

A STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY
IN CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ART
AND FOUNDATIONS FUNDING

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

This study traces the emergence and defines the role of spirituality in the contemporary visual arts and examines and proposes possibilities for nurturing that role through philanthropic foundations within the context of postmodern American culture. The study describes the issues and changing attitudes regarding spirituality in art within the artworld and the philanthropic community. Extensively analyzing the work of contemporary artist Bill Viola (b. 1951), the study examines the references to the sublime and spirituality in his work and their connections with postmodern theory. The contemporary discourse of the sublime, championed by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998), serves as a structural grounding for spirituality in a postmodern context.

Recommendations and subsequent implications are made for combining contemporary research, writings, and artistic creations that are spiritually centered in order to understand the potential impact of the growing phenomenon of spirituality in art. The study identifies issues and problems and poses new possibilities for substantively supporting, encouraging dialogue, and disseminating information about spirituality in art that enables it to thrive in postmodern American culture.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“The crisis today in the industrialized world is a crisis of the inner life, not of the outer world.” (Viola, 1995, p. 256)

We are bombarded with information in today’s postmodern society, so much so that the comprehension and assimilation of such a barrage of material creates a void, a gulf where the spirit, core, and idea of self are lost. Images become so prevalent that pastiche and simulacra have transformed reality, interpretations of truth, and our overall views of the world. The pervasiveness of capitalism and its technological advancements in the United States provides a fertile environment not only for the accumulation and distribution of products but also for the accumulation and distribution of information. One scenario depicts us as nodes within this late-capitalist system, immersed in a deconstructive postmodernism that creates an anti-worldview where concepts of God, self, meaning, and purpose are lost and humans are left adrift, unmoored (Rifkin, 2000). Little room and less encouragement are left for creative exploration and artistic contemplation, and all eyes are on the bottom line: the return on investment, quarterly projections, consumer confidence, marketability, market stability, and on through an endless list. In this

scenario, the information age of late capitalism is a time when artistic investigation has been usurped by the capitalist mindset, and a nihilistic postmodernism prevails (Malpas, 2005).

Changes are afoot, however, and artists are taking a stand, responding to the negative aspects of a deconstructive and, in many senses, self-destructive postmodernism: nihilism, the loss of self, a world devoid of meaning — all maladies, often associated, in essence, with the loss of the spiritual. Over the past two decades, many artists have focused their energies, their artistic endeavors, and their passions on reconstructions of the spiritual, moving toward notions of the sublime and the transcendent in myriad creations. In an overarching sense, this renewed interest signals a turning point where innovative ideas about spirituality (undergirded by concepts of the sublime and transcendent) are altering the landscape of scholarly discourse: i.e., the vital dialogue of research, theory, exhibitions, and art criticism.

With a resurgence of interest in spirituality in the visual arts, and a marked quest to participate in and relate through the sublime, many contemporary artists are venturing into uncharted territory. Support for these artists is ongoing, and growing, and in the artworld establishment, their work is increasingly respected and well funded by a host of philanthropic individuals and foundations. Yet it is still necessary to forge purposeful connections between philanthropic foundations and the proliferation of artistic interest in spirituality in the United States. Only when a dialogue is fostered through broadly accessible (and so, generally speaking, well-established) channels, and the rich essence of the spiritual and the sublime is openly acknowledged, will the quest for greater awareness

of the transformative and reconstructive nature of the spiritual in art be better understood, and supported.

Exhibitions such as the Los Angeles County Museum's *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (November 1986); the Deutsche Guggenheim's *On the Sublime: Mark Rothko, Yves Klein, James Turrell*, in Berlin (July 2001); the City Gallery at Waterfront Park's *Thresholds: Expressions of Art & Spiritual Art*, in Charleston, South Carolina (December 2003); and the Houston Contemporary Arts Museum's *The Inward Eye: Transcendence in Contemporary Art* (December 2001) have raised awareness regarding the plurality of spiritual expressions and embraced the notion of the sublime in contemporary art. Yet these are just a few examples of the artworld's foray into the spiritual in recent years. These exhibitions, groundbreaking as they are, only begin to address the melding of spirituality and art that is gaining momentum at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Such exhibitions do, however, bring to light modern and postmodern avant-garde artworks and artists engaged with the spiritual and the transcendent. These artists and their works might be seen as reflecting the discussions of postmodernism formulated by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998) with his interest in avant-garde art and his use of aesthetics in articulating his theory of postmodernism. In a concise definition of postmodern aesthetics that incorporates the idea of the sublime, Lyotard stated:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not

in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81)

Lyotard defines postmodernism as combating the Enlightenment ideals of truth and knowledge, which he terms metanarratives. Metanarratives are concepts that keep society in check (Truth, God, Self), and to Lyotard the term *postmodern* involves an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1979/1984, p. xxiv). He was concerned less with the scope of these grand stories, these modern phenomena, than with the way they attempt or claim to substantiate Reason in a universal sense (Smith, 2005). Lyotard, in turning away from the metanarrative, looks instead for new, innovative, and challenging ways to approach philosophical theories. The various movements and styles of art provide that very approach, as the diverse landscape of the artworld over the last fifty years presents an array of examples to extend Lyotard’s notion of postmodernism with discussions of the avant-garde and the sublime.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to trace the emergence and define the role of spirituality in the contemporary visual arts and to examine and propose possibilities for nurturing that role through philanthropic foundations within the context of postmodern American culture. Specifically, the study will describe the issues and changing attitudes regarding spirituality in art within the artworld and within the context of the philanthropic community. By extensively analyzing the work of contemporary artist Bill Viola (b.1951), the study will examine and evaluate the sublime and spirituality in art within the context of postmodern theory. The contemporary discourse of the sublime,

championed by Jean-François Lyotard, will serve as a structural grounding for spirituality in a postmodern context. Recommendations will be made for combining contemporary research, writings, and artistic creations that are spiritually centered in order to understand the potential impact of the growing phenomenon of spirituality in art. The goal is to identify issues and problems and to pose new possibilities for substantively supporting, encouraging dialogue, and disseminating information about spirituality in art that will enable it to thrive in postmodern American culture.

The research design for this dissertation is what contemporary qualitative researchers define as a “mixed” methodology, in this case drawing on philosophical inquiry, historical methodology, content analysis, and case study design. The case study and content analysis concentrate on the work of American video artist Bill Viola (b. 1951), a pioneer in video art and perhaps the best known video artist who utilizes subject matter rich in spirituality and ripe with references to both the sublime and the transcendent.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its capacity to illuminate the vitality of spirituality in contemporary visual art in terms of an underlying need for such content and to analyze and delineate avenues for philanthropic support. Since the beginning of the new millennium, the future of American society has been constantly reconsidered through new interpretive frameworks. Concerns with terrorism, global warming, destruction of the environment, poverty, AIDS and other health crises, the state of education, and a host

of other urgent concerns grip postmodern society in a vice that is being tightened day by day in an escalating cycle of fear and angst.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, provided fresh wounds that with the disastrous crumbling of the World Trade Center towers and the loss of nearly 3,000 lives remind us of the precarious fragility of both freedom and life itself. Dissipating the long shadow those events have cast, the possibility for light, redemption, clarity, and wholeness is surfacing, promising renewal for the woes of the human spirit. After the events of September 11, artist Elizabeth Murray wrote in a special section of the *New York Times*:

I cling to my belief in art as a way for us to try to understand our real situation in life, which is a condition of not knowing what is coming around the next corner...I think that perhaps things will slow down and that it may be good for things to get quieter so that we can all think and reflect. Maybe there is no understanding, but there is opening yourself and trying to continue to grow and hope. (September 23, 2001, Section AR, p. 29)

In the face of uncertainty, Murray addresses contemporary angst. What is it that might lead us out of such a world of spiraling disarray? Murray, like many fellow artists, believes that the answer lies in art and, more specifically, an art that incorporates spirituality and the rich experience of the sublime. Through art replete with spirituality, sublimity, and transcendence, we are provided with moments for contemplation, for renewal, for deep reflection, rich insights, and communal bonding that bring together the spirit of a culture, and, more importantly, the diversity of a variety of cultures. Art provides an opportunity to explore the thoughts and feelings of others, promoting empathic awareness. Understanding art within a spiritual context has the potential to open

a deeper quest for answers to questions about our existence and purpose, and so offers a strong defense against the nihilism of the postmodern malaise.

Spirituality, the Sublime, and Art

Could art be the building block that creates a silent space for reflection, stillness, and restoration? Within the artworld, aesthetic philosopher René van de Vall (1995) asserts that Jean-François Lyotard's sublime presents itself with a silence experienced within the gaps of comprehension. Since the sublime, according to Lyotard (1982), is presenting the unrepresentable or the nondemonstrable, it is the allusion of the invisible within the visible. Lyotard also suggests that there is a gratification of effort that brings about the capacity of feeling and imagining, making the perceptible correspond to the inexpressible. The crux of Lyotard's argument then is that the pain of not being able to comprehend or "represent" leads to gratification—to pleasure.

Spirituality in relation to the sublime is defined as a "*concern for transcendence*: the sense that something in life goes beyond the here and now and the commitment to that something" (Helminiak, 1996, p. 32). Theologian Sandra Schneider contends that spirituality in today's postmodern world is "the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives" (1989, p. 684).

Based on the definitions of the sublime and the spiritual presented by Lyotard, Daniel Helminiak (a professor of psychology at West Georgia College), and Schneider, art may be a key to bringing these often-nebulous concepts to the fore for examination and consideration. To a growing chorus of artists and art scholars, the sublime and the

spiritual in art may be the healing force that can *rehumanize* a shattered society. One contemporary artist of note, Philip Taaffe (1986), states, “Now the sublime, surely we must all realize, is an experience essential to the preservation of our humanity. Especially, I would submit, since we are living in a sublimity-deprived society.” Taaffe contends that he “supports the ascendancy of a sublime art,” and that he is “interested in a sublimity which encourages laughter and delight in the face of profound uncertainty” (p. 19). So sublimity becomes a moment, perhaps many moments, for freeing, expanding, and opening our comprehension and our sense of possibility.

In her thought-provoking book *Conversations Before the End of Time* (1995), art critic and artist Suzi Gablik converses with nineteen artists, writers, and philosophers, all grappling with the notion of profound uncertainty cited by both Taaffe and Murray. The point of Gablik’s discussions is to integrate the role of art in a rapidly changing society steeped in spiritual uncertainty. One engaging question she poses to each of her interviewees asks, “how do you live in a time of decline, and what role does art have in such a time?” (1995, p. 22).

Writer David Plante, Gablik’s close friend, responds to her question with this poignant suggestion:

It [art] can play a role in giving one a sense of possibility, because things are so out of control, and so uncertain. And by giving one a sense of the possibility of what there is outside of one’s control, outside of one’s intentions and in the darkness, it offers the possibility of grace. I believe grace is possible, and I believe that writing and art can inspire grace. (Gablik, 1995, p. 164)

Plante’s notion of grace points toward art, art that provides us with a sense of renewal, regeneration, a shoring up, a strengthening. Spiritual renewal and grace are perhaps what is really needed in such tumultuous times.

Like Gablik and Plante, Daniel Helminiak (1996), suggests that people are now clamoring for inspiration and spiritual insight. Helminiak asserts that we are in a spiritually deprived time in an age of rampant materialism. There seems to be little slowing down as the accumulation of wealth and possessions aids the notion of life speeding quickly past, with time for reflection and contemplation left far in the wake. Artists delving in spirituality perhaps allow us to slow down, to reflect. Experiencing an installation that deals with ascension and resurrection by video artist Bill Viola, for instance, causes us to commit time to such reflection and contemplation and so gives us hints of the sublime.

Where might the spiritual insight and transcendence that is suggested in Viola's work take us? How might we meld the silences, the contemplation, and the playfulness and sublimity with transcendence and immanence in the postmodern era? To grapple with such questions necessitates further clarification of the concept of spirituality as a theoretical base in the postmodern paradigm. Some of the sentiments associated with spirituality, especially in New Age circles and self-help arenas—the “Barnes & Noble as synagogue” as Robert Fuller, a professor of religious studies at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois (2001), describes it—may appear to be merely platitudes, even fluff. Helminiak and Fuller, however, point toward a concept of spirituality that is more in keeping with asking deeper questions and probing further into the notion of human existence. This is where the artist as philosopher comes into play, as artists can allow and enable us to look more deeply at why we are here, what is beyond our comprehension, and where we are going.

The subjugation and support of spirituality in the societal framework of the artworld and contemporary America as a whole also requires examination. Given the power that capitalism and materialism exert on society, strong critics are essential for deep dissection and thought-provoking analysis. In order to see the effects of capitalism and materialism in a postmodern society and the repression or subjugation of spirituality and art within the postmodern framework, it behooves us to look to postmodern philosophers who debate the notions and nuances of postmodernism head on.

The postmodern condition is also significant within this paradigm and may best be understood by again turning to the writings and theories of philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. In Lyotard's postmodern sublime, the world no longer appears linear, is not so straightforward, and rational systems of explaining the world are discarded (Malpas, 2003). Lyotard emphasizes art, specifically avant-garde art, which presents the sublime as a focus to demonstrate that there exists an unrepresentable element in the world, one that begs acknowledgement and exploration.

Within the theoretical constructs of Lyotard's postmodern theories, spirituality, and the kindred notions of the sublime and transcendence, may be encompassed in the idea of the "unrepresentable" (1984, p. 81). In a modern context, the sublime allows for solace and pleasure; in the postmodern, the unrepresentable offers pleasure and pain, because one might not be able to comprehend it. For Lyotard, the spiritual and the sublime refer to events or occurrences that cannot be readily explained in human experience.

Academic cyberpunk critic Cat Francis, in an article titled *The Virtual Sublime*, explains the sublime and the connection with spirituality in a similar way:

The sublime becomes a moment in which the world is immanent, but the message of immanence is that it is absolutely unknowable, and only the fact of its unknowability can be known. An intimation of a patterned world appears, a shadow of the possibility of being able to know it, and the fact of its existence, coupled with the fact that such a scrap is all one will ever have by which to know. The sublime moment is a moment of transcendence through aesthetic experience, sometimes conflated with or cloaked by words which evoke spirituality. (Francis, 1999, ¶ 5)

Francis is pointing toward the notion that the sublime goes beyond the dehumanizing environment of our society and its plethora of ills, pointing toward transcendence. According to Lyotard (1994) as well, art has the potential to liberate and resist the dehumanizing factors of our society and the capitalist mindset. Lyotard expresses the hopeful notion that, with the introduction of the avant-garde, representationalism and the concept of creating something realistic, something that only corresponds to reality, can be overcome and shattered. The work of presenting something that cannot be represented, which is beyond representation, allows for innovation, freedom, and liberation. According to Philip Shaw, senior lecturer in English literature at the University of Leicester, Lyotard's sublime suggests that we suspend judgment—that there are no rules (Shaw, 2006).

In Lyotard's perspective, we need not be imprisoned in the mindset of advancement of knowledge and progress towards the end of market-driven gain. The sublime has the potential to disrupt ways of representing the world, and the vitality of art that encompasses the sublime has, according to Simon Malpas (a professor in the School of Literatures, Languages & Cultures, University of Edinburgh), the capacity for disruption, disorientation, and challenges to the viewer (Malpas, 2003). Lyotard (1994) compares this disruption and disorientation to *lightning* that short circuits thinking. The

sublime becomes an experience in and of itself, separate from the object, as in works such as Bill Viola's installations and videos. In the character of these challenges, we are taken beyond the limits of representation, the commodification of postmodernism, the unrest, the anxiety, and fear. After the *lightning* we travel toward a place of quiet contemplation. Within the serenity inherent in a number of Viola's momentous artworks, we grapple with the gratification of effort, between pleasure and pain, and wrestle with the broader concepts of the sublime and spiritual that such art poses.

In this intense world of sublimity, the artist becomes the philosopher. As such postmodern theorists as Frederic Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard have recognized, the artist has the ability to pose the big questions, to explore human existence, and to point the way out of a world of materialism and the capitalist mindset. Artists, critics, philosophers, and museum curators alike are recognizing the power of the artist-as-philosopher. Although the amorphous nature of spirituality and sublimity make these concepts elusive, they nonetheless have a presence that is growing stronger in artistic circles.

More specifically, museum curators and art critics are exploring the ideas of spirituality and art infused with sublimity, referencing and drawing from the work of artists from a variety of movements and time periods. Modernist artists such as Mark Rothko, Kazimir Malevich, and Barnett Newman may evoke the sublime, just as deeply as more contemporary figures such as Viola. The significant issue is to see the sublime as more than a theoretical construct, rather as an experience—something we really feel. Lyotard (1991) suggests that the sublime is in essence “immaterial” and can be best grasped with sensibility rather than with the faculties of the mind. This feeling or

sensibility can be key to allowing transcendence over the nihilism that so often marks the postmodern turn.

Lyotard's Postmodernism

At its most basic, the term *postmodernism* describes a way of viewing and experiencing our world that compares and contrasts contemporary examples and situations with the tenets of modernism (Malpas, 2005). Beginning with discussions in the 1940s, mainly in antimodern artistic circles, postmodernism gathered momentum in the 1960s, entering into mainstream discourse (Carroll, 1987). It has predominated in most philosophical and aesthetic discussion into the first decade of the twenty-first century. Postmodernists such as Jean-François Lyotard, Frederic Jameson, Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes each present individual perspectives on the interplay of modernism and what has come after it. A host of other players—including critics, theologians, scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists—also continue to wrestle with changes to ideas and ways of experiencing reality introduced with the Enlightenment, which is generally regarded at the inception of the modern period. Lyotard looks further back, with references to premodern times and the influences and influx of premodern ideas within postmodern discourse (Griffin, 1990).

