she admired her mother's cultural values, kindness, and generosity. In *Olive, Almond & Mustard* ... she comes to terms with her self-conscious ethnicity and her avoidance of the past, which was larger than herself.

Because Dhaliwal's video is a narrative of return, she inserts elements of Sikh religious practice into its sequence of images, although she is not religious herself. In Sikhism, everyday objects are imbued with religious significance or, put another way, "sacred" objects have entered into everyday practice. These objects are more than symbols: they are articles of faith that collectively form the external identity of the devotee's commitment to the *Sikh Rehni* (Way of Life).⁵² They include *kesh*, uncut hair that is considered, like everything else, to be a gift from God; the *kanga*, a wooden comb that indicates cleanliness and tidiness; and *kara*, an iron bracelet that serves as a reminder to follow the morals that are at the heart of Sikh faith.

The video shows us close-ups of women's hair, combs, and bracelets, and later we see the long flowing hair of a young man, who brushes it well before fastening it into a bun and hiding it from sight under his turban. The sense we have of travelling back in time and space is accentuated by the flickering of the images and the view from a window of a fast-moving train. The train slows and now we see dimly lit countryside and then, in the centre frame, a vivid farmland scene in which a traditionally dressed woman is walking away from the viewer, a silver pail on her head and one in her hand. The woman in the landscape is simultaneously Dhaliwal's mother, who washed her hair with yogurt, and a source of experience, knowledge, and belief.

Another similarity between Kandinsky and Dhaliwal emerges in considering the final sequence of the video. Both Kandinsky's father and Dhaliwal's mother conveyed to their children an original spirituality associated with traditional life. This spirituality linked Kandinsky to his father's childhood in Kyakhta, a Siberian town in the Republic of Buryatia near the Russian-Mongolian border.⁵³ One senses that Dhaliwal, following her visit to her ancestral village and having created this ode to her mother, has discovered peace, happiness, freedom, and independence in the world of her imagination, where vivid colours awaken an affiliation with her family life and the landscape of her forebears.

Conclusion

In "Revisiting the Spiritual in Art," Donald Kuspit suggests "that the future for a spiritual art looks bleak ... The question today is where are the few artists who are ready and willing to reaffirm the spiritual, and, more crucially, who can convince us that their art does so – that it is a beacon of transcendence in dark materialistic times."⁵⁴

This essay shows that the video works of Sylvia Safdie, Marisa Portolese, Marielle Nitoslawska, and Sarindar Dhaliwal are just such beacons. Coming from different religious backgrounds and despite not adhering to traditional religious practices or beliefs, they deploy a variety of techniques to interweave religious, cultural, and secular threads. As Kandinsky did before them, they use the visual motifs of religion, including works of art, buildings, objects, and the natural world, as catalysts for reinvigorating a personal sense of spirituality. Simultaneously, a reservoir of cultural memories and religious knowledge sustains and renews their attitudes. Their situations can be compared to Kandinsky's memories of his childhood and the ethnographic expedition he undertook as a young man.

At the same time, these artists, like Kandinsky, do not express a straightforward or easy understanding of spirituality or of their perceptions of the world. The content and context of these video works have no simple alignment with particular religious beliefs. Significantly, the interconnections, interdependence, and diversity of these works suggest complex worldviews and beliefs.⁵⁵ Rather than establishing a sense of exclusivity or separation, their works evoke a contemporary ethnicity and spirituality that tends toward a pluralistic universalism. Each video, in effect an ethnic and aesthetic search for self-definition, offers a textured sense of being that allows the viewer to participate in another person's culture and religion. While the videos show individualism, they also recognize that parallels affect individuals across a religious and cultural spectrum.

Safdie, Portolese, Nitoslawska, and Dhaliwal have successfully recovered and revitalized cultural and religious resources from different traditions into visual dialogues that generate new perspectives. Portolese and Dhaliwal initiate this spiritual conversation through connecting with their mothers, recuperating past narratives, and creating new visions. Safdie suggests an interplay between Jewish and Moslem religious and cultural traditions that preserves the richness of a universal spirituality. Nitoslawska creatively recreates the liturgical architecture of the Grey Nuns community in a way that sustains an informed knowledge of its historical texts and religious rituals.

Drawing attention to the fictive nature of their videos, these artists encourage the viewer to participate in the production of meaning. Although the photographic reality of the images in these videos is quite different from Kandinsky's abstractions, the autobiographical references, self-reflections, expressions of interiority, and abstract manipulations of images capture what Kandinsky called "the all-important spark of inner life."⁵⁶ The interiority central to the images they chose occurs through de-emphasizing the realism of the works. This is true of Safdie's fragments of dust, the incongruous pose of Portolese and her mother, the traces of Nitoslawska's flying lines,

and Dhaliwal's bursts of colour, to mention only a few effects that serve as spiritual metaphors. This abstraction is not merely descriptive of how ethnic and religious connections are experienced but, more importantly, of how they are activated in the artist and relayed to the viewer.