Instead of viewing postmodernism as simply something that comes after or disrupts modernism, however, Lyotard suggests another way to wrestle with this complex idea by equating the postmodern with “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). For Lyotard, metanarratives, or *grand récit* (which might be translated from the French as “grand story”), keep society in check and determine the progress of

society through universal truths that lead to oppression and domination—not liberation and freedom. James K. A. Smith (2005), associate professor in the Department of Philosophy at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, suggests that the issue with *grand récit* is not the scope of these stories but the inherent claims they make to be able to legitimate an appeal to universal reason (Smith, 2005). Turning away from these claims, the acknowledgement of small narratives (and the rejection of metanarratives) allows for a plurality of expression in a society that embraces diversity and the expansion of ideas and discourse.

Lyotard’s concentration on artists and their innovations also proves paramount in discussions of postmodernity and the postmodern condition. Malpas states, in regard to Lyotard, “Like the experimental artists to whom he devotes a great deal of his time, the aim of thought for Lyotard is to open new possibilities that have the potential to change the world for the better” (Malpas, 2003, p. 7). In this light, Lyotard’s views of postmodern society and the postmodern condition are hopeful and promising, as long as the ideas of capitalism, globalization, and corporate interests are recognized and acknowledged for their pervasive roles in controlling power and knowledge.

If we agree that we are in a postmodern turn, and we choose to incorporate the contextual nuances of spirituality and art, we could choose Lyotard’s assertion that in the context and presence of the sublime, postmodern society is hopeful in contrast to a variety of negative postmodern philosophical perspectives. With a retraction of the metanarratives that govern a rapidly changing, increasingly globalized world, we become free to embrace diversity, innovation, freedom, and the paradoxical present in all its

splendid ambiguity. Not everything is pinned down in a dichotomous universe; there are still questions that remain simply questions, unanswered, perhaps unanswerable.

Sociologist James A. Beckford of the University of Warwick, Coventry, U.K., also describes postmodernity in terms of characteristics that offer fertile ground for spirituality, sublimity, and transcendence (1992). In his succinct discussion of postmodernism, he identifies four central elements in a complex progression beyond the confines of modernity: a refusal to regard positivistic and rationalistic criteria as the exclusive standard of knowledge; a willingness to combine symbols and frameworks of meaning that may result in disjunctions and eclecticism; an emphasis on spontaneity, fragmentation, and playfulness; and abandoning the idea that overarching myths, narratives, or concrete frameworks of knowledge can be found. The spontaneity of the postmodern condition and the refusal to cling to metanarratives introduce a paradigm shift in which spirituality, sublimity, and transcendence are part of the plurality and the varied experiences accepted and embraced in American postmodern society.

Conclusion

This dissertation will discuss the emergence and growth of renewed interest in spirituality in contemporary visual art with particular reference to the concepts of the sublime and the transcendent, referencing video artist Bill Viola as the case study for the research.

Framed through a Lyotardian postmodern perspective, which equates the sublime with spirituality, Viola's work will demonstrate the prevalence of varied spiritual beliefs and nuances of spiritual teachings within the artworld and the larger realm of America's

pluralistic society. Issues and controversies surrounding spirituality in art within the artworld and within the philanthropic community will also be discussed.

The intent of the research is to raise awareness of this phenomenon by documenting present-day discussions and bringing disparate and dispersed conversations and writings into a coherent and clear summation and to foster understanding of spirituality and art in postmodern American society. In addition, the dissertation seeks to examine current priorities in philanthropic communities that highlight the need for spirit-infused giving.

While members of the foundation and the philanthropic communities are beginning to grapple with spirituality—relaying what they value most in their personal spiritual lives with what they value most in their philanthropic work—artists and scholars are continuing to delve deeply into the spiritual as it pertains to art. The spiritual life of both artists and philanthropists might be said to be developing greater prominence in their work, and the documentation of such developments demands careful scrutiny and observation to detail the impact and the congruencies of such occurrences. Attention to and adequate documentation of this phenomenon is essential to understanding and encouraging contemporary creative processes and spiritual explorations in all their guises.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY AND PARAMETERS OF THE STUDY

Methodology

This study uses a mixed methodology to trace the emergence and define the role of spirituality in the contemporary visual arts and to examine and propose possibilities for nurturing such spirituality through philanthropic foundations within the context of postmodern American culture. The primary systems of inquiry are historical investigation, content analysis, an extended case study of one artist's work, and philosophical analysis, with particular regard to Lyotard's concepts of the postmodern and the sublime. Each methodology has been chosen to explore specific areas of inquiry and to bring together multiple interpretive frameworks.

Historical methodology.

What is the significance of historical research in this study? According to Norman Denzin, a professor of sociology, cinema studies, and interpretive theory at the University of Illinois, and Yvonna Lincoln, a professor of educational administration at Texas A & M University, all social phenomena need to be studied in their historical contexts and historical texts themselves are documents of the social phenomena of their times: "A historian's account of the past is a social text that constructs and reconstructs the realities

of the past” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 375). Art, the sublime, spirituality, and support of the arts by philanthropic foundations are all key areas of historical inquiry in this study. Each is analyzed contextually to draw out its unique influences, progression, and development in a variety of discourses.

The historical context in this study progresses from a general view of artistic movements that reference spirituality to a more comprehensive case study of contemporary video artist Bill Viola, who exemplifies the prevalence of spirituality and the sublime in the postmodern artworld establishment. Contextually and theoretically, the research links the historical lineage of the sublime in art with more recent approaches to spirituality in art. The research also incorporates the interpretation and contextual placement of events, artists, and the sociopolitical environment in which the sublime and spirituality coalesce in the artistic realm.

In an article on historical research methods, Arthur Efland, professor emeritus in the Department of Art Education, The Ohio State University, suggests that historical research is both a science and an art. The scientific investigation follows certain guidelines or procedures for investigation; the artistic components of historical research provide generalizations that include creative interpretation (Efland, 1995). When significant new material, new research, or new findings arise, reevaluations and reinterpretations follow. With regard to the issues addressed here, this occurred when *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, curator Maurice Tuchman’s tour-de-force exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1986 (and its accompanying publication), sparked significant new and renewed scholarly attention to artists’ spiritual underpinnings and movements associated with spirituality.

In addition to the analysis of such artistic movements, historical methodology is incorporated here to examine the emergence and development of the concept of the sublime over time, concluding with Jean François Lyotard's exploration of the sublime through his concept of presenting the unrepresentable. Historical interpretations of the sublime also relate directly to the study of Bill Viola's work and artistic progression. The connections thus made between historical research and the case study emphasize the interconnectedness of the research methods employed throughout this study.

Philanthropic foundations and the greater philanthropic community have exerted significant influences on artistic innovations and their dissemination in the United States. A final area of historical research in this study involves patterns in giving among the philanthropic foundations that have played such crucial roles in sustaining the arts in the United States. Historical analysis of such trends clarifies the progression of funding for the arts and the emerging interest in funding spirituality and religion, an area of philanthropy previously shied away from by many philanthropic foundations. A new willingness to recognize the plurality of America's spiritual landscape—and how the arts connect with this plurality—can be found within emerging funding interests in religion, civil society, and the broad umbrella of spirituality. Included in such philanthropic interests is the move toward a more civil society that embraces diversity in belief systems, plurality of cultures, and breadth of creative exploration, as well as increasing willingness to discuss the concept of public value, which may well involve an spiritual dimension that is frequently unacknowledged.

Content analysis.

Content analysis is incorporated in this study to explore the nuances in the multifaceted artworks of Bill Viola. Such analysis moves from the systematic and objective description of content toward interpretation of a variety of texts (Weber, 1990). Content analysis complements and ultimately bolsters the historical analysis of documents relating to the sublime and spirituality in art. It also allows for the exploration of spirituality and the sublime in Viola's own writings, interviews with the artist, and critics' and scholars' interpretations of Viola's artwork and creative processes.

As a means of textual analysis, the intent of the content analysis is to compare, contrast, and categorize a multitude of documents relating to Bill Viola in order to formulate, support, and strengthen the suppositions inherent in the purpose of the study (Weber, 1990). Arrays of texts, which reflect multiple contexts, are carefully analyzed using keywords and significant phrases that relate to the purpose of the study. The texts and documents are mined for keywords, scholarly quotes, and generalized anecdotal discussions of the spiritual nuances of Viola's work. Key concepts relating to the sublime, spirituality, religion, philanthropic foundation support, and postmodernity are highlighted. Such analysis results in an extensive view of the sublime and the spiritual in Viola's work. Philanthropic support is also noted and documented as it relates to Viola's progression of acceptance and stature in the artworld establishment.

Case study.

Bill Viola was selected as the case study for this dissertation because his work, its influence, and its enthusiastic reception in the artworld provide a leading example of the acknowledgement of spirituality and the sublime in contemporary art. Viola represents

what educator Robert Stake (2000) terms a “bounded system,” with influences such as psychological, cultural, aesthetic, and other forces, which add to the rich complexity of case study methodology. The idea of thick description is explored in analyzing the artwork and the aesthetic experience inherent in encountering Viola’s videos and installations. This enhances the research with an emphasis on Viola’s interaction and participation in the artworld, the contextualization of his work in the broader realm of the postmodern condition, and the myriad interpretations and reactions to his work in and outside of the artworld establishment.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida references the phenomenon of multiple interpretations when he suggests that the meaning does not reside in the text, or in this case the artwork, but in the reading and writing of the text (Derrida and Attridge, 1992). When the text or artwork is “read” in different contexts it is given new meanings that are socially embedded within ideological systems (Hodder, 2000). The “reader” is in essence invited to become a “full and equal partner in the meaning-making process,” as Michael Hassett, a specialist in rhetoric and writing, suggests (1993, p. 1). Thus viewers or “readers” of Viola’s artworks bring their own life experience and contextual interpretations to his work. A hermeneutical awareness of the possibilities and pluralities of interpretation is necessary in this arena, as the lived experience surrounding the artwork is translated into different contexts of interpretation (Hodder, 2000). In other words, viewers are left to make their own interpretations and perhaps even clarifications of Viola’s work in a variety of contexts. Each person constructs an individual contextual framework for interpreting the work, conditioned by such things as gender, financial

standing, and cultural background, among others. This is where the historical and contextual nuances of Viola's writings and work meld with the case study methodology.

“There are times when all researchers are going to be interpretive, holistic, naturalistic, and uninterested in cause, and then, by definition, they will be qualitative researchers” (Stake, 1995, p. 46). In this statement, Stake, director of the Center for Instructional Research and Curriculum Evaluation, at the University of Illinois, references a strategy—“qualitative research”—used in the case study of this dissertation to incorporate my own experiences and interpretive frameworks in encountering Viola's work. The attempt to describe personal encounters with Viola's work provides another perspective, which bolsters and supports existing accounts that connect Viola's artworks with the sublime and the spiritual. My firsthand accounts, along with Viola's own writings, the writings of other scholars, and the extensive interviews conducted by prominent figures in the artworld provide an interpretation of Viola's life and work that emphasizes the interconnectedness of spirituality and art in postmodern culture.

The analysis of varied sources that cover Viola's life and art provides the opportunity for reaching broad generalizations about Viola as an artist whose work is steeped in the sublime and the spiritual. These generalizations are what Stake and Deborah Trumbull, a professor of education at Cornell University, refer to as “naturalistic generalizations” (Stake and Trumbull, 1982), where the ideas this researcher has gained through direct observation of Viola's works intermingle and coalesce with the writings of other art scholars. These naturalistic generalizations are combined with observations based on my aesthetic experiences at museums that have featured Viola's work. These subjective observations and responses are also compared and contrasted with

interpretations drawn from the interviews and extensive texts written by and about Viola.

Supporting this type of research and exploration, Stake (1995) contends,

Our accounts need to be personal, describing the things of our sensory experiences, not failing to attend to the matters that personal curiosity dictates. A narrative account, a story, a chronological presentation, personalistic description, emphasis on time and place provide rich ingredients for vicarious experience. (pp. 86, 87)

These personal accounts are an attempt to allow the reader to vicariously experience

Viola's artworks as described through my direct observation.

In order to unearth meaning while searching for patterns and consistency within certain conditions, I also employ what Stake (1995) calls, *correspondence*.

Correspondence elucidates patterns documented and coded in interviews and writings about and by Viola to show instances of the sublime and spirituality. Curators and critics often use the terms *sublime* and *spiritual* when describing and analyzing Viola's work to demonstrate and point out influences and nuances that Viola expresses in the complex conceptual underpinnings of his work. Viola's interactions in and out of the artworld, his personal and artistic challenges, and the context in which he creates are essential to understanding the subtle influence of the sublime and the spiritual in his art.

The qualitative inquiry of the case study is appropriate for discovering the artistic and creative processes of Viola. Viola creates a rich arena of creative expression, conceptual orientation, and deep insight into the process of exploring the sublime and the spiritual in visual art. Spirituality being a large part of human experience, a qualitative inquiry with thick description provides a fruitful and complex case study analysis.

Through personal narratives and my experiential accounts, I attempt to create what Van Maanen (1988) calls a *critical uniqueness*. This critical uniqueness bolsters the strength

of the case study and enhances the interpretive complexity that is appropriate to Viola's artwork.

A goal of the case study is to create a narrative so that readers may reach a level of what Stake (1995) refers to as *experiential understanding*. By combining an extensive analysis of published interviews and critiques with my direct experience of Viola's works, I compare and contrast my impressions and observations with those of critics, curators, and other scholars who have extensively analyzed and interpreted his creative processes. The intent is to present a constructivist view, keeping in mind my engagement with the artworks and providing a personal account of viewing and digesting the complexity of Viola's works in order to stimulate further reflection for the reader.

Philosophical inquiry.

The example of the reader and the researcher coming together to complete the observations and interpretations of Viola's work and the multitude of documents written about Viola reflect a postmodern concept where the reader recreates the text while reading the text (Derrida, Bass & Ronse, 1981). This is where philosophical inquiry begins to coincide with the methods of the case study. An expectation is formulated in which, at times, the onus is on the reader to join the researcher in the interpretation and the experiencing of Viola's work. In some respects readers are asked to place less emphasis on the author or researcher and more emphasis on their direct observation and interpretations of the intent of Viola's work.

Even though the content analysis is heavily influenced by the researcher, an attempt to foster individual exploration of Viola's work is encouraged, though perhaps only in a vicarious manner. This individual exploration opens up avenues for personal

contemplation, allowing for the nuances of Viola's creative process and his myriad creations to unfold. This exploration ultimately provides for the consideration of the spiritual and the sublime in Viola's art. The author's voice is not lost or silent in the text; instead author and reader combine in a collaborative effort to interpret and explore the works and influences of Viola in order to better understand the presence of the sublime in his work and its spiritual underpinnings (Hassett, 1993).

Stake (1995) suggest that phenomena (in this case the sublime and the spiritual in art) are "intricately related through many coincidental actions and that understanding them requires looking at a wide sweep of contexts: temporal and spatial, historical, political, economic, cultural, social, and personal" (p. 43). This is where Jean-François Lyotard's philosophical concepts of postmodernism and the sublime play a key role in substantiating and legitimating the presence of spirituality in contemporary art.

Drawing on Lyotard's idea of ambiguity and the open-endedness of his notion of the postmodern condition, this research allows for further questioning and prompts additional research, exploration, and interpretation. Just as Lyotard's notion of the postmodern condition is somewhat ambiguous, the sublime and the spiritual in art are nebulous and subject to multiple interpretations. The role of philanthropic foundations in supporting spirituality, art, and a host of competing priorities is similarly multilayered and steeped in contextual complexity. Therefore, the tenets of multiplicity, open-endedness, and ambiguity are inherent in the research process.

The use of a mixed methodology protocol supports this research, helping to provide accuracy and alternative explanations in the accounts of spirituality and art, and of foundations' support for dialogue in this area. The multiple forms of inquiry provide a

breadth that expands to cover the fields of art education, arts administration, and cultural policy, while also incorporating additional fields of inquiry that help determine the impact of spirituality in the artworld and its prevalence in the postmodern arena. Within the postmodern context, research—through analysis and a multiplicity of interpretations—allows for observations and prospective outcomes to remain open for revision and reinterpretation based on the complexity and the particular advantages of each research strategy.

Reflexivity.

In the process of the mixed methodology for this study, my personal interest in the area of philanthropic foundation support of a dialogue that encompasses art and spirituality is readily acknowledged. This personal accounting attempts to deepen the research, showing the formulation of ideas and concepts vital to the progression and development of such an inquiry. This research strategy involves my participation and interactions in a personal, and more importantly, a reflexive way. According to Norman Denzin (1989), involving reflexivity and addressing it head on is to engage in critical self-reflection, one of the attributes of methodological reflexivity.

Expanding on Denzin, scholar Janis Bohan and psychologist Glenda Russell (1999), define reflexivity as a process of honoring oneself and others in one's research through awareness of the relational and reflexive nature of the research. Russell and clinical psychologist Nancy Kelly state:

Reflexivity requires that we suspend judgment, our propensity for foreclosed inquiry, and our enthusiasm for the early answers that usually seem to present themselves. We have to sit with the information at hand long enough, and with openness, to understand not first what it says, but rather how it wants to talk to us. (Russell and Kelly, 2002, ¶ 29)

This statement points to the critical analysis of my consistent attempt to present spirituality and art in an academically sound research arena.

My encouragement of multiple perspectives and multiple interpretations stems from my interest in expanding the notion of academic research that attempts to uncover the complex nuances of the sublime and spirituality in relation to art. According to Franz Breuer (2000), professor of psychology at the Psychology Institute, in Muenster, Germany, a number of characteristics can draw a researcher to a particular research topic. Breuer identifies intellectual or emotional comfort, individual interest in a particular phenomenon, and attraction toward certain environments. These characteristics are in keeping with my work in spirituality and art, as I have an intellectual investment, a professional interest, and a background in the field of study, both on a personal and an academic level.