While neither participating in religious rituals and ceremonies nor adhering to traditional religious beliefs, these four artists recognize that something outside their essential being and immediate consciousness requires an effort of self-definition through art. Their autobiographical searching, like Kandinsky's spiritual quest, focuses on mysterious and inviting revelations sourced in ethnic ties and traditions and recollections of personal identity. The interface between religion and ethnicity consists of ever-changing relationships embedded in different identities, diverse cultural forms, and distinct geographies. For these Canadian artists, spiritual experience emanates from acts of memory and retrospection associated with the discovery of their pasts via the lands and people of Morocco, Italy, Poland, Quebec, and India.

NOTES

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- 2 Clement GREENBERG, "Our Period Style," *Partisan Review* 11 (November 1949): 1138.
- 3 GREENBERG, "Modernist Painting," in *The New Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (1966; rev. ed., New York: Dutton Paperback, 1973), 101-102.
- 4 Donald KUSPIT, "Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art," lecture delivered in 2001 and 2003. *Blackbird: an online journal of literature and the arts* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2003). Accessed 5 Jan. 2011, http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v2n1/gallery/kuspit_d/reconsidering.htm
- 5 GREENBERG, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, vol. 2, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 233.
- 6 Jürgen HABERMAS, "Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25 (2008): 17-29; *Notes on a Post-Secular Society* (18 June 2008). Accessed 27 June 2011, <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1714.html>. See also Alessandro FERRARA, "The Separation of Religion and Politics in a Post-Secular Society," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 35 (2009): 77-92; Hent DE VRIES and Lawrence E. SULLIVAN, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); Rosi BRAIDOTTI, "In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism," *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 (2008): 1-24; James K.A. SMITH, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004). For a countervailing Canadian philosopher's perspective, see Charles TAYLOR, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 7 HABERMAS, *Notes on a Post-Secular Society*, 2.

- 8 Jacques DERRIDA, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 59.
- 9 Paul RICOEUR, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also, John WALL, *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 10 Julia KRISTEVA, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 17.
- 11 See Loren LERNER, "Rejection and Renewal: Art and Religion in Canada (1926–2010)," in this issue.
- 12 For an analysis of some exhibitions before 2005 see Diane APOSTOLOS-CAPPADONA, "Shattering the Foundations: Museums and Contemporary Religious Art," *American Arts Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 27–35.
- 13 Maurice TUCHMAN, ed., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986).
- 14 See, for example, Christian ECKART, Eleanor HEARTNEY, Harry PHILBRICK, Osvaldo ROMBERG and Ori SOLTES, *Faith: The Impact of Judeo-Christian Religion on Art at the Millennium* (Ridgefield, CT: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000); Barbara MATILSKY and Carolyn WOOD, *Five Artists Five Faiths: Spirituality in Contemporary Art* (Chapel Hill: Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2004); Wayne ROOSA and Patricia C. PONGRACZ, *The Next Generation: Contemporary Expressions of Faith* (New York: Museum of Biblical Art and Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005); John BALDESSARI and Meg CRANSTON, *100 Artists See God* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2004); Edwin CARELS, Bart DE BAERE, Liliane DE WACHTER, Dieter ROELSTRAETE and Grant WATSON, *Al het vaststaande verdamt : vijf reflecties over materialistische spiritualiteit in de hedendaagse kunst / All That is Solid Melts into Air: Five Reflections on Materialist Spirituality in Contemporary Art* (Tielt, Belgium: Lannoo, 2009).
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- 18 Christopher SHORT, *The Art Theory of Wassily Kandinsky: The Quest for Synthesis* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

- 19 Peg WEISS, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). See also, “Kandinsky and ‘Old Russia’: An Ethnographic Exploration,” in *Syracuse Scholar* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 43–62; “Kandinsky and ‘Old Russia’: An Ethnographic Exploration” (an expanded version of the previous essay), in Gabriel WEISBERG and Laurinda DIXON with Antje Bullmann LEMKE, eds., *The Documented Image: Visions in Art History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 187–222.
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- 21 WEISS, “Kandinsky and ‘Old Russia’: An Ethnographic Exploration.”
- 22 Hal FOSTER, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 170–203.
- 23 Sylvia Safdie, interview with the author, 21 Oct. 2011. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the artist are from this interview.
- 24 Susanne K. LANGER, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 94–95.
- 25 KUSPIT, “Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art.”
- 26 KANDINSKY, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 6.
- 27 LANGER, *Feeling and Form*, 86.
- 28 Issachar BEN-AMI, *Saint Veneration among the Jews of Morocco* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).
- 29 KANDINSKY, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 31.
- 30 Marisa Portolese, interview with the author, 30 Sept. 2010.
- 31 Eric SIMON, “Interview with Marisa Portolese,” *Camera Obscura* (3 Dec. 2010). Accessed 26 Sept. 2012, <http://www.co-mag.net/marisa-portolese/>
- 32 KANDINSKY, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, xxxi.
- 33 Ibid., 70–82.
- 34 Romy HILLOOWALA and Jerome OREMLAND, “The St. Peter’s Pietà: A Madonna and Child? An Anatomical and Psychological Reevaluation,” *Leonardo* 20, no. 1 (1987): 87–92; Joanna E. ZIEGLER, “Michelangelo and the Medieval Pietà: The Sculpture of Devotion or the Art of Sculpture?” *Gesta* 34, no. 1 (1995): 28–36.
- 35 Kenneth BERRY, “The Paradox of Kandinsky’s Abstract Representation,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 99–104.
- 36 KANDINSKY, “Reminiscences/Three Pictures,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, 368.
- 37 Edgar Allan POE’s “A Descent into the Maelstrom” first appeared in the May 1841 edition of *Graham’s Magazine*. Reprinted edition in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1912), available on line from University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center. Accessed 5 Jan. 2011, <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=PoeDesc.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all>
- 38 In 2010 the Possible Movements Lab, based at the Hexagram Institute in Concordia University, Faculty of Fine Arts, exhibited seven stereoscopic projections of the chapel at the Grey Nuns Mother House, Montreal, in the York Corridor Vitrines of Concordia University’s FOFA Gallery. Marielle Nitoslawska (conception and supervising); Alison Reiko Loader (stereoscopy and digital imaging); Suzie Synnott (compositing); and Jane Tingley (management and curation).

- 39 Marielle Nitoslawska, interview with the author, 27 Sept. 2010. All quotations from the artist are drawn from this interview.
- 40 David BORDWELL, *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 41 KUSPIT, "Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art."
- 42 John B. KUIPER, "Cinematic Expression: A Look at Eisenstein's Silent Montage," *Art Journal* 22, no. 1 (Autumn 1962): 34, 36–39.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid., 65.
- 45 Sixten RINGBOM, "Art in 'The Epoch of the Great Spiritual': Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966): 386–418; Rose-Carol WASHTON LONG, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980).
- 46 FOSTER, "The Artist as Ethnographer."
- 47 Brian Keith AXEL, *The Nation's Tortured Body: Violence, Representation, and the Formation of a Sikh "Diaspora"* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001). Chapter 4, "Glassy Junction," 158–96, about the Sikh diaspora and the British nation-state, considers the experiences of the Sikh community in the Southall section of London.
- 48 Sarindar Dhaliwal, interview with the author, 6 Nov. 2010. Unless otherwise noted all background information on the artist was obtained during this interview.
- 49 This video was on view at the Galerie d'Este in Montreal in October 2010.
- 50 Kandinsky, quoted in Peg WEISS, *Kandinsky and Old Russia*, 82–83.
- 51 Khushwant SINGH, *The Illustrated History of The Sikhs* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 52 Daljeet SINGH and Kharak SINGH, "Sikh Way of Life." Accessed 5 Jan. 2011, <http://www.allaboutsikhs.com/sikh-calendar/sikh-way-of-life.html>
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- 54 KUSPIT, "Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art."
- 55 SHORT, *The Art Theory of Wassily Kandinsky*, 193–97.
- 56 KANDINSKY, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 6.

Du spirituel dans l'art de Wassily Kandinsky et les vidéos de Sylvia Safdie, Marisa Portolese, Marielle Nitoslawska et Sarindar Dhaliwal