An important component of the reflexive process for me is to enhance and develop my own research skills while contributing to a body of research in art education and arts policy and administration. I value the process in the academic arena as a researcher, which provides an opportunity to build on my wide-ranging experience in nonprofit arts organizations. The reflexive process provides for the exploration of spirituality as it relates to art and the artworld establishment while allowing for my personal perspective. In keeping with the importance of the reflexive process and the multiple benefits of such a process, Russell and Kelly (2002, ¶ 44) explain:

Just as we rely on reflexivity to carry out good research, conducting good research tends to improve our reflexivity. It enhances our ability to stay engaged with our own reactions and the reactions of others. It insists that we learn more about our personal and intellectual strengths and limitations. It invites us to confront

feelings and conflicts that we might otherwise avoid— aspects of experience that traditional training has, in fact, encouraged us to disavow.

This statement is in keeping with my personal encounters with Viola's work. As a viewer and as a participant in experiencing Viola's creative journey and process, one cannot help but delve into feelings and reactions to his work that are on one level intellectual and on another level no less than spiritually transformational.

Through a personal journey with a variety of spiritual teachings, a strong interest in contemporary visual art, and my experience with philanthropic foundations, I have the unique opportunity to simultaneously combine many interests in the pursuit of my research agenda. As Russell and Kelly (2002) state, my unique experiences also demand close scrutiny as to my reactions, my personal strengths, and my limitations as a researcher. In order to ameliorate the risks of becoming too close to the research, creating a strong bias, or interpreting texts in a way as to eliminate opposition to my preconceived notions of the results, constant checks and balances are in place to maintain objectivity.

There can be a balance between combining rigorous scholarly research, replete with strong qualitative methodology, and personal reflection to make for a richer and multilayered account of the phenomenon of spirituality and art. Carefully analyzing and dissecting the phenomenon of the sublime, spirituality, and art, I also take into account some segments of the philanthropic foundation community's interest in funding spirituality.

Building on quantitative research.

Although the research methodology in this study is predominately qualitative, it builds upon quantitative research by Robert Wuthnow, a professor of social sciences and

director of the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University. Wuthnow has conducted extensive work on the interface of spirituality and art in American culture, as documented in his book, *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist* (2001). Studying spirituality and religion in the United States for over thirty years, Wuthnow has received extensive funding from the Henry Luce Foundation and the Lilly Endowment. This support has afforded him the opportunity to collaborate with the Center for Arts and Culture in Washington, DC, a think tank devoted to arts and culture (now disbanded), which in turn has provided a strong research base for his studies. Stalwart, forward-thinking members of the philanthropic community, the Henry Luce Foundation and the Lilly Endowment have both demonstrated fervent commitment to supporting dialogue between artists and theologians who delve in spirituality.

Wuthnow continues to conduct surveys, incorporating ethnographic research in terms of artists' exploration of the spiritual. In *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist*, he completed extensive research on contemporary American artists and demonstrated how they embrace their spirituality and, more importantly, how spirituality impacts their artwork and creative process. Wuthnow's research also lends credence to examining the impact of Bill Viola's explorations in spirituality.

Limitations of research methods.

Each research method discussed above, including Wuthnow's quantitative inquiry and this study's qualitative inquiry, possesses inherent weaknesses. Difficulties in establishing validity, generalizability, and reliability are inherent in qualitative analysis; in order to combat those weaknesses, the structure of this study emphasizes the flexibility associated with investigating social contexts (Janesick, 2000) rather than a psychometric

perspective. Employing a mix of research methods (historical, content analysis, case study, and philosophical analysis) also minimizes those weaknesses. These areas of inquiry, with an emphasis on thick description, place the study in a contextual framework with the limitations of the bias of the researcher clearly noted.

Carl Kaestle (1997), professor of education, history, and public policy at Brown University, emphasizes four key points as limitations of historical research methodology: The first is avoiding the potential for confusion between correlations and causes. The second, cites the need to clearly define terms in order to prevent them from becoming vague. Kaestle's third caveat involves reporting how people should have behaved, which may be in direct opposition to how in fact people actually behaved. Kaestle's final challenge to historical methodology involves carefully interpreting the people and institutions being reported, in order to ascertain their intent, behavior, and the resulting consequences.

In order to address some of these limitations, I continue to concretely define terms such as spirituality, art, philanthropic foundations, and Lyotard's postmodernism within the context of the research parameters. I also identify the incorporation of reflexivity and efforts to recognize and so minimize my own biases. In this research, I consult and compare the differing opinions of varied scholars and commentators—on spirituality, postmodern discourse, religion, power structures, the larger artworld establishment, and the methods employed by philanthropic foundations in supporting and fostering creative expression—minimizing the impact of individual interpretations. Also of significance in this regard are my attempts to carefully note the way Bill Viola's work is presented and interpreted in varied scholarly discourse.

In case study methodology, boundaries between phenomenon and context are not always clearly evident (Yin, 1994). In addition, the case study involves the interpretation of artwork or text by the observer, which may be incorrect or inaccurate. Meanings may change across time and cultures, so that the accuracy with which the artwork or text is considered and interpreted is essential and must be compared with similar works in order to set a context that is relevant to the creation and viewing of the work. In order to combat this weakness Denzin (1989) suggests that the researcher provide ample amounts of thick description.

Philosophical analysis also has limitations, including the idea that research can never be wholly neutral, distanced, or complete (Green, 1988). In this case, it is difficult for me to separate myself from my own life experience, my location, my gender, my class, and my research purpose. In addition, it is necessary for both the researcher and the audience for this study to understand the complex disparities that surround such concepts as spirituality and the sublime, to embrace some level of ambiguity in this regard. Thus, validity remains in question because of the open-ended nature of philosophical inquiry and the theoretical constructs inherent in this research.

Content analysis shares weaknesses with both philosophical methodology and case study methodology. In keeping with the limitations of philosophical inquiry, content analysis has the inherent weakness of the researcher's own interpretive framework and a lack of subjectivity. As is apparent with case study methodology and the interpretation of text, limitations in content analysis include the fact that text-based documents are highly complex. According to sociologist David Silverman (1998), a professor emeritus at Goldsmiths College, London University, who specializes in qualitative research, content

analysis can obscure the interpretive processes that turn interviews and other forms of talk into text. The researcher may miss out on specific words, the interpretation of words, and the subsequent meanings of words because conversations have been transformed into a written text. For example, nuances in speech patterns are lost in this process as well as crucial observation of a host of nonverbal communication and reactions.

Mike Palmquist, a professor of English, at Colorado State University, suggests that the reproducibility and accuracy of coding texts is a problem of content analysis and must be addressed in the course of the study if there is to be stability with the coding of texts over time by other researchers. As in philosophical research, the overshadowing problem of content analysis is the debatable nature of conclusions reached (Palmquist, 1991). Again, conclusions and fixed definitions of truth may need to be suspended with the possibility that no concrete conclusions are formally reached. Thus reliability and validity are identified as the main concerns in content analysis, as in all the other individual methods under consideration. And, as in the other methods, further questioning and inquiry are the recommended ways to mitigate such concerns. Throughout this research, the mixed methodology has asserted itself as a way to minimize the limitations of any one approach. It is not a means to an end, but essentially a means for deeper contextual exploration.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

With the limitations of the research methods addressed, it is important to turn to the parameters and limitations set forth for the study itself. First, the philanthropic foundation community is a finite group of philanthropists providing support for a variety of causes.

This study only focuses on those philanthropic foundations that have an interest or have supported a dialogue exploring the connections of religion, spirituality, the achievement of a civil society, and art. The study also references smaller family foundations and individual philanthropists who may or may not be associated with a particular foundation.

Second, spirituality in terms of its influence and diversity in American postmodern culture has a vast array of definitions and implications for the personal and collective lives of people and communities. The study limits itself to specific and pertinent definitions of spirituality as it can be traced in contemporary visual art and postmodern culture.

Lastly, the study does not aim to cover the entire array of theories and influences that permeate the vast expanse of contemporary thought known as postmodernism. Instead it concentrates on a limited number of critical thinkers whose ideas have significant relevance to spirituality and the arts, particularly Jean-François Lyotard.

In addition to these three major parameters, the study limits its attention to a few major definitions and theories of art and aesthetic philosophy. There is a trend in the philosophy of aesthetics to provide a contextual analysis of art that brings the artists' intentions and the formulation of their work within a body of artwork in the overall artworld establishment. There is also a trend toward *presentationalism*, accepting artworks for what they are and their manifest properties. The former is explored, developed, and utilized to enhance the notion of the sublime and the spiritual in art.

Although the sublime, spirituality, and specific artworks and art movements are discussed at length, the study does not attempt to address religious art outside of Viola's references to his pseudo-appropriation of Renaissance art and religious art as a fellow at

the Getty Institute and his subsequent exploration of Christian mysticism. Religion and art are referenced only to the extent that this has been the larger context within which the discussion of art and spirituality has occurred within the philanthropic foundation community. Under the larger umbrella of religion and theology, art has been explored as a vehicle for spiritual expression and exploration.

Conclusion

This study utilizes a mixed methodology that creates a framework for the exploration of the complex concepts of the sublime and its relationship to spirituality and postmodernity, especially in the ideas of Lyotard; the work of video artist Bill Viola; and the philanthropic foundation community's support of art and emerging support of spirituality. The qualitative inquiry involves historical analysis, content analysis, a case study, and philosophical analysis. This mixed methodology provides theoretical and interpretive tools to trace the emergence and define the role of spirituality in the contemporary visual arts and to examine and propose the possibilities for nurturing such spirituality through philanthropic foundations' support within the context of postmodern American culture.

The sublime, spirituality in art, and philanthropic foundation support of the arts are all key areas of the study that are explored through a historical analysis. Content analysis is incorporated to examine the multifaceted work of influential artist Bill Viola, who is also the subject of the case study. A goal of the case study is to create a narrative with thick description so that readers may reach a level of experiential understanding of Viola's myriad works. By combining an extensive analysis of published interviews and

critiques along with my direct experience with Viola's works, I compare and contrast my unique impressions and observations of Viola's works to that of other scholars.

Philosophical research is employed so that the reader and the researcher can come together to observe and interpret Viola's work within the context of Lyotard's postmodern interpretation of the concept of the sublime. As is the case in some theories of postmodernism, the author or researcher is not absent from the research but engages in a qualitative collaborative effort with the reader to better understand the spiritual underpinnings of Viola's work. Reflexivity is emphasized to guard against possible bias and influence I may have in exploring the various topics expressed in the study. The mixture of methods employed also addresses limitations inherent in each kind of inquiry if pursued on its own. The discussion does not end with one study, as new questions surface, and opportunities arise for deep looking and further inquiry. What this particular research ultimately aims to provide is a window into a moment or moments when the unanswered questions and ambiguity inherent in the process coincide with the Lyotardian notion of freeing and expanding while traversing the circuitous route of discovery.

CHAPTER 3

SPIRITUALITY AND THE SUBLIME

Introduction

This study analyzes and contextualizes the concept of the sublime to provide a philosophical framework for understanding the prevalence and role of spirituality in the arts of our contemporary postmodern culture. The current chapter sets forth the historical background surrounding the development of this concept since it was introduced in the first century of the Common Era by the relatively unknown author Longinus. The concept has proved to be quite mercurial, shifting in response to the usage by philosophers, scholars, and laymen. Tracing this historical progression sets the stage for understanding the present-day usage of the sublime and its impact on aesthetic theory into the twenty-first century. The ultimate goal of this analysis is to link the sublime with spirituality while emphasizing art and aesthetics.

The definition of *sublime* in its current, vernacular usage is a somewhat watered-down version of the original intent of the word, which remains prevalent in the philosophical arena. In everyday usage, the word is often employed as an adjective to describe an object or an event, as when a diner states, “The food was sublime” or a listener comments, “The musical performance was sublime.” Tsang Lap-chuen, a theorist

and philosopher from Hong Kong, contends that the notion of the sublime can be used to describe a variety of things and experiences, most often involving some affect with emotions at its core (1998).

In this research I focus on the usage of the word within philosophical discourse, where the concept of the sublime remains much more closely connected to the historical lineage of the term's use in aesthetic theory. The first recorded discussion of the concept of the sublime was in the work of Longinus, *On the Sublime* (1st cent./1985). Longinus's writings were translated into French in the late 1600s and into English in the 1700s, leading to renewed interest in this idea in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The concept of the sublime became fashionable in eighteenth-century aesthetic and academic discourse and was promoted and developed by Edmund Burke (1729–1772) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Expanding on Longinus's writings, Burke and Kant employed a notion of the sublime that continued developing into the twentieth-century theoretical discourse of Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998).

The history of the sublime provides a springboard for discussions that touch on Burke, Kant, and Lyotard, as well as on artists and artistic movements that highlight, meld, and contrast these theorists' perspectives on the concept. A key focus of this research involves the links between spirituality and the sublime within the larger context of the postmodern artworld establishment.

Philosophers such as Frederic Jameson (b. 1934), Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), and Louis Althusser (1918–1990) tackle the complexities of the postmodern sublime in specific instances and contexts. Jean-François Lyotard, however, wrote most expansively and specifically on the sublime and visual art. Lyotard is considered, in some academic

circles, the most prominent theorist to thoroughly explore and present the idea of the sublime, which he did in the context of using contemporary art and artists to examine and define postmodernism. Lyotard's open discussion of the sublime, transcendence, and immanence within the realm of aesthetics is melded in this study to show the interpretations of his concepts that link art with spirituality.

According to Jan Rosiek (2000), a professor of Nordic studies and linguistics at the University of Copenhagen, Lyotard is universally recognized as *the* leading theorist of the sublime and has done more to place the sublime in mainstream philosophical discourse than any other contemporary philosopher. Although Lyotard's writings about the sublime focus on specific attributes of the term, in his latter years his writings on the subject became more intense, often alluding to a connection with the spiritual and the transcendent (Malpas, 2003). Discussions of the sublime intensified when Lyotard moved away from the discourse on politics, power structures, and the construction of knowledge that he initially used to describe and analyze the postmodern condition. Lyotard's analysis of the sublime in aesthetics and his views on theology, specifically Christian mysticism, led him to formulate somewhat loose connections between the sublime and spirituality (Malpas, 2003), achieved through a potential emotional response from the viewer.

Historical Interpretations of the Sublime

The sublime of Longinus.

Longinus (1st C. E./1985) is credited as introducing the sublime in *On the Sublime (Peri Hypsous)*, a treatise that mainly dealt with literary works and the observance of the

grandeur of nature. According to Longinus, nature and literature allow us to experience awe and wonder, and hence part of our experiences of nature are beyond human comprehension and intellect (Longinus, 1st C.E./1985). A key to Longinus's argument is that the sublime can exist either externally, from some undefined object, as some disastrous event, or internally, when one is psychologically affected. Longinus emphasized the extraordinary, the great, and the beautiful in describing the sublime experience (McEvilley, 2001).

Longinus's perspective of the role of the sublime in nature was of special importance to the eighteenth-century writers who read the translations of his work. His writings were an influential precursor for the stirring idea of Romanticism that would embrace the power of nature, connecting nature with the Divine and the numinous (Gamwell, 2002).

Although hundreds of translations of Longinus's work appeared throughout the centuries in a host of languages, the translation most often referenced in the seventeenth century was that of Nicolas Despréaux Boileau (1636–1711). Boileau translated *On the Sublime* in 1677 in Paris, eventually bringing the sublime to the attention of Burke and subsequently Kant. Referencing Boileau's translation, Burke and Kant moved beyond Longinus's focus on criticism of Greek literature and his brief references to nature, expanding the concept of the sublime to include natural phenomena and later visual art and aesthetics, where, with the help of Lyotard, the sublime still maintains a prominent place today (Milbank, 1998). According to John Milbank, a Christian theologian and professor of religion, politics, and ethics at the University of Nottingham, Boileau's

translation precipitated the domination of the sublime in early modern aesthetic theory (1998).

Burkean sublime.

Edmund Burke (1729–1797), an Irish-born essayist and British statesman who wrote prolifically on the French Revolution and strongly advocated against the Enlightenment, emphasized the terror-sublime in his treatise *Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756/1958). Burke presented his ideas about the sublime in a time when religious assumptions were challenged and nature was being analyzed to determine its laws and limits (Bashkoff, 2001). Using secular terms as opposed to religious ones, Burke recommended experiences with the grandeur of nature in order to rouse the senses. These experiences with nature, when viewed from safety or from a distance, produce a sense of terror.

The mild shocks that are precipitated by terror—and recommended by Burke—are designed to jolt our awareness and our senses in order to push us out of monotony or boredom. These experiences do not involve *real* danger or pain; they simply elicit terror (Crowther, 1993). Once a particular awe-inspiring experience with nature (standing on the edge of a voluminous waterfall for example), is viewed from safety, the terror-sublime becomes an experience of delight.

Burke's treatise foreshadowed the ideas of the Romanticism of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with its emphasis on the sublime, while the Enlightenment concentrated on beauty (McEvelley, 2001). Romantic artists and writers drew from Burke's writings to stress the idea of nature (matter) and spirit (mind) being formed from the Absolute (Gamwell, 2002). With this union, the emphasis on the mystical and on

intuition pushed artists to look for deeper meaning beyond the confines of institutional religion, providing a broader feeling of unity of the self with the universe. The Absolute suggests that all things are an expression of one independent reality (McEvelley, 2001). Knowledge of a union with the Absolute became a spiritual goal for those who promoted Romanticism. Burke's notion of the sublime, like that of Longinus, emphasized the awakening to the grandeur without (as through an experience with nature) that leads to an awakening of the dormant grandeur within (McEvelley, 2001). Although the widely accepted notion is that in Burke's usage the sublime moved from the physical toward the mental, contemporary scholar Philip Shaw asserts that, upon further analysis, Burke's sublime actually resides in words rather than ideas (Shaw, 2006).