LOREN LERNER

En 1949, le critique d'art Clement Greenberg a catégoriquement éjecté la religion du modernisme, déclarant que l'art ne devait pas être « gonflé par un contenu illégitime – aucunes certitudes religieuses, mystiques ou politiques ». Plus récemment, comme l'historien de l'art et critique Donald Kuspit l'a maintes fois répété, la théorie de la peinture moderniste de Greenberg a été la phase finale de la « déspiritualisation » de l'art en le réduisant entièrement à l'état de « médium matériel ». Bien qu'aujourd'hui peu d'artistes occidentaux affirment explicitement leur adhésion à des croyances religieuses ou à des affiliations dénominationnelles, il y a une résurgence du religieux dans l'art contemporain. Le philosophe et sociologue allemand Jürgen Habermas a adopté le terme « société post-séculière » pour signifier le retour aux liens religieux qui n'ont cessé de se briser de façon dramatique après la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. Le présent essai examine un ensemble d'idées qui ont accompagné leur retour actuel au regard du texte clé de Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), *Du spirituel dans l'art* (1911). Ce peintre et philosophe d'origine russe, influencé par son éducation chrétienne orthodoxe et les écrits théosophiques, a utilisé des éléments iconographiques et religieux abstraits pour créer de nouvelles perceptions de la couleur, de la musique et des formes abstraites. De nombreuses publications sur Kandinsky, ainsi que de récents écrits sur les artistes contemporains et la religion, ont offert des moyens, directs et indirects, d'interpréter et d'appliquer les écrits de Kandinsky sur l'art. Cela comprend la perception de Kandinsky que l'artiste est capable de transformer l'individu et la société et que les développements scientifiques peuvent contribuer à de nouvelles découvertes et façons de connaître la réalité, ainsi que sa théorie selon laquelle les communications entre l'artiste et le spectateur mettent en jeu les sens et l'esprit. Peg Weiss, auteur de *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (1995), a une approche différente. Selon elle, les idées les plus profondes de Kandinsky concernant le pouvoir spirituel de l'art se sont développées au cours des voyages qu'il a entrepris dans la province de Vologda, au nord-ouest de la Russie, après ses études en droit, en économie et en ethnographie à l'université de Moscou. La méthodologie ethnographique qui a conduit à ces découvertes a trouvé un écho dans la pratique artistique contemporaine. Dans *Return of the Real*

(1996), Hal Foster consacre un chapitre à « l'artiste en tant qu'ethnographe ». Considérant les objectifs et les pratiques des récents mouvements artistiques, Foster explore ce qu'il appelle « le tour ethnographique » depuis les années soixante. En rapport avec les déclarations de Kandinsky dans *Du spirituel dans l'art* et son expérience d'ethnographe et de guide, le présent essai examine comment quatre artistes canadiennes, Sylvia Safdie (n. 1942), Marisa Portolese (n. 1969), Marielle Nitoslawska (n. 1953) et Sarindar Dhaliwal (n. 1953), qu'on peut, d'une certaine manière, comparer à Kandinsky, comprennent l'art comme une activité spirituelle. Pour chacune, différents lieux – que ce soit le Moyen Orient pour Safdie, l'Italie pour Portolese, le Québec pour Nitoslawska ou l'Inde, pour Dhaliwal – ont contribué à évoquer la « nécessité intérieure » de l'expérience spirituelle. Dans la série de vidéos marocaines de Safdie, créée en 2009, nous voyons des images de cimetières et de synagogues, l'entrée d'un quartier juif et des portraits et figures des gens qui habitent présentement ces espaces. Puisque, en tant que juive, Safdie n'a pu visiter la Syrie, où sa famille a vécu dans une communauté aussi dynamique qu'au Maroc, ce pays est devenu le catalyseur qui lui a permis de penser à son propre lieu d'origine et à ce qui arrive lorsqu'une société n'habite plus le lieu où elle a vécu pendant plusieurs années. Dans *Pietà* (2010), une vidéo en boucle d'une durée de 15 minutes qui montre l'artiste et sa mère dans l'eau, Portolese utilise l'imagerie de la Pietà, le baptême, son expérience au sein de sa famille italienne, ses contacts avec l'œuvre de Michel-Ange et un paysage cosmique d'eau et de ciel pour atteindre son être intérieur et celui de sa mère. Conçue et supervisée par Marielle Nitoslawska, l'exploration cinématographique *Possible Movements* (2010) consiste en couches superposées de dessins d'architecte de la chapelle des Sœurs Grises, construite en 1879 par Victor Bourgeau, et d'images photographiques projetés sur des écrans gigantesques. Les couches d'images différentes suggèrent non seulement l'aura de ce lieu sacré, mais aussi le métarécit qui décrit l'histoire des Sœurs Grises et leur rôle dans la culture québécoise. *Olive, Almond & Mustard ...* (2010), film/vidéo projection par Dhaliwal, est un triptyque d'images fixes ou en mouvement accompagnées de chansons populaires en anglais et en punjabi. Dhaliwal a souhaité évoquer les gens et les lieux qu'elle a connus durant sa jeunesse à Southall, un borough de Londres, et d'autres qu'elle a découverts alors qu'adulte, elle est retournée à Birbansian, village du Panjab indien, pour la première fois en 2002. Parce que la vidéo est un récit du retour, elle y insère des éléments des pratiques religieuses sikhes pour affirmer sa relation avec sa mère décédée et pour mieux se connaître elle-même.

Traduction : Élise Bonnette