For Burke, the beautiful and the sublime are completely different concepts, diametrically opposed. The reason for this division is that the beautiful is comprehended as human in scale, relying on taste and opinion, purposeful and measurable, while the sublime is understood as out of scale entirely and threatening (Gilbert-Rolfe, 1999, Bashkoff, 2001). The sublime is found in the dark of storms, dense mysterious forests, the vastness of the heavens, rushing torrential waterfalls, and the seemingly limitless dimensions of the sea and desert, prompting danger and fear. These depictions of nature elicit an overwhelming sense of terror and awe, emitting a sense of desolation, and in some instances the threat of death (Milbank, 1998). The sublime for Burke begins in the senses, what we can hear, taste, and touch (Shaw, 2006). Nature sets the course for this experience of sensual exploration. Burke's exploration of the unceasing power of nature led him to explore the power of human imagination. For Burke, the imagination was "one of nature's least tamable forces" (Ratcliff, 2001, p. 227). Paul Crowther (1995) perhaps

best describes the incorporation of the imagination with the sublime, when in his article, “The Postmodern Sublime: Installation and Assembly Art,” he harkens back to the underpinnings of Burke’s theory of the sublime in imagination. Crowther (1995) states:

Burke’s sublime is fundamentally an existential one. For him, we enjoy the sensory overload of vast objects, or the threat of dangerous ones (when encountered from a position of safety [*sic*]) precisely because the shock they give us revivifies our sense of being alive. (p. 10)

From Crowther’s statement we can surmise that Burke was concerned with an attraction to pain and a retreat from the pain that the sublime emphasized. In Milbank’s opinion Burke noted that the opposite of the sublime is melancholy—the loss of the pleasurable (1998). Milbank further explains that the opposite of the sublime is not only melancholy but also a sense of complacency and staleness that creates a lack of awareness outside of one’s self and within one’s self through the faculty of imagination.

The importance of Burke’s sublime for contemporary art can be found in the work and writings of Barnett Newman. Newman, along with six other artists, was asked to respond to the question, “What is sublime in art?” in a special issue, published in December 1948, of a short-lived arts magazine, *The Tiger’s Eye*. In recounting the answers by the six artists who responded to the question, Bashkoff (2001) contends:

Vague as much of the language of the respondents was, their common mood of high seriousness, of goals that would elevate modern art to an awesome, unfamiliar level of spiritual power was pervasive, as was the idea that the ‘sublime,’ as traditionally differentiated from the ‘beautiful’ in the aesthetic treatises of Longinus and Edmund Burke, might light the path for a new American art that would break from European conventions of visual harmony in order to express what Newman referred to as ‘absolute emotions.’ (p. 43)

Kantian sublime.

Beyond the ideas and concepts which Burke promulgated, Immanuel Kant is also referenced as a major contributor to expanding the concept of the sublime. Kant (2000) was strongly opposed to the authority of reason, and in 1790 he wrote the *Critique of Judgment*, which brought him into discussions of aesthetics among other areas of discourse. Kant's objective in his writings was to make philosophy rigorous and to establish it as a true science of knowledge (Zakian, 1988). The second book of the *Critique of Judgment* was titled *Analytic of the Sublime* (2000/1790). Sections 23–29 of this second book focus specifically on the notion of the sublime. In this treatise Kant paid little attention to Longinus but acknowledged a large debt to the work of Edmund Burke. Kant was careful to show the distinction between Burke's writings on the sublime and his own. His concept in introducing the sublime within his treatise was to take sublime objects as occasions for acknowledging the innate human capacity to reason (Lap-chuen, 1998).

In Kant's concept of the sublime one looks out over the vast sea, up to the soaring peak of a mountain, or contemplates the starry heavens and realizes the ungraspable awe of such an experience. In this moment of the sublime, one experiences fear and terror, as the mind cannot comprehend this overwhelming expanse. At the same moment, the ability of the human mind to reason, to employ rationality, brings a pleasure to the sublime as one's comprehension of the vastness is followed by the sheer fact of the human mind's ability to reason. With this capacity to reason and employ rational thought, Kant imparts what Crowther (1993) describes as the ability to transcend "the limitations imposed by our embodied existence" (, p. 153). This change or passage from one's pain,

or an inability to comprehend, to pleasure, or the ability to apply reason, is often referred to as the *sublime turning* (Vall, 1995).

The sublime turning represents Kant's key argument of employing reason to fully experience the sublime (a major departure from Burke). The pleasure resulting from the ability to distance oneself from the initial sense of terror or pain is implicit in the human capacity to employ reason. Another differentiation is Kant's emphasis on the sublime experience that exists in the mind, separate from objects themselves. Kant suggested that one does not necessarily need an object to produce the notion of the sublime—an experience, a feeling, or a situation can produce the complexities of the sublime (Zakian, 1988).

Drawing more on the notion of imagination and less on the importance of Burke's focus on nature's grandeur, Kant (1790/2000) emphasized *noumena*, actual entities that transcend experience, as those that cannot be perceived through the knowledge of the senses (Zakian, 1988). *Noumena* exist in thought and are often associated with intuition. Only phenomena, such as looking out over vistas, or out over granitic peaks, can be truly experienced through the senses. "In Kant's terms the sublime hinges on a relation between perceptual and imaginative *excess* and rational *containment*" (Crowther, 1995, p. 11).

This rational containment refers more to what is inside, the notion of reason, and not something outside of one's self (Bernstein, 1992). Kant shifted the emphasis of the sublime into the realm of subjectivity where one can obtain the feeling of the sublime, not only from an object, but also from one or a number of experiences. In contrast to

Longinus and Burke, Kant argued that the object that results in the sublime could essentially be anything (McEvelley, 2001).

Influence of Burke and Kant on Lyotard.

Burke and Kant's theories of the sublime are precursors to the modern and postmodern sublime presented by Lyotard. The ideas that were established by these early theorists set the pace for expanded discussions of the sublime by Lyotard in the postmodern turn. Lyotard (1984) referenced Kant's theory to discuss the idea of the unrepresentable and the absolute and used Burke's concept of the sublime to reference the void and the anxiety associated with the void.

In referring to Kant's theory, Lyotard (1984) noted, "We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to 'make visible' this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are ideas of which no presentation is possible" (p. 78). Lyotard referenced Kant's discussion of the sublime and the notion of formlessness. This formlessness provides the absence of the form as a possible way to express the unrepresentable (Bertens, 1995). According to Lyotard, both modern and postmodern aesthetics are concerned with the unrepresentable.

Burke's contribution to Lyotard's concept of the sublime presents the terror sublime, which also includes the idea of the anxiety that Lyotard (1984) expands upon in terms of the anxiety of waiting for something to happen. Following anxiety, the threat of nothing happening, leads to Lyotard's notion of ushering in the new. For Lyotard the striving continues once we experience something vast and unexplainable. We strive to resolve the conflict in our mind as to the vastness, which Burke associates with terror.

Two key contradictory feelings in Lyotard's argument of the sublime are that the sublime demands attention or a response and that the sublime indicates a presence beyond our comprehension or understanding (Williams, 1998).

The Lyotardian Sublime

According to Lyotard (1982), the sublime is presenting the unrepresentable or the nondemonstrable. At first, this definition appears paradoxical, and questions arise. How can one present something that is unrepresentable? Lyotard uses contemporary art and aesthetics to explain the complexity of this paradox. For him, the beginning of abstract painting in 1910 led to the allusion of the invisible within the visible. In abstraction, the artwork poses subject matter that is not recognizable or is nonrepresentational. Using the example of abstraction in art, Lyotard contends that the universe is not fully demonstrable; neither is humanity, neither is spirituality nor the spirit. So the artist-as-philosopher represents the absolute through what Kant (1790/2000) calls a "negative representation" or what Lyotard calls abstraction (Lyotard, 1982). Lyotard suggested that there is a satisfaction that one experiences in attempting to call forth the faculty of feeling and imagining that allows the perceptible to correspond with the ineffable. The crux of his argument then is that the pain of not being able to comprehend or "represent" leads to gratification—to pleasure. Lyotard (1982) stated that for artists,

The sublime is not simple gratification, but the gratification of effort. It is impossible to represent the absolute, which is ungratifying; but one knows that one has to, that the faculty of feeling or imagining is called upon to make the perceptible represent the ineffable—and even if this fails, and even if that causes suffering, a pure gratification will emerge from the tension. (p. 68)

Lyotard provided ambiguity and a deep richness of thought in formulating his concepts and theories of the sublime, offering multifaceted and multilayered approaches. Like many postmodern philosophers, he presented an open dialogue, a plurality of ideas, and a melding of varying concepts to present his philosophical constructs that elicit ambiguity and open-endedness. This is the case not only with the sublime but consequently with his concepts of transcendence and immanence. In order to explain and underscore his concepts of the sublime, Lyotard continued to use the aesthetic realm of the avant-garde (Malpas, 2003).

Richard Brons (2002), a Lyotardian theorist, suggests that when reading Lyotard there are many references to transcendence, although in these instances Lyotard leans toward a free range of notions of the transcendent. This openness and playfulness are trademarks of Lyotard in his writings and philosophical discourse. Not only does he view multiple discourses existing at the same time, what he calls *language games*, but he also challenges the reader to ruminate with complex ideas and concepts (Lyotard, 1982). In this sense, Lyotard's writings tend to provide rich contemplation in analyzing the pain and pleasure mix of the sublime. This mix, in turn, leads to varying notions of transcendence and immanence so that there is no one set of *language games* and no final resolution to the dilemma of comprehensively defining the sublime (Brons, 2002). The sublime does not lead toward resolution, but leads to radical openness (Bertens, 1995). For Lyotard, the postmodern sublime is for all intents and purposes one of freeing, expansiveness, and playfulness with the anticipated final stage of pleasure and infinitude.

Jean-François Lyotard: Defining the sublime.

Lyotard initially became interested in the sublime to consider its political, rather than aesthetic, implications in reference to the political writings of Immanuel Kant. A variety of other applications of the sublime became of interest to him, including ethics, art, and theology, through multiple publications in the 1980s and 90s. Most notably, for this research, Lyotard's use of the sublime references the visual arts with a strong emphasis on the contributions of the avant-garde through the example of such pioneers and luminaries as Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, and Barnett Newman.

Lyotard (1984) emphasized how vanguard artists such as these three presented the unrepresentable in their work and shattered the notions of art and reality in innovative ways. The structure of the works of these particular iconoclastic artists contains the idea of changing the rules and the language games that are inherent to avant-garde art. Within the context of their particular contributions to the artworld, these artists created works that are groundbreaking, inventive, and innovative. According to Lyotard (1982), such avant-garde artists were interested in answering the question, "What is painting?" by demonstrating the existence of the invisible in the visual.

Artistic movements and Lyotard's sublime.

Lyotard argues that the function of painting since the fifteenth century was to document sociopolitical and religious structures with the use of the laws of perspective so that people could identify with the works, observe the artist's mastery, and admire the artist's technical skill (Crowther, 1993). When viewing works by master painters, the skill and technique of the artist is prevalent and noteworthy. The representationalism is of paramount importance, and the painting is designed to create a depiction of the subject

matter that is as realistic as possible, a veritable copy, with the expertise that incorporates techniques to create the illusion of viewing the subject matter. The dictum is: make the painting as real as possible (Crowther, 1993).

The artists of Romanticism are proponents of such a dictum. Romantics concentrated heavily on depicting the grandeur of nature in precise detail. Their goal was to express a sublime encounter to the detail of nature's grand scale. The realism of single blades of grass, lichens on rocks, individual stems and petals on flowers, flowing streams, sea foam, and buds on branches brought nature to the canvas in a representational fashion that indicated a communion with nature and the magnificence of such an expanse of wonder (Gamwell, 2002). The grand masterpieces pointed to something greater than the artist and the viewer. The Romantics interest in the Absolute brought to the canvas a striving to intricately detail the beauty that surrounds them, bringing the viewer to experience the awe and power of natural forces, be it vistas or the power of the ocean (Gamwell, 2002).

Lyotard (1994) refers to this Romantic sentiment of the sublime as "melancholia." It is the constant yearning for the communion with nature and the Absolute Spirit that always falls short but continues nonetheless, to strive for such a relationship (David, 2003). According to Anthony David (2003), a philosophy professor at Blinn College, this melancholic sublime is always striving toward, but never reaches, its goal; so, the overarching sentiment it provokes is regret. Representatives of this "melancholia" include Joseph Mallord William Turner and Caspar David Friedrich who both associated nature with the Divine or the Absolute (Gamwell, 2002). In this sense, nature became a religious experience that involved a humbling before such grandeur and beauty. More importantly,

a Romantic painter, such as Turner, only eludes to specific realistic elements in his work that do not move beyond the object themselves (Shaw, 2006).

Lyotard (1982) references modernism as the key turning point in the expression and implementation of his concept of the sublime. When the viewer is confronted with a modern work of art, the rules of perspective are broken down, and representation is confronted head on with a freeing expanse of the rules of painting and the loss of figurative representation of the object (Lyotard, 1982). As painting, in the past, served a documentary role in most instances, the viewer finds that the innovative nature of modern painting breaks this role of strict documentation and the striving to accurately and precisely depict particular subject matter. With an abstract canvas, such as a color field painting by Barnett Newman, the absence of a particular form or distinction allows the viewer to become mesmerized because there is no sense of reference (Shaw, 2006). Standing in front of a large Newman painting can create a sense of wonder and awe that may be akin to what Lyotard attempts to describe—the sublime. With the introduction of new technologies and innovations in science, namely photography and film, Lyotard pinpoints the advancement of this knowledge as the key to the departure of the arts from the documentation of events, people, and history. Lyotard suggested that painting in the mode of the modern context of the avant-garde changes the role of artists. Lyotard (1982, April) explains the role of the modernist avant-garde artist:

‘Modern painters’ discovered that they had to represent the existence of that which was not demonstrable if the perspective laws...were followed. They set about to revolutionize the supposed visual givens in order to reveal that the field of vision simultaneously conceals and needs the invisible, that it relates therefore not to the eye, but to the spirit as well. (p. 67)

Lyotard (1982) further states, “The momentum of abstract painting since 1910 stems from the rigors of indirect, virtually ungraspable allusions to the invisible within the visual” (p. 68). In this sense Lyotard is conveying that the “Modernist painters” in their abstract work have more of an ability to allude to what Lyotard refers to as the “unpresentable” (Crowther, 1993). This abstraction or formlessness is in direct contrast to representation or realism. Lyotard emphasized two distinct divisions or notions of the sublime. One is the modern version, influenced by Kant that emphasizes nostalgia; the other is a revised version that promotes the jubilation and freedom of postmodernism (Bertens, 1995). Lyotard (1984) explains the differentiation:

Here then, lies the difference: modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure. Yet these sentiments do not constitute the real sublime sentiment, which is in an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept. (p. 81)

Lyotard’s twentieth-century usage of the term *sublime* is well suited for the avant-garde artists, and especially for the abstractionists and the abstract expressionists. The unpresentable became more dominant and prevalent as artists such as these removed figurative and representational elements from art. According to Tracey Bashkoff, a Guggenheim curator, these artists were working from a sense of spiritual grounding in theory and practice in order to convey the spiritual and the sublime. Bashkoff (2001) further explains:

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Vassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian considered abstraction a means to reform an overly materialist society. The avant-

garde believed in the power of art and in the potential of abstract forms to convey spiritual truths and exert social influence. (p. 35)

Bashkoff (2001) goes on to state the changes in the ideal concept introduced by Kandinsky and Mondrian after the World War II:

Postwar Abstract Expressionists such as Robert Motherwell and Rothko were not as optimistic about art's potential benefits or use value for society. Art was used for communicating on a personal level; abstraction allowed an individual to engage with the spiritual, offering a way to find meaning in a society where experiences of alienation and disconnection were common. (p. 35)

To further elaborate on Bashkoff's notion it is helpful to consider the painting *Black Square* (1915) by Kazimir Malevich. Malevich provided the viewer with a painting that is devoid of the figurative, of the representational, and of clear presentation. The painting is steeped in Theosophical influence and suggests the idea of nothingness, the idea of creating a form out of nothing (Bowl, 1986). Malevich invites the viewer into the void; he presents the unrepresentable. Barnett Newman, as well sought to create art that went beyond beauty, to create a pictorial surface that was simply the picture itself, exemplified in his monochrome paintings (McEvelley, 2001). Thomas McEvelley, a noted critic and distinguished lecturer in art history at Rice University, further contends that Newman's idea to destroy or to go beyond beauty referred to a belief that beauty is finite and the sublime is infinite. When the sublime is reached, beauty is eliminated, so in a sense, the sublime transcends beauty. McEvelley asserts that perhaps the discourse of the sublime underlies the tradition of all of Western abstract art.

Malevich and Newman are simply two examples of the artworld pioneers who broke free of convention, of representation, removing all figurative elements to create the

controversial and often misunderstood works of the avant-garde. Malevich's monochrome canvases, Newman's enormous "zip" paintings, Mondrian's geometric grids, and Mark Rothko's luminous color-saturated canvases each in their own ways connect abstraction with the magnitude and obscurity of Burke's terror-sublime and the boundlessness and totality of Kant's sublime (Bashkoff, 2001).

The work of the abstract expressionists, including Rothko and Newman, is often interpreted with particular reference to the aftermath of World War II and the apocalyptic events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Shaw, 2006). Such artists are seen as attempting to bring the "creation of a new order from chaos, light from darkness, oneness from multiplicity" (Bashkoff, 2001, p. 45). Here we see the beginnings of new ideas, new concepts of the inner psyche of the unknown depths of the human imagination being produced on canvas. This essentially unknowable journey would lead the country, and in a sense the war-torn Europe and Japan out of the darkness into a fresh and prophetic light (Bashkoff, 2001). American artists would provide an unconventional voice to express a new art with promise and originality that would include the immense exploration of the inner world of the psyche, the imagination, and in turn spirituality.

Lyotard's differentiation: Postmodernism's sublime in the artworld.

The modernist sentiment in painting brings Lyotard to a differentiation. Lyotard (1994) states that in contrast to the modern sublime, the postmodern in art presents the idea of the *novatio* sublime, which presents the unrepresentable. *Novatio* denotes a separation from imagination, from reason, and provides a progression from pain to pleasure. Postmodern art, therefore, is not seeking for rules and categories; it is associated with play and freedom (David, 2003). The *novatio* sublime is a type of sublime that places an emphasis

instead “on the increase of being and the jubilation which result from the invention of new rules of the game, be it pictorial, artistic, or any other” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 80).

The old language games are no longer working, no longer applicable. These new rules are always changing and include experimentation and developments that are freeing and expansive. New rules and a continuous stream of invention flow in the postmodern milieu. These new rules, the new language games, allow questions to be raised about one’s everyday sense-making processes (Malpas, 2003). Lyotard (1982) succinctly states, “The spirit of the times is surely not that of the merely pleasant: its mission remains that of the immanent sublime, that of alluding to the nondemonstrable” (p. 69).

The different concepts of the sublime become quite striking as the sublime is brought from Kant’s notion to Lyotard’s interpretation and his emphasis on varying aspects of the sublime in postmodernity. Lyotard is specifically concerned with sublime art, not nature, and does not emphasize the connection between the sublime and nature’s vastness (Linn, 1996). Lyotard is more concerned with the difficulty one faces conceiving art that is sublime as it presents the unrepresentable. Lyotard (1986) posits the question regarding the sublime, “How can we share with others a feeling which is so deep and unexchangeable?” (p. 11)

In a concise definition of postmodern aesthetics with the incorporation of the idea of the sublime, Lyotard stated:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81)

Differentiating Lyotard's new sensibility of the sublime transforms Kant's notion of the sublime to an awareness of the possibility of an infinite experimentation and development of art (Oblak, 1995). The postmodern sublime is used to transcend, to go beyond tradition and convention, radically redefining the ways we view the world and reality (Lap-chuen, 1998). A key element of this sensibility is that the sublime can be achieved in the act of making art and the act of viewing art.

Lyotard, the sublime, and the avant-garde.

Avant-garde art is perhaps the most exemplary of Lyotard's sublime—the unrepresentable—because of its very nature of placing limits on our ability to reduce the world to concepts based on reason (Linn, 1996). Avant-garde art creates a fissure, a rupture that expands and broadens our preconceived notions of what art is and what it should be. Not only do avant-garde artists present new techniques in particular art forms, but they also create a new way of thinking. In order to bring new feelings and thoughts about art, that are in fact sublime, the avant-garde attempts to break rules and conventions, which in turn brings about a shock that, once taken in and experienced, produces a sense of pleasure and freeing. The avant-garde is ideal for the expression of the sublime and freeing possibilities. Lyotard (1991) speaks of the specific contribution of the avant-garde to the sublime:

Here and now there is this painting, rather than nothing, and that's what is sublime. Letting go of all grasping intelligence and of its power, disarming it, recognizing that this occurrence of painting was not necessary and is scarcely foreseeable, a privation in the face of *Is it happening?* guarding the occurrence 'before' any defense, any illustration, and any commentary, guarding before being on one's guard, before 'looking' (*regarder*) under the aegis of now, this is the rigour of the avant-garde. (p. 199)

Yet if Lyotard's notion of the sublime and its relation to the avant-garde is to be of any significance today, one must take into account the changing nature of the avant-garde. The amorphous avant-garde did not lose touch with ideas of the sublime after the established artworld shifted its attention away from the proponents of abstraction and abstract expressionism. A variety of twentieth-century artists continued to delve into the idea of the sublime, presenting work influenced by diverse spiritual teachings and grounded in esoteric theories of the occult, mysticism, and a range of religious and spiritual practices. As the notion of the avant-garde was identified over time with a sequence of artistic directions and movements (Silverman, 2002)—from pop to minimal, conceptual, action, and earth artist—at least a few practitioners of each sustained an interest in the spiritual and sublime.

Artist as philosopher: Bill Viola.

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determined judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81).

This is one of the most profound statements Lyotard makes about postmodernism and the sublime in the artworld. Hugh Silverman, professor of philosophy and comparative literary and cultural studies at Stony Brook University, suggests that indeed presenting the unrepresentable itself has another name—the sublime. Silverman (2002) reminds us that the sublime is not in an object but is an event, so the places of the sublime are manifold. The sublime can then be an experience one finds in viewing a Rothko painting, or standing amidst a Viola installation. Pain ensues as one is not completely sure what

one is viewing, but the sentiment changes to pleasure as the experience comes to be comprehended and grappling with the effort to comprehend become the moment of the sublime.

With Viola fulfilling the role of the artist as philosopher and the presence of the sublime in describing his work, the sublime ushers in the idea of “the thought of art and art as thought” (Rosiek, 2000, p. 59). Lyotard (1984) specifically contends that postmodern art is more about the expression of thought, than about expanding ways to address painting and similar innovations. Viola is an example of an artist whose notion of the sublime is inherent in his work as he expresses thoughts and concepts rather than being confined to a narrow definition of what art is. Viola creates environments that are more about thought with less emphasis on the concrete.

Viola’s interest and concentration on the human condition points toward and references the sublime. A fitting statement to integrate the idea of the sublime as it relates to the work of Viola is that of Paul Crowther, a professor of philosophy and visual arts at Jacobs University, Bremen, Germany:

What is fundamental is not this or that moment of self-consciousness, but the urge to create or discover meaning that is embodied in every such moment. It is this primal urge into meaning which is made vivid in the experience of the sublime. The best art of postmodern times, therefore, restores some notion of an authentic self which is admittedly more complex than hitherto admitted, but which cannot be analyzed away in a mere play of relations. On these terms, if properly understood and explained, sublime art has the capacity to rehumanise. (Crowther (1995, p. 17)

Spirituality, Religion, and the Sublime

Spirituality and religion in the artworld.

Abstract works serve the purpose of alluding to the unrepresentable and the nebulous, invisible level of spiritual being (Crowther, 1993). The open-ended nature of abstract and avant-garde art lends itself to an invisible and elusive present that suggests spiritual influence. This open-endedness is a trademark of contemporary spirituality. The plurality and varying nuances of spiritual practice leave little room for dogma, for strict adherence to codes, to ritualized institutional religion, and literal translations of codified texts. The spiritual in art harkens to Lyotard's notion of the sublime, where there is an expanse, a freedom, and playfulness. No longer are artists tied to a particular way of representing the world, but they may allude instead to a reality beyond the present and beyond the demonstrable.

Crowther (1995a), who discusses the contemporary sublime in a special edition of the journal *Art & Design*, to which Lyotard contributed, suggests that spirituality is difficult to pin down, though one aspect of spirituality can be made specific—the sublime. Crowther (1995a) contends that the notion of the sublime that continued from the eighteenth century to the 1960s evoked wild natural grandeur, limitlessness, and the idea that artists were expressing ultimate truths about their relation to the world. Emphasis was placed on the Divine in these instances of a sublime experience. An Absolute Spirit was prevalent, as is the case with much of the sublime works associated with Romanticism (Gladwell, 2002).

An array of artists from a variety of artistic movements have addressed this amorphous and, in the words of visual artist and writer Bill Beckley (2001), this “sticky”

sublime. Beckley (2001) uses the word *sticky* because that is what he suggests the word *sublime* has become over time. For modernists it was touted as sacred, to be taken concretely; with postmodernists, such as Lyotard, it denotes more of a freedom and expanse, more of an oscillation between pleasure and pain.

Spirituality and religion.

Just as the sublime has multiple, and often nebulous, interpretations so does spirituality in its usage in current postmodern discourse. The term *spirituality* is prone to the vernacular, just as is the sublime. In current usage, the term *spirituality* is best understood when differentiated from religion to understand its nuances and impact in American society, and specifically in the artworld.

Spirituality and religion are often viewed as synonyms, and before the twentieth century, the terms *religion* and *spiritual* were used interchangeably (Fuller, 2001). Today, they are increasingly separate as the metanarrative is replaced with many narratives, and as the plurality of discourses in understanding the world expand and diversify. The terms *spirituality* and *religion* both connote belief in a higher power, the longing to enter into a relationship with such a power, and involve interest in rituals, practices, and daily moral behaviors that foster this relationship (Fuller, 2001). With the advances in science, modern biblical scholarship, and cultural relativism, however, a strict adherence to religion's codes and dogma has become more difficult (Fuller, 2001).

In the West, religion generally means theism or the belief in God. Religion, in contrast to spirituality, involves a public realm of membership in religious institutions, participation in formal rituals, and adherence to official denominational doctrines (Fuller, 2001). Church, mosque, or synagogue attendance is encouraged as well as a commitment

to traditional beliefs. The structure of religion denotes a social and political organization that is involved in issues of power, rules, officials, dogma, dues, and a hierarchy of power structures (Heelas, 1996). According to Paul Heelas (1996), a professor of religion and modernity at Lancaster University, religion is viewed as traditional, not living, misleading, and exclusionary. Spirituality, on the other hand, has the predisposition to be more inclusive and freeing.

Spirituality defined.

Though a precise definition of spirituality is elusive because of this predisposition to freer interpretation, one component is clear: spirituality is considered a human concept, grounded in the makeup of the human being (Helminiak, 1996). Spirituality exists within the private realm of thought and experience of a person, with a focus on personal growth and development; it is more akin to a sensibility rather than a set of beliefs (Fuller, 2001). Joe Holland, a professor of philosophy and religion at St. Thomas University in Miami, Florida, suggests that one can find spirituality at the heart of culture (1988). Daniel Helminiak, a biblical scholar and former Catholic priest, suggests that *spirituality* may be defined as a “*concern for transcendence*: the sense that something in life goes beyond the here and now and the commitment to that something” (1996, p. 32). Sandra Schneider, a professor of psychology at the University of South Florida, contests that spirituality is “the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives” (1989, p. 684). As these examples suggest, definitions of spirituality often eschew references either to any divinity or to the Divine.

The spirituality of the postmodern turn represents eclecticism, a melding of oft esoteric teachings from scriptural components, sacred texts, premodern belief systems, doses of psychology, mysticism, secularized thought, and a host of other influences that contribute to the plurality of spirituality in postmodern society. Spirituality emphasizes the self and the power of the self to ascertain belief systems and ways of experiencing the world that are unique to the individual and empower the individual without an intermediary in order to have direct access to a higher source, or to a power greater than one's self (Schneider, 1989). In the context of spirituality, teachers have replaced religion in the West with their primary purpose of setting up "contexts" for participants to encounter their own spirituality and their own authority (Heelas, 1996).

In postmodernism, spirituality involves a variety of interests in mysticism, and experimentation with unorthodox beliefs and practices. Spirituality may draw from a variety of sources where one is able to pick and choose from a wide range of alternative philosophies, including Christian mysticism, Eastern philosophy, Native American teachings, Neopagan rituals, and Gnosticism, among others. Meredith McGuire (1997), a professor of sociology and anthropology at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, suggests that most spiritual seekers dabble and experiment with an array of choices rather than make a permanent commitment to one set of teachings or beliefs. Often, the church and religious organizations do not provide the type of guidance those interested in spirituality are wishing to obtain. Spiritual seekers may find the church set on building an organization or an institution rather than promoting spirituality, which emphasizes the spiritual growth of the individual (Fuller, 2001).

Spirituality can be viewed as an inherent quality, denoting the overall orientation of the individual to the world and providing new understandings of self, personal growth, and of personal potential. Providing insight into the more general sense of the term, Robert C. Fuller, professor of religious studies at Bradley University, states: “Spirituality exists wherever we struggle with the issue of how our lives fit into the greater cosmic scheme of things” and “We encounter spiritual issues every time we wonder where the universe comes from, why we are here, or what happens when we die” (2001, p. 8). In this instance, spirituality takes one to the larger picture, those philosophical questions that are asked by many at varying degrees and varying intensities.

In a more specific sense, spirituality may be viewed as having particular characteristics, among them the individual’s right and duty to establish their own criteria for belief and to decide what ideas make a practical difference in their life. In addition, contemporary spirituality often involves the rejection of any requirement to accept specific religious doctrines or faith and the acceptance of experimentation with varying beliefs and teachings (Fuller, 2001).

Spirituality has come into the popular consciousness and has become accepted by popular culture. This is evident in television, film, popular nonfiction, and a host of other media outlets. The public may not be unreservedly sure what spirituality is, or agree on exact definitions, but it increasingly accepts spirituality as part of popular discourse. The discussion and importance of spirituality, with all the rich nuances of questions about the meaning and the value of life, also moves beyond popular discourse. Spirituality has entered the academic arena, appearing in a variety of areas of study. Medicine, health education, psychology, social work, sociology, aesthetics, philosophy, anthropology, and

art are a few of the fields in which spirituality is now seeing increased attention and full acknowledgment in legitimate and sustainable dialogue (Helminiak, 1996).

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates how the concept of the sublime has changed over time, coming in the writings of Lyotard to offer significant insights on connections between the sublime, vanguard art, and the postmodern condition. The concept is traced through its associations with varied movements in art, from Romanticism to modernism, and especially abstract expressionism and Lyotard's references to avant-garde artists in order to clarify his analysis as presenting the unrepresentable or undemonstrable. This progression builds momentum toward Lyotard's conclusion that the artist has become the philosopher of the postmodern era.

The analysis of the sublime builds toward a connection with contemporary spirituality. This correlation is constructed by again using the artworld and artists to clarify and refine specific nuances of spirituality, which in contemporary society refers to a melding of eclectic and sometimes esoteric teachings from scriptural components, sacred texts, premodern belief systems, psychology, mysticism, secularized thought, and a host of other influences. Beyond experimentation with varying beliefs and teachings, contemporary spirituality encompasses a person's right to determine their own belief systems and make decisions on what impacts the individual most, and an independence from dogma and religious doctrine. Combining these theories and definitions, the chapter clarifies the definition of the contemporary sublime and spiritual within a postmodern Lyotardian construct.

This chapter also introduces artist Bill Viola and his work as an exemplar of current interests in both the sublime and the spiritual in art. The analysis of Viola and his art will continue in the case study that follows in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4
A CASE STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE ART OF BILL VIOLA

Introduction

Introduction to the case study.

This chapter introduces artist Bill Viola as the case study for this dissertation. A discussion of the artist's formative years, his influences, his personal history, and his own philosophy and creative motives is offered to provide background for his artistic development. The key themes of the sublime and spirituality are examined as an essential part of the artist's contributions to contemporary postmodern visual art. References that illuminate Viola's attitudes toward the sublime and spiritual are also compared and contrasted with those articulated in the preceding chapter.

This chapter then addresses connections between Viola's work and broader interpretation of spirituality and investigates possibilities for interpreting his work in the context of postmodernity. The artist's own statements and explanations of his work are presented and analyzed, as well as writings by arts scholars, critics, and curators who have studied the artist from a variety of perspectives. A final section describes the kind of support Viola and his work have received from foundations and other funding sources.

Introduction to Bill Viola.

Bill Viola (b. 1951) is considered one of the most influential artists of his generation, with a career spanning over thirty years. His oeuvre extends from experimental single-channel videos to more elaborate video installations, and his works offer a cinematic presence filled with philosophical insights and capable of producing personal transformations. Viola's work is deeply spiritual, steeped in the sublime, and rich in emotion. As he commandingly forges ahead in the artworld of the twenty-first century, his messages and his convictions about the spiritual nature of his work remain steadfast and explicit. He has received some of the highest accolades the artworld can bestow and substantial support from the philanthropic community for the creation and exhibition of his work. Thus Viola embodies the notion of a contemporary artist working with spirituality and making a significant impact on the landscape of the artworld with his extraordinary visions of rare transcendence and brilliance. He allows the viewer to journey along with him, to become physically and spiritually immersed in visceral and forceful encounters with startling images and arresting sound.

Ideas of the sublime developed by Edmund Burke (1729–97), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and especially Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998) offer a very productive avenue for approaching Viola's work. Lyotard's sublime—a feeling that there is something that can be conceived beyond the limits of experience—is particularly relevant. This postmodern sublime encompasses not only experiences that are extreme and awe-inspiring but an awareness that the unrepresentable exists even if we cannot know it or represent it (Lyotard, 1984). Viola attempts to convey the existence of something that is unrepresentable without necessarily emphasizing images themselves, but rather what

lies beneath and behind the images, the connotations of the images. Through the sublime feeling his work evokes, Viola uses his art to communicate his deepest thoughts, dreams, fears, processes, and epiphanies.

Providing an awareness of the unrepresentable and evoking the sublime, Viola references a plethora of spiritual and religious teachings in his work, including Chinese Taoism, Sufism, Judeo-Christian mysticism, Buddhism, and Zen Buddhism. The mysteries and the transformational power of these belief systems allow for a glimpse of the sublime through spiritual awakenings. In recent years, Viola has explored the rich tradition of Christian mysticism and the saints associated with such traditions. His interest in mysticism also extends beyond the Christian tradition, spilling out into Buddhist and Islamic mysticism.

Viola's work is steeped in rich layers of meaning, drawing not only from these numerous spiritual belief systems, but also from the ordinary and the extraordinary events of his life. His vision and process represent deep-seated convictions that have been part of a very personal journey. "My work is nothing more than an expression of myself in as deep a way and as full a way as I can make it," Viola states in an interview with film and video critic Deirdre Boyle (1983, p. 12). Experiences such as the birth of his son, the death of his mother, and a near-drowning accident in his childhood inform the deeply felt phenomena he incorporates in his work. He communicates and evokes the sensations associated with these experiences as catalysts that startle, arouse, and enliven the viewer.

By combining, melding, and synthesizing a number of belief systems and the teachings of mystics from many generations and cultures, Viola and his work reflect both the varied ingredients and the additive processes typical of postmodern art. Viola breaks

down the metanarrative, allowing many small narratives to surface and to intermingle and complement his work. Many of the teachings and spiritual belief systems he employs are on the fringes of mainstream organized religion, and in this too, Viola's method is akin to Lyotard's notion of skepticism toward metanarratives. He seeks to investigate multiple truths, rather than to reveal one all-encompassing truth, and revels in the freedom that gives him.

Melding his personal experiences with his broad knowledge of spiritual teachings, Viola creates a unique and poignant body of artworks replete with ambiguity, unanswered questions, and mystery. He asks of viewers their full attention, hoping that questions will be raised and ideas will be challenged and explored upon encountering his work. Evoking the feeling of the sublime, his work is engrossing and alarming, and viewers can find themselves attracted and repelled at the same time. The process of experiencing these works can produce both pain and confusion, but that process eventually leads to understanding and better comprehension, and thus results in pleasure. The challenge for the viewer in encountering the sublime in this way is to grapple with the presupposition of what an artwork should be (Malpas, 2003). Viola's medium, video, proves a perfect vehicle for producing unknown and as of yet unseen images—for, in essence, presenting things that cannot be fully seen or represented (Syring, 1992).

Bill Viola's Background and Development

To better understand the progression of Bill Viola's work, it is important to elucidate his many interests and influences. Consequently, a brief history of his education, his involvement with technology, and his personal life is useful, as is a consideration of the

influences of his readings in spirituality and religion, and of the impact of Renaissance art on his work. Seminal changes occurred in Viola's artistic process at different junctures in his life, based on external factors and events in his personal life. External factors such as the rapid surge in technological innovation consistently changed the nature of his work. In addition, changes and radical shifts in society and Viola's reaction to such shifts substantially altered his creative process.

Events in Viola's personal life, be they mundane or momentous, play an integral part in his artistic process, strongly influencing his artwork and his creative explorations. From childhood memories and events, to the documentation of his life into adulthood, Viola draws keen insight from the passage of time. His internal spiritual growth, participation in spiritual practices, and immersion in different cultures, religions, and spiritual teachings have also led to changes in his work and the realization of his vision.

Formative years.

Viola enrolled in the art school at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York, in 1969 where he studied painting and experimental electronic music (Hoberman, 1987). At the university student center, he was introduced to video for the first time and developed a budding interest in this new medium. In order to further explore video as a means of artistic expression, Viola transferred to the Department of Experimental Studios and in 1972 he graduated with a BFA from the College of Visual and Performing Arts (Campbell, 2003). Working in the Department of Experimental Studios allowed him to continue his explorations of experimental music, and his music studies and, more specifically, his interest in sound, would prove a strong influence in his videos and video installations (Walsh, 2003).

Viola's college years coincided with a vibrant time of exploration and discovery involving the new technology of video and the emergence of experimental music. Moreover, he was attending the university at a time when American society was questioning its values, its beliefs, and allowing the floodgates of spiritual teachers and gurus from a plethora of cultural traditions and belief systems to enter the greater American consciousness. Inquisitive and open-minded, Viola embraced the radical social changes occurring outside of the studio and the classroom, and the counterculture of that time has continued to affect his work over the course of his career (Campbell, 2003).

To Viola, the artworld of the 1960s and 1970s seemed characterized by progress not only in technological change, but in social and cultural changes as well (Hixson, 1999/2000). Video, as an art form, became an integral part of this counterculture and provided a vehicle for responding to the burgeoning social and cultural changes occurring in the United States (Darke, 2000). Initially seen as an antiestablishment medium, video proved to be highly adaptable to self-exploration, diverse experimentation, and examination of society's conflicts and unrest (Kamps, 1994).

As the development of the counterculture forged ahead, Viola was intrigued by the influx of belief systems and spiritual teachings he encountered at the university. Like many artists seeking deeper insights, additional source material, and new discoveries to inform and inspire their work, Viola was eager to explore these mind-expanding spiritual teachings. He embarked on a journey to broaden his notions of spirituality and religion beyond his Episcopalian upbringing, which had provided a strictly Western perspective.

In his time on the Syracuse campus he became aware of Zen masters, Hindus reading the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita, and the transcendentalists (Campbell,

2003). He drew much of his spiritual inspiration from Chinese Taoism, Sufism, and Buddhism, as well as from Judeo-Christian mysticism. As Viola himself notes, the “Vietnam generation was really open to Eastern religion” (Campbell, 2003, p. 89) and those spiritual teachings were “just floating in the air” (Viola & Hyde, 1997, p. 143). The artist immersed himself in those ideas “floating in the air” and created grounding for his work that he would revisit repeatedly. Such alternative spiritual and religious teachings only fueled his enthusiasm for deeper exploration and understanding, and he sought additional inspiration from an eclectic array of disciplines and philosophies, including quantum physics, metaphysics, perceptual psychology, phenomenology, anthropology, mythology, and ancient Greek philosophy (Boyle, 1988).

The 1970s: An experimental phase.

While ruminating on these new belief systems, Viola began to focus intently on the technological components of his craft. In the early 1970s, he began an experimental period with the video camera, exploring the camera’s expressive qualities as a tool for creating works of art. Testing the camera’s capabilities and limitations, he began to create general statements about the world with a direct approach to his own perceptions of life. In their nascent form, Viola’s early works dealt with everyday occurrences, the play of images, and changes in technology while traversing the nature of human existence (Lauter, 1999). He then branched out into broader themes, addressing ideas that encompassed the concepts of movement, space, time, and change (Lauter, 1999). This phase of his work (between 1973 and 1979) Viola termed *structural video*, in the sense that the nature and the qualities of video are deconstructed (Syring, 1992, & Darke,

2000). The experimentation of this period draws heavily from Viola's experiences in experimental music and performance (Syring, 1992).

In his first solo exhibition, in 1974 at The Kitchen in New York City, Viola pushed the limits of the artworld establishment and demanded that it consider video as a true medium of artistic expression. Often working against the notion of the staid museum structure, Viola became part of a second generation of video artists that gained comfort using video as an expressive tool (Kamps, 1994). Through many substantial exhibitions, retrospectives, and the momentous opportunity to represent the United States at the 46th Venice Biennale in 1995, Viola championed the idea that video be regarded as a legitimate medium of artistic expression.

Many of Viola's early videos depicted interiors with the artist himself as a main focal point, in order to demonstrate his inner process of thinking and feeling (Lauter, 1992). Whether or not the viewer is aware of Viola's inner thoughts and feelings, however, one is nonetheless, invited to partake in an inward journey that requires patience and an open mind. In this sense, the viewer has the opportunity to witness the Kantian and Burkean sublime inherent in these early works. As Viola progressed, his work exemplified more of the Lyotardian notion of the sublime.

This Lyotardian sublime is noted at a specific turning point in Viola's career that surfaced in 1979. Viola began to concentrate less on casting himself as a focal point in his videos and instead to concentrate on the mysterious outside world that challenges one's perspective. Marie Luise Syring (1992), an art critic, curator, and cultural development manager in Düsseldorf, Germany, notes the importance of this sea change in Viola's work:

From this we may conclude that the outer world would later be only a way through which one may reach other realities. These years were, in any case, a time of preparations for the main statement developed in the works of the '80s: video can make visible that which is not. (p. 21)

After the shift in 1979, Viola allowed the viewer less access to his outward experiences and offered more of his inner perceptions of external phenomena. This emphasis on outward phenomena incorporated his thoughts, experiences, feelings, memories, and his dreams (Lauter, 1999). He moved beyond these psychophysical processes to embrace the spiritual domain, mysticism, metaphysics, imagination, and reason (Lauter, 1999). All along Viola was interested in synthesis rather than the analysis of these phenomena and ideas (Gehr, 1999).

Throughout the many video experiments from the 1970s to the 1980s, a connection can be made to the sublime and the spiritual. This connection can be gained when considering that the use of video and technology in the realm of a postmodern world, can present the unrepresentable. Even if we cannot know it, there is something beyond the limits of our experience that we can conceive of, and video provides that capability.

The 1980s: An emphasis on content.

Ending his experimental or *structural* phase and focusing more on the outside world, Viola began concentrating on content. Viola drew from his continuing interest in, and curiosity about, ancient Asian and Middle Eastern cultures (Darke, 2000). He drew from his travels to the exotic terrain of the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific and to the unique aesthetic environment of Japan where he documented the music, and spiritual

traditions, of these cultures (Lauter, 1999). He also garnered much inspiration from his sojourns to Java and Bali, Indonesia, as well as in Australia.

In this environment of change, replete with possibilities for exploration, Viola began to take seriously the Eastern religions and spiritual teachings that were a part of his student days at Syracuse. As he says to Lewis Hyde, poet, essayist, and MacArthur and Guggenheim Foundation Fellow (1997), “It was primarily through these studies and readings that I eventually went to Japan and met the Zen master Daien Tanaka and actually started practicing Zen meditation” (p. 143). Zen Buddhism would play an ever-increasing role as an underlying theme in Viola’s work.

With his newfound interest in Buddhism, Viola traveled to Japan, setting up residence there from 1980 to 1981, with a goal of studying the culture as well as Japan’s innovative advances in video technology. He immersed himself in the traditional culture of Japan: calligraphy, Nô theater, and meditation. During this time of deep engagement with Japanese culture, his work with technology and his interest in the developing innovations of the video camera did not cease. He explored state-of-the-art modern video technologies while an artist-in-residence at Japan’s Atsugi Labs, a part of the Sony Corporation (Lauter, 1999). He continued to use the video camera as a tool to delve deeper into the realm of spirituality.

Viola’s travels and residencies in Japan were only the beginning of his multifaceted cultural explorations. His exposure to, and immersion in, different cultures, strongly influenced and would continue to affect his work in profound and illuminating ways. In his voracious quest to gain knowledge of various belief systems, he diligently forged ahead, always looking for personal and artistic inspirations.

In 1982 he traveled to Ladakh, India, to study religious art and the rituals of the Buddhist monks. In 1984 he traveled to the Fiji Islands in the South Pacific where he witnessed intense and alluring rituals of the South Indian Suva (Lauter, 1999). His interest in other cultures also prompted interests in the indigenous peoples of the United States, and he honed in on specific Native American archeological sites in the American southwest. All of these travels at home and abroad were spawned primarily by Viola's curiosity about spiritual practices in a variety of cultures (Walsh, 2003). He was particularly interested in understanding the underpinnings of the belief systems specific to these many cultures.

The 1990s: Exploring Christianity and Christian mysticism.

Moving into the 1990s, Viola left behind his travels and began to focus on a dialogue with Western medieval and Renaissance art, particularly referencing art history, artists' narratives, depictions of the human figure, and portraiture (Livingstone, 2000). This focus prompted Viola to move toward an exploration of Christianity and Christian mysticism with an overt reference to Christian religious art (Livingstone, 2000). As part of his interest and foray into religious art, Viola became a scholar-in-residence at the Getty Institute in Los Angeles, California. At the Getty he studied the passions and the intense emotional states depicted in many medieval and Renaissance artworks (Walsh, 2003). He was intrigued with the idea that religious art had underlying meaning and structure that demanded closer attention and scrutiny.

While exploring the Getty Institute's collection of religious art, his interest in Christian mystics began to intensify, and he devoted entire installations to mystics and saints such as St. John of the Cross, and Saint Catherine. Viola himself states that he sees

“a strong connection between the outstanding mystic and artists” (Zutter, 1992, p. 102). As Christian mystics have been on the fringe and not generally recognized by the church, they are similar to Viola’s perception of himself as an artist outside of the mainstream art establishment. As a video artist, he defies the conventional notion of the artist set in the conventional museum environment. Reinforcing this notion, Syring (1992) notes that Viola perceives mystics, as he does himself and other particular artists, as outsiders, admonishers, and critics of their respective society.

Exploring his burgeoning interest in mystics and saints, Viola began to broaden his research in religious art. He began looking to the “great artists” or the “old masters” to uncover the hidden transformative nature of their work. In an interview with art critic and historian Hans Belting (2003), Viola states, “the dominance of religious and spiritual realities in daily life, allowed these artists [old masters] to see through the material surface of the object to the symbolic layers underneath” (p. 194). Viola then began to look beyond the visual and to see something that is not easily presented, something lurking beneath the surface. In a sense he was exploring the sublime sentiment inherent in these masterworks.

In an interview with art historian and curator Jörg Zutter, Viola further explains what he sees as the qualities beneath the surface of the artworks created by these “great artists:”

When I began to focus in on this aspect of the work, I saw that what at first appeared to be independent shining lights, bursts of transcendent inspiration on a dull field, became linked by something unconsciously sensed below the familiar surface. (p. 103)

Viola recounts that for him, viewing the “old masters” was important, as the paintings produced a visceral emotional response that was unexpected and meaningful for him personally and in terms of his own work as an artist. He states, “My training in art school was all about responding to artworks from an intellectual, perceptual, or cultural way—in other words, as a viewer, not a participant.... It certainly didn’t involve a bodily fluid coming uncontrollably out of my eyes” (Belting & Viola, 2003, p. 198).

In an interview with Martin Gayford (2003), chief art critic for *Bloomberg*, Viola notes that one thing about “the so-called Old Masters is that they were not old masters—they were young radicals” (p. 22). According to Viola, the “old masters” were inventive and creative, responding to sociopolitical issues of their time, and they were trying to revitalize religious teachings for contemporary viewers (Gayford & Viola, 2003). Viola is taking on the same mission, creating the same dialogue. He has proven to be a radical as well, creating works through state-of-the-art technology that speak to a new generation of viewers interested in contemporary spirituality and the complex social issues of today (Gayford & Viola, 2003).

Moving into the twenty-first century: The Passions.

As they mature and develop, many artists in varying disciplines are led to study the art and artists of the past while trying to understand themselves (Walsh, 2003). *The Passions* (2000–2002), a compilation of twenty video works inspired by Viola’s careful study of the “old masters,” explores emotions, the hidden world of feelings, the search for wholeness, and personal transformation (Walsh, 2003). This extensive series of works culminates in a grand tour de force of the religious and spiritual influences that have dominated Viola’s oeuvre for over thirty years. The exhibition curator John Walsh

(2003), in the catalogue accompanying *The Passions*, defines the purpose of Viola's work as it has progressed into the twenty-first century, as an attempt to "...lead him and others toward self-knowledge" (p. 25). In these works, Viola's investigation of Christian art brought him to themes of compassion, resurrection, mourning, and remembrance. His aim was not simply to copy or contemplate this art. Walsh (2003) contends, "Viola returned to Christian art and sought to understand and re-embody its former purpose as a path to spiritual growth" (p. 61).

Although at first glance, it may appear that Viola is merely copying or appropriating images from the past, the artist is clear that this is a misdirected perception of his work. Art critic and curator Marco Livingstone (2000) quotes him as saying, "I don't believe in originality in art. I think we exist on this earth to inspire each other, through our actions, through our deeds and through who we are. We're always borrowing. I think it's a beautiful, wonderful thing" (p. 322). Though one may consider appropriated images a hallmark of postmodern art, Viola (2003) contests that he is not interested in appropriating or restaging historical artworks. In the process of appropriation, Viola expounds that one can "...lose respect for the latent power of the objects and materials themselves, and the inner transformative reasons for appropriating them in the first place (Zutter, 1992, p. 102).

One example of restaging or appropriating and delving beneath the surface of historic religious art in a contemporary way is *Catherine's Room* (2001), in which Viola explored many past depictions of Saint Catherine. In the catalogue of *The Passions* (Walsh, 2003), Viola describes *Catherine's Room* as a color video polyptych on five LCD flat panels mounted on the wall and arranged horizontally. On these five separate

screens, Viola depicts a series of tableaux, private glimpses into the life of a solitary woman performing daily rituals in five separate rooms. Viola explains that these panels depict the progression of time, both seasonal (represented by a simple branch that appears outside the window of the room that changes from budding to being devoid of leaves) and according to the succession of the day from morning to afternoon, sunset, evening, and night (Walsh, 2003).

Viola demonstrates the passage of time by offering glimpses of everyday tasks and occurrences that reference Saint Catherine and are addressed in a ritualistically spiritual manner. John Walsh (2003) describes the work as a celebration of the everyday events of life that if lived attentively, represent and become prayer. These silent rituals, or prayers, show a spiritual diligence to approach each day as a gift of simple, yet profound revelations. The form for the work is taken from the Renaissance predellas, small narrative panels at the bottom of multipanel altarpieces that tell stories of spiritual significance and awakening. Such Renaissance predellas are part of the Getty collection. In discussing them, Viola reiterates that his interest is to explore their hidden meanings and to delve beneath their surface, rather than merely appropriating them.

...I want to get inside these pictures...to embody them, to inhabit them, to feel them breathe. Ultimately it became about their spiritual dimensions, not the visual form. As to my concept in general, it was to get to the root sources of my emotions and the nature of emotional expression itself. (Viola, 2003, p. 199)

As this suggests, Viola's development again is continuing with a focus on spiritual beliefs. Moreover, he is looking for something lurking beneath the surface of these important artworks of the past that can speak to audiences today. Viola implies that we can conceive or know what is lurking beneath the surface even if it is beyond the

limits of our experience, an idea closely connected to Lyotard's postmodern sublime. This sublime sentiment is what Lyotard suggests avant-garde artists embody. In his works at the beginning of the new millennium, Viola demonstrates this multifaceted notion of the sublime through his videos in stark and alarming clarity

Venice 2007: Ocean Without a Shore.

For one of his most recent large-scale works, Viola was invited to create a site-specific installation to coincide with the 52nd Annual Venice Biennale (June 10–November 21, 2007). The piece consists of three flat-panel video screens situated above three altars in the Venetian Church of San Gallo. Presented by the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice under the auspices of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, this work continues to delve into spirituality, dealing with human mortality and attempting to present the unrepresentable—in this instance the threshold between life and death. Here's how Viola describes this enigmatic installation:

Ocean Without a Shore is about the presence of the dead in our lives. The three stone altars in the church of San Gallo become portals for the passage of the dead to and from our world. Presented as a series of encounters at the intersection between life and death, the video sequence documents a succession of individuals slowly approaching out of darkness and moving into the light. Each person must then break through an invisible threshold of water and light in order to pass into the physical world. Once incarnate however, all beings realise that their presence is finite and so they must eventually turn away from material existence to return from where they came. The cycle repeats without end. (Viola, 2007)

According to Viola in a podcast produced by the Tate in London (Tate Online & Viola, 2007), "Monitors positioned on three stone altars in the church show a succession of individuals slowly approaching out of darkness and moving into the light, as if encountered at the intersection between death and life." Viola explains that in order to represent the threshold between life and death, he used a sheer transparent stream of

water in the filming, invisible until the person walks through the water. Incorporating water to set up a metaphor of transcendence, Viola presents an avenue for discovery by prompting viewers to ask philosophical questions about ephemeral existence and life after death. This project seeks both to arouse and awaken the viewer—as in Burke’s sublime—and to present the unrepresentable, as in Lyotard’s. Moreover, Viola continues to ask the larger questions, proving himself a true philosopher of our time in the sense Lyotard suggested artists could and should be.

The Sublime and Spirituality in Viola’s Work

Varieties of the sublime.

Viola’s work demonstrates a direct link to the experience of the sublime that is multifaceted and complex. In some instances his earlier work—for example, *The Crossing* (1996)—exemplifies the sublime of Burke, in its attempts to startle, to arouse terror, to wake up the viewer with the use of elements of fire and water. In other works, such as *Heaven and Earth* (1992), Viola is concerned with the Kantian sublime, where the viewer is simultaneously repelled by and attracted to his images (Malpas, 2003). Most notably in the Kantian sublime the viewer incorporates the human capacity to reason so that the comprehension of the images results in a feeling of pleasure. Particularly in later works, however, it is the notion of Lyotard’s sublime that informs and is informed by the spiritual and religious influences that are so significant in Viola’s oeuvre. *The Passions* series, for example, embodies Lyotard’s sublime with references to a variety of spiritual teachings that look beyond human experience and reason. Experiencing these works, the viewer may find that Viola’s art eludes to the unrepresentable, a spiritual essence that be

conceived of even if Viola and the viewer cannot represent or know this spiritual component precisely.

Another work in *The Passions* series, *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001), further exemplifies the seemingly unrepresentable through a compelling and alluring installation. The work invites viewers into a large dark room that allows for spiritual contemplation and awakening. Viola refers to the viewers' potential experience as "an enveloping emotional experience like that of a church" (Walsh, 2003, p. 48). He goes on to describe the installation in more detail and with captivating poetry:

Five Angels for the Millennium consists of five individual video sequences showing a clothed man plunging into a pool of water. Playing simultaneously and repeating on a continuous loop, the images are projected directly onto the walls of a large dark room. The "angel" appears infrequently on each screen, breaking through the surface in a sudden explosion of light and sound that interrupts the otherwise peaceful aqueous landscape. Weightless and motionless, the human figure enters the depths of a mysterious underwater world, a luminous void of unknown dimensions where the laws of physics seem suspended and the borders between the infinite cosmos and the finite human body merge. Shining bubbles float like stars in the night sky as the human form traverses the gap between heaven and earth, suspended between light and darkness, time and eternity, life and death (Viola et al, 2003, p. 146)

This installation is rich in the sublime, where the viewer must grapple with the seen and the unseen, the demonstrable and the undemonstrable. At least some of the power of this piece comes from the immersive installation Viola creates, a presentation format or medium in which—as Kate Davidson (1996) eloquently describes—"The unity of components is greater than the sum of its parts: its presence exists beyond the object itself" (p. 4).

Referencing the Burkean and Kantian sublime.

The sublime as experienced in Viola's work references the ideas of Burke and Kant as well as those of Lyotard. For example, part of his work's appeal is the way it startles and rouses viewers. Incorporating profound events that have occurred in his life, Viola attempts to awaken the mind of the viewer, as he described in an earlier statement (1995):

As people drawn to the field of art, it is, most fundamentally, the basic human characteristic of wanting to share and give others an experience that has been profound and important in our own lives. If it is our desire to perpetuate our own experience of personal meaning and transformation, then the question becomes, how do you start the fire in the individual. (p. 172)

For Viola, starting the fire in the individual is to rouse, to create what he sees as an experience of spiritual awakening. The images may be alarming or jolting, confusing, or transporting.

In one of his earlier works entitled *Science of the Heart* (1983), part of the installation involves a large video projection of a calm human heart beating loudly—the sound filling the entire room. In describing the work Viola notes that by rapidly speeding up the video to nearly 20 times normal speed, what starts out as a relatively calm environment suddenly changes to the assaulting pounding crescendo of a wildly beating heart (Belisle & Viola, 1993). Through the depiction of such startling images and events, the use of state-of-the-art technology, and a mastery of sound environments, Viola leads the viewer on a sensory experience that provides a journey through the Burkean sublime. With the sudden flash of images, rapid beating of the human heart, the sound of roaring winds, the depiction of deserts and mountains, or the ascension of a human figure, Viola transports the viewer and arouses terror to startle and awaken.

But the artist's evocation of the sublime does not stop with the Burkean notion, but progresses to the Kantian sublime, as Viola's seeks to arouse the senses in order to penetrate beneath the surface. This penetration of the surface is designed to expose the layers of meaning underneath the reality that is generally perceived. In Kant's view, a sublime experience is not simply outside the individual, it may occur within the imagination as well.

The Crossing (1996), an arresting work by Viola that I was able to view at both the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City and the Galeria Zacheta in Warsaw, Poland, exemplifies this notion of the sublime sentiment moving from Burkean to Kantian. In *The Crossing*, an image of a man walking toward the viewer is projected onto a white scrim that hangs in the middle of the gallery. The man, closely resembling Viola himself, is slowly doused with water on one side. The amount of water builds to a deluge that engulfs the man. Simultaneously on the other side of the scrim, small flames begin to emerge around the man's feet. Eventually the flames reach a crescendo and seemingly engulf the man in flames.

In *The Crossing*, water and fire not only represent their destructive qualities but they point toward the cathartic, regenerative, and purifying capacities of these two elements as well (Viola & Perov, 2007). Fire and water also produce what Viola describes as "self annihilation." In order to reach the cathartic and purifying nature of water and fire Viola further explains, "Self annihilation becomes a necessary means to transcendence and liberation" (Walsh, 2003, p. 52).

Referencing Lyotard's postmodern sublime.

Even in the relatively limited descriptions of Viola's work presented in this chapter, the pattern of his work clearly demonstrate this artist's intense and personal mission of awakening and transcendence that ultimately allows the sublime to inhabit his works. Immersing his work in rich spiritual dimension, he presents the unrepresentable. He attempts to expose those events not readily experienced in human existence, and to keep them open for further scrutiny and analysis. In an interview with Lewis Hyde (1997), Viola provides grounding for the presence of the sublime in his work. In his conversation with Hyde (1997) Viola eloquently states,

I guess the connection ultimately, if I can say it in one encapsulated way, has to do with an acknowledgment of awareness or recognition that there is something above, beyond, below, beneath what's in front of our eyes, what our daily life is focused on.... There is an unseen world out there and we are living it. (p. 143)

In Viola's installations, it is possible to look beyond what is readily seen, to encounter what Viola describes as "an unseen world." These moments may lend themselves to an experience that parallels Lyotard's postmodern sublime, what Lyotard (1982) refers to as, "the gratification of effort" (p. 68). There is the tension that Lyotard (1982) suggests in attempting to present the ineffable, that even if one fails to do so, even if it causes suffering in the process, this is the place of pure gratification. Viola carries the notion of "gratification of effort" one step further. He notes that in his work there is an unsolvable mystery that is inherent in life. Inherently there is the potential for and experience of gratification or satisfaction that allows the viewer to continue to grapple with the ambiguities of life. Viola (1995) explains the beauty of this mystery in an

interview with author Michael Nash, “Something that is not solvable and doesn’t have an answer gives life because it propels one to continue with the quest” (p. 177).

Viola’s 1992 work *Heaven and Earth* captures the notion of this quest while also demonstrating Lyotard’s gratification of effort. The work exemplifies this effort, pointing toward something that essentially cannot be presented, but perhaps only alluded to.

Heaven and Earth consists of two wooden columns, one protruding from the gallery floor and another column suspended from the ceiling. Two monitors are affixed to these columns, a few inches apart, projecting a video image of Viola’s dying mother and an image his newborn son opening his eyes for the very first time.

Viola depicts these birth and death moments in stark images that face one another in a poignant composition. The screens reflected the opposing images—birth and death, a beginning and an end—these complex, miraculous moments that are represented in video stills of arresting simplicity. The viewer grapples with the small gap between these images, a seeming compression of time. The small gap becomes a vista that points toward a life lived, and the nascent stage of hope and possibility. The notion or complexity of life cannot necessarily be depicted in a gap or space, but in this moment of silence, the essence of life, the idea of life, is suggested all the same. In *Heaven and Earth*, Viola attempts to demonstrate, to represent the nondemonstrable, the unrepresentable, and therefore the sublime.

Viola closely exemplifies the essential and crucial role that Lyotard’s avant-garde artist plays in the postmodern world. For Lyotard, avant-garde artists are meant to be nonconformists; they disrupt the established ideas of the world, altering and challenging perception (Malpas, 2003). In this sense, Viola represents a postmodern artist that breaks

rules and creates his work to challenge and provide a freedom of ideas and concepts. He does this not only with the radical antiestablishment medium of video, but by launching complex ideas that challenge the boundaries of perception and thought. Stuart Morgan, considered one of the greatest British writers on contemporary art (1996), further explains the unique characteristics of the avant-garde artist inherent in Viola's oeuvre: "the alteration of the viewer's preconceptions plays a major part in Viola's thinking, in which canons of importance are reconsidered, focus is set free, and the viewer is forced to revise fixed ideas" (p. 10). In addition to the notion of disrupting fixed ideas and concepts, Viola utilizes additional tenets of the postmodern avant-garde, namely to undermine, destabilize, and transgress (Kalil, 1995).

Critical response to Viola's sublime.

A range of critics, scholars, and curators has attested to the sublime as a major element of Viola's work. Hoberman (1987) contends that one of Viola's early works, *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986), "expresses a yearning for a reality beyond the senses and outside of history, even while suggesting the impossibility of grasping such a reality" (p. 71). In this work Viola is interested in a path through the inner states of his being (Syring, 1992). The work is unsettling with depictions of nature, fish swimming then rotting, bison roaming the plains then the image of a bison's carcass decomposing as the camera zooms in on the bison's eye. The camera moves from outer states of nature to inner states of animal and human consciousness (Yapelli, 1994). The work is in five parts and takes the viewer on a journey through consciousness. In a statement to accompany an exhibition titled *Images and Spaces* at the Madison Arts Center, Viola (1994) succinctly encapsulates the premise of this work: "Images of animals mediate a progression from an

initial stage of non-differentiation [pure being], proceeding through stages of the rational and the physical orders, finally arriving at a state beyond logic and the laws of physics (p. 23).

Like Hoberman, Anne-Marie Duguet (1983) speaks of the sublime element inherent in Viola's work when she states, in another description of this particular work:

We are confronted by the visual elements which are not easily grasped in our immediate experiences of the world. What operates here is *an abstraction*, the creation of a mental time lapse, of truly subjective duration, a kind of extension of our field of awareness. (p. 7)

David Ross (1997), former director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, remarks on the sublime sentiment in Viola's work, both written and visual:

Through personal, nearly diaristic writings and a consistent vision, he [Viola] has created and nurtured a unique intellectual and spiritual foundation for his work. The work functions as an extension of direct personal observation of the everyday, presented as poetic intimations of the sublime in everyday life. Viola's notebooks reveal the evolution of an artist's working process and trace the ways in which his wide-ranging curiosity has powered a deep personal search for the sublime in both written and visual form. (p. 24)

Elsewhere in this text, Ross explicitly notes that Viola's work focuses on "the sublime and the possibility of spiritual transcendence" (p. 24).

Connected with the notion of the sublime is the concept of the infinite. Viola attempts to address this notion through his experience of his son's birth, an extremely spiritual, life-changing event for him, which has become part of the fabric of his work. When a viewer is placed at the level of the infant's experience of the world, as Viola suggests, an experience of infinitude transpires (Kuspit, 1987). Viola not only depicts the birth of his child and the newness of his son's life on video, but he suggests an approach to art that brings into play nascent awareness. Viola (1995) writes, "As countless artists

have stated before, the appreciation, as well as the making of art demands a primacy of perception, an open child-like state of vulnerability and emotive sensitivity” (p. 170).

Looking at Viola’s art just as an infant would view its surroundings, Donald Kuspit (1987), an American art critic, poet, and professor of art history and philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook writes, “objects self-deconstruct—lose their ordinary, obvious presence to become extraordinarily present” (p. 73). Furthering the idea of infinitude, David Jasper (1996), an Anglican priest and theologian, currently Professor in Literature and Theology at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, suggests that Viola’s work “evokes a spirituality transcending both time and space” (p. 13). Stretching the boundaries of the complex themes of time and space, Viola’s work carries the notion of the infinite to perpetuate new and radical views of art and the world—the role carried out by Lyotard’s true avant-garde artist.

Viola, Romanticism, and Nature

Nature and landscape in Viola’s art.

Many of the ways that Viola’s art connects to ideas of the sublime carry echoes of Romanticism and of Lyotard’s contemporary notion of Romanticism also stated as the “romantic sentiment.” The artists of Romanticism, like Viola, were interested in depicting nature’s grandeur. They emphasized communion with nature and the magnificence and the seemingly limitless expanse of nature’s wonders (ideas with close ties to Burke’s sublime). For Viola, the “grand masterpieces” of Romanticism pointed to something greater than the artist and the viewer. Lyotard (1994) refers to this romantic sentiment of the sublime as “melancholia.” The Romantic sublime is the constant yearning for the

communion with nature and the Absolute Spirit that always falls short but continues nonetheless, to strive for such a relationship (David, 2003). Because this melancholic sublime is always striving, but never reaches its goal, the result is regret (David, 2003).

The melancholic sublime is prevalent in Viola's fascination with landscape. Film critic Chris Darke (2000), has directly linked Viola's incorporation of landscape in video with nineteenth-century Romantics such as Casper David Friedrich and Joseph Mallord William Turner. In a conversation with Martin Friedman, Viola (1995) talks about the landscape as metaphor:

Apparently exterior, the true extension of any landscape traverses both the exterior and interior of the individual. In short, landscape is the link between our outer and inner selves. Its substance is as much of mind as it is of body, and we cannot be considered distinct and apart from it any more than a living cell can be considered autonomous within the body of its host. (p. 253)

In this statement, Viola speaks to the traditional notion of the Romantic sublime where a communion with the Absolute was necessary to fully understand and grasp the power of nature and humankind's intricate link with this powerful entity.

There is also a mystical and spiritual element present in nature that Viola references repeatedly in his work. Whether it is elements such as fire and water, the changing of the seasons or the images of animals—fish, buffalo, and guard dogs—Viola's work is full of primitive symbolism. Viola is linked with Romanticism in a large sense because in his work, as in that of the Romantics, nature becomes a mirror, and man and nature create a mystical union (Syring, 1992). This union ties into the idea of Viola's interest in an outer as well as an inner landscape.

In *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986), Viola takes the viewer through darkened, dripping caverns. The camera wanders through elements of decay, maggots

feasting on decaying flesh. Suddenly the images change to vast herds of buffalo on the open planes. In this work with its stark contrasts between the inner and outer world, the inner and outer streams of consciousness, Marie Luise Syring comments:

There is a constant alternation between inner and outer realms. Nature becomes a psychological landscape. The eye of the buffalo and of the fish, the staring gaze of the birds become surfaces for human projection, the mediums for mystical union. Nature is our mirror, and she, on the other hand, finds her continuation in man and her transgression in cult and ritual (1992, p. 23)

In an exploration of this outer landscape that in essence illuminates the inner landscape, Viola often turns to the barren desert to create videos of stark emptiness. In *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)* (1979), Viola records the visual effects created by heat and light reflected and refracted by the dessert sand. Like mirage, like illusion, images seem to appear and disappear, while clarity of perception wanes and blurs. In *Chott el-Djerid*, Viola references this search for truth in the most unlikely of places. The outward view of the desert prompts a deeper inner exploration, a reckoning with the soul.

Viola's ties to Romanticism, or at least to a modern-day version of Romanticism, come in large part from his concentration on landscapes. This outward concentration on landscapes became a changing point for Viola, the place where he began to move out of experimentation and to raise questions of a deeper vision (Lauter, 1992). *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait of Light and Heat)* was his first foray focusing on nature and the landscape. Filming in such barren landscapes as the Sahara Desert in Tunisia, Viola captured the otherworldly and foreign images of barren vastness. (It's Kant's notion of the sublime that comes to mind here.) Viola presents the desert as a vast expanse beyond

comprehension. The horizon is blurred, and the unfathomable distance of perceptions creates what Kant would term pain because the human imagination is stretched to its limits (Syring, 1992). Just as this pain is experienced, however, pleasure arises as one employs human reason, the perplexing mirages are understood and the vastness comprehended.

The external depiction of the landscape is revealed as a projection of the inner psychological process of the individual (Lauter, 1999). In keeping with Lyotard's postmodern sublime, the vastness of the desert and the perplexing mirages defy clear comprehension and absolute clarity of perception. However, the gratification of effort, the feeling of the sublime is the driving force to compel the viewer to remain engaged and engrossed in knowing that there is something substantive even though it may be beyond comprehension. This provides the notion of freeing and expanding preconceived notions of the world around us. Art is the catalyst to this freeing, providing the capacity for creativity and imagination.

Chris Darke (2000) notes that Viola uses the landscape as raw material for the human psyche. With his concentration on landscapes, Viola could be perceived to delve into a realm of contemporary Romanticism. Here Viola uses nature as a device to explore the inner spiritual, psychological, and emotional state as he creates his work. It is not just the limited definition of nature outside of the individual. The individual is part of nature, not separate from nature. This is true for Viola as Syring (1992) notes: "But the gate to self-knowledge is Nature, and for Bill Viola this concept of nature encompasses not only the world of animals and plants, but also the human psyche (p. 24).

The spiritual significance of landscape.

Viola has worked on videos incorporating images of the deserts of both the American Southwest and Northern Africa. For Hoberman (1987), Viola's use of the desert depicts his interest in the Koran and the Old Testament where the desert becomes an "incubator of visions" (p. 68), and in Viola's (1995) words, a "locale of vision" (p. 262) for many world religions. Prophets have always ventured to these regions in a form of self-imposed exile to seek spiritual revelation (Yapelli, 1994). In the process of experiencing these deserts, Viola examines these great expanses in terms of their vastness, presenting in turn, Kant's sublime of awe and wonderment. In these images of the dessert, the emphasis is on the vanishing point on the horizon that conjures up the notion of infinity, a key component of the sublime (Duguet, 1983). Progressing from sublimity to spirituality, Viola's exposure to such vast landscapes has created works that have become meditations in a mental, physical, and spiritual realm (Darke, 2000).

Viola's use of the desert landscape builds to the notion of Lyotard's sublime and to an inner spirituality of faith. In an interview with Hans Belting (2003), Viola talks about the reasons for traveling and capturing the images of the desert on tape, "It's literally about the limits of the image, the threshold where representational reality breaks down, but it's also about faith" (p. 189).

In an interview with Martin Friedman, Director Emeritus of Walker Arts Center, at the Denver Art Museum on March 5, 1993, Viola describes his use of landscape as a metaphor for the complex physicality and spiritual embodiment of the individual:

Apparently exterior, the true extension of any landscape traverses both the exterior and interior of the individual. In short, landscape is the link between our outer and inner selves. Its substance is as much of mind as it is of body, and we

cannot be considered distinct and apart from it any more than a living cell can be considered autonomous within the human body of its host. (Syring, 1993, p. 253)

At the opposite extreme of the desert scenario and the barren wastelands of parched landscapes, Viola continues to demonstrate an intense fascination with water. As is the case with water as Jung's metaphor for the subconscious, water provides rich symbolism for Viola's work (Kuspit, 1996). Walsh (2003) states in reference to Viola's work, "Water is the binding medium: the fluid from which all are born, the destroyer of life and human achievement, the gulf between life and eternity, the regenerator of life" (p. 52).

The use of water produces what in many instances would be referred to as a Burkean or terror sublime. There is a strong concentration of the dangers and the deep primitive reality of water (Kuspit, 1996). In many of Viola's works, water envelopes, suffocates, destroys, and washes away. These startling images of the power of water to destroy as in suffocation from drowning, or the birth of a child emerging from amniotic fluid, Viola refers to as "power images." In an interview with Jörg Zutter (1992) Viola says, "These 'power images' are like wake-up calls, and I feel today there is a need to wake up the body before you can wake up the mind" (p. 104).

Perhaps one of the best examples of water being used in this terror sublime is *The Passing* (1991). In this video, a man is seen floating and submerged in the water while a child also emerges from the water. This work very much mirrors a childhood experience where Viola had a near drowning incident at the age of ten. Viola describes this life-changing experience: "I had no fear. I was witnessing this extraordinary beautiful world

with light filtering down...it was like paradise. I didn't even know I was drowning....For a moment there was absolute bliss (Walsh, 2003, p. 50).

This notion of waking up the body in a Viola installation, to be physically engulfed in an arresting environment of the senses, creates a visceral immersion in sight and sound, helping to engage the mind. Bill Viola states, "I wanted the viewer to be inside the image with their body, not with their intellect, not regarding it from a distance where it is framed off from you and therefore you are studying, looking at this thing" (Campbell, 2003, p. 91). In an interview with John Handhardt (formerly the senior curator for film and media arts at the Guggenheim Museum and head of the film department at the Whitney), Viola (2002) states, "That's one of the limitations of the Western system too, this incessant description, as if identifying or naming something was a way to understand it. I wanted them [the viewers] to *have* the experience" (p. 98)

The experience is similar to Burkean sublime where Burke suggests one should stand on the edge of a precipice or the edge of a waterfall to experience the shock and terror: this shock and terror wakes one up, provides one with a sense of being alive. Jean-Christophe Ammann (1995) states, "No matter how frightening and literally breathtaking these images are, they are also comforting. Perhaps because of their remoteness from everyday experience and their overwhelming beauty. Perhaps also because they reconcile us with ourselves" (p. 16).

From the Sublime to the Spiritual

Just as Viola thoroughly explores the sublime in his work, that sublimity often merges with the spiritual, a common thread that he admittedly weaves throughout his work and

process. The true nature of much of his later work is manifestly spiritual and transcendent. Along with the spiritual attribution to his work, there is more of an acceptance of the term in describing his work both by critics and by Viola himself. In speaking of Viola's work, writer and artist Clayton Campbell (2003) notes, "At its heart, the role of the artist is a spiritual one" (p. 91). In its deepest spiritual sense, Viola's work provides for questioning, meditation, and at times, contemplative viewing. Chris Darke (2000) states:

Viola's videos and installations are unique to many of the contemporary works of video art today. Instead of a fast-cutting blur of images that bombard the viewer, his work is more akin to "...an insistence on stasis, on a kind of visual 'silence' in his work, [which] has affinities with ascetic and meditational practices.... (Darke, 2000, p. 182)

This is where the spiritual and the sublime come together in a Viola installation.

Contemplation and meditation create a silence and a place of profound sacredness where the viewer is caught up in stillness.

Viola, though often referencing religious icons and important works of religious significance from a variety of time-periods, brings the ideas of these works to a contemporary setting, placing the ideas of religiosity and mysticism in a postmodern construction that alludes more to spiritual awareness than religious dogma. Deirdre Boyle (1988) writes:

Viola's art, like that of Robert Smithson or James Turrell, is situated within a contemporary art tradition that draws its authority and iconography from primitive art and mythology, reaching back in time to the origins of art in religion. It is not an echo of the past, although it resounds with the past. (p. 9)

Boyle (1988) further states:

Viola creates new art rituals which render the modern world spiritually significant. In them, he extends the mythic invitation to join the hero's perilous

quest for knowledge of Self and Being, a journey of birth, death, and rebirth that is fraught with the potential for psychic violence and disorientation. Our reward for enduring the ‘dark night of the soul’ that is at the core of every Viola work is an experience of unity, wholeness, and being. (p. 9)

This has implications for the work of Viola, who in many senses deals directly with the spiritual and the sublime. Viola’s use of film and video facilitates the experience of the sublime, and in turn can enhance the awareness of the spiritual and the numinous in the world around us.

In the 1980s, Viola was less inclined to use the term “spiritual” to describe his work. In an interview with Deidre Boyle (1983), Viola suggests that language or words that describe his work are not adequate to describe the content and the impact of his creations:

And when it’s transposed into writing, it comes out poorly, like the word “spiritual.” I cringe sometimes when I read that on paper. I would rather have people who see the work feel it. That’s where it lives. It’s really hard to analyze it. (p. 13)

As his work progressed and his artistic practice evolved, Viola became more accepting of the word *spiritual* and began to define it and use the concept in his work, in interviews, and in describing his process as an artist.

The reason for this acceptance of spirituality and this world beyond language in his work may be akin to the notion of what spiritual disciplines provide that coincide with what Viola attempts to provide in his work. Viola (2002) states, “One of the techniques or mechanisms for all traditional systems of spiritual discipline is the transformation of perception, modifying the senses to create new knowledge and a deeper understanding” (p. 98)

Coming to terms with the description of his work as spiritual, Viola began to describe his notion of spirituality in a variety of interviews. In keeping with this new found comfort level in describing his work as spiritual, Viola began to further clarify and define the word spirituality as it permeated his artistic practice. Clarifying his infusion of spirituality in his daily life, Viola (2002) states that the spiritual is "...a vast underground river that moves in darkness and silence below the surface of our daily life. It is like a deep natural spring that I draw from over and over in my life now..." (p. 106).

Referencing his Christian upbringing with his deep current metaphor, Viola (2002) states,

It [spirituality] is like a deep natural spring that I draw from over and over in my life now, and this source includes the Western Christian tradition of my own culture, which contains at its roots, beneath the politics and complicated history, beyond the politics and complicated history, some profound spiritual elements. (p. 106)

Viola clearly seeks to distance himself from the limits of organized religion and any one dogma or belief system, when he suggests "you could touch the spiritual life on your own walking down the street somewhere" (Hyde, 1997, p. 146). Further elaborating, Viola says:

There wasn't a time when things were any more spiritual than they are now. There wasn't a time when there were all these gods around us in this spiritual world and now consciousness has evolved so we don't need that any more. It's always there. We happen to live in an age that doesn't reflect it or encourage it or focus it in the way that cultures have done in the past where religion has been dominant. But that doesn't mean that it's not there. (Hyde, 1997, pp. 146-147)

Through continuing dialogue and comparisons with religion and historic references as to the importance of connecting spiritually with Viola's work, Viola gained comfort with the notion that spirituality plays a key role in his artistic process.

Scholars and critics have also embraced spirituality and spiritual elements inherent in Viola's work. Stuart Morgan (1996) for instance, in writing about Viola's work, states, "His work is beautiful and meaningful. Not religious, perhaps, according to usual definitions, but certainly to do with the spirit, an element in our lives that he is not afraid to acknowledge, even to celebrate" (p. 11). Without adhering to any formal religion then, Viola in turn respects the traditions and rituals of many systems of belief found in religious traditions throughout the world (London, 1987). David Ross (1997) remarks, "His art does not rely on traditional religious faith, yet paradoxically it is fueled by an absolute belief in the transformative power of art and in a common human spiritual nature" (p. 17).

In an interview with Michael Nash (1995), Viola refers to spirituality in discussing the underlying questions of where we came from and where we are going. Viola (1995) explains that he has a, "Curiosity about personal experiences that seem to indicate an existence of another order or another domain of experience" (p. 175).

Though personal experiences are important, Lauter (1999) is careful to point out that Viola does not have particular expectations for those who view his work. As he explains:

He [Viola] does not wish to nurture a metaphysical notion *per se* or some religious/spiritual stance in the viewer. No, he wants to engage both our emotions and our thoughts in his pictorial worlds, so that we remember the secret mysteries of life, the beauty of nature, the origins of our cognitive faculties. Viola's video art tries to visualize the visible and the invisible, namely an experience of the unity of the present world. (p. 29)

Lewis Hyde's 1997 conversation with the artist, quoted in part above, negotiated the often-misunderstood nature of spirituality in Viola's art. Hyde notes that Viola is quick to point out that the viewer's response is not indicative of his spiritual intent or

underlying spiritual influences. Further clarifying this notion, Viola remarks: “I’m trying to address this issue of how, in a secular age, one works in a spiritual vein, and how one avoids the problem of simply labeling things in a way that tells the audience how to respond” (Hyde, 1997, p. 146).

Viola says about his ties to religion and spirituality that he “never felt a formal adherence to any one particular tradition” (Hyde, 1997, p. 143). Though he was raised Episcopalian he did not experience a formal connection to Christianity or any one religion or dogma. Viola, in a sense, approached religion in an ecumenical way. Quick to embrace a multitude of belief systems, Viola does reference his Christian upbringing and his family influences; “My mother did instill in me a deep spiritual sense of the world beyond the specifics of her religion” (Hyde, 1997, p. 143). From these early religious experiences and encouragement to embrace a variety of teachings, Viola formed a view of religious institutions that he would return to when describing his work. He encourages his viewers to embrace their feelings, to explore their own spiritual and religious belief systems, and their instinctive spiritual awareness. Viola is not tied to the viewer experiencing his work in a literal spiritual sense.

While encouraging multiple spiritual experiences with his work, Viola is critical of the role of religious institutions in suppressing the individual’s spiritual experience with his artworks. Viola also discussed this issue in his conversation with Lewis Hyde:

In this sense, what I’m saying is that institutions have built up a system to commandeer these innate feelings we all have and channel them into a certain series of particular experiential forms, objects, iconography, metaphors or structures that become in some ways substitutes for the experiences themselves.
...

So I think today that the authority question gets mixed up with the belief systems, compounded by this tremendous fluidity and “freedom” we have in the information age. I wonder if something could have spiritual power in the absence of some institutional criterion that everybody can agree on. (1997, p. 147)

Viola further elucidates: “Religion is no longer an effective unifying force to tell us what to do,” and contends “this is a land of rule breakers with an art based on rule breaking” (Hyde, 1997, p. 157).

For Viola, religion is a component in his work to the extent that it corresponds with or is perpetuated by the larger domain of spirituality. The religions he draws on in order to delve into the larger notion of spirituality are not exclusively Western or part of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and there is a strong leaning toward Tibetan Buddhism and, especially, Japanese Zen Buddhism as influences in his work (Lauter, 1999), perhaps because of his studies in Buddhism while in Japan. Lauter (1999) explains that Japanese Zen Buddhism is predominant because of its emphasis that each and every object and all sentient beings have a spiritual and physical presence that represents the world as a whole with equal importance to everything else.

In exploring Eastern spiritual practices such as Zen Buddhism, Viola began to distance himself from his Christian upbringing, constantly seeking out the complexities of human belief systems. He ventured into new territory in order to explore truths about life. Viola states, “I am getting these ancient texts that are not written to convince, coerce, or describe something, but are talking about ineffable universal mystery” (Campbell, 2003, p. 91). Video curator Barbara London (1987), further explains Viola’s tireless spiritual quest when she states, “Bill Viola is constantly searching for greater

understanding of the spiritual heritage of humankind, looking beyond individual limitations toward a more collective, universal mind” (p. 22).

As part of a spiritual journey, Viola grapples with larger questions of life, addressing the complexities of universal mysteries that are not necessarily entrenched in religiosity. For Viola, his undaunted inquiry and personal questioning becomes his exploration into the intricacies of spiritual existence. Consequently, one of Viola’s main investigations in his work is the idea of “being” itself (London, 1987). This extends the notion of spirituality to a very broad and all-expansive definition.

Spirituality and installations.

The intricacy and complexity of Viola’s installations are one way he explores the notion of “being,” as London expresses it. In these installations, his work and vision are poignant and direct, with viewers in many instances, reporting enormous emotional impact through the total effect of sight and sound. Viola is less concerned with an aesthetic experience that highlights the beauty of images than with a comprehensive spiritual and psychological experience that is emotionally engrossing and even transformative. In concurrence with such a notion, critic and lecturer Vicki Goldberg (1988) notes, “What distinguishes Viola’s video installations is not necessarily beauty or formal invention but emotional force (p. 24).”

In his installations, Viola takes viewers on a personal journey, a quest, immersing them in surrounding visual elements and sound. Viewers are free to emotionally interact with the work and partake in the possibility of a transformative experience, rising above the limits and confines of their daily routine. The use of such installations, as opposed to a simple video format, has become a key to Viola’s process, providing a unique all-

encompassing experience separate from everyday occurrences. The medium of installation becomes an effective tool for heightening interaction and response even more in the current image-saturated information age, where images on their own may be easier to disregard. Curators Kate Davidson and Michael Desmond (1996) further this sentiment by explaining that, “In an era of fluid identities, mobile lifestyles and undefined relationships, installations are islands of refuge” (1996, p. 4).

In these installations, these islands of refuge, the viewer may be taken from the mundane to the transcendent. The outside world implodes and the inward reality of the installation coincides with the perception of self and one’s place in the world. Describing this notion of installations Viola states, “After a long time of doing this [installations] I recognized that this physical situation was also the content of the work. I was making separate worlds, talking about things that are not about the daily routine...” (Hixson, 1999/2000, p. 43).

Viola typically incorporates multiple elements in his installations; sound, video images, and the physical space in which the viewer is placed, where the viewer participates in the installation, are all key components. Davidson and Desmond (1996, p. 4) speak of the way he unites these elements:

The unity of components is greater than the sum of its parts; its presence exists beyond the object itself. This notion of the installation is in keeping with Viola’s contention that the artwork lives in the mind of the viewer. Perhaps it lives in memory, or thought, and if it is located there it can be summoned at given times, perhaps in an instant, or after a very long time.

Installations, like collage, may be viewed as a quintessential art form to represent the postmodern milieu. Kate Davidson and Michael Desmond explain, “Installation art is

very much a collage of meanings: the conjunction of objects, signs or ideas constructed by the artist provides a rich, synthetic field of relationships, generating allegory and metaphors” (1996, p. 6). For Viola, this expansive medium is clearly intended to potentially bring the viewer to a state of contemplation and aid in his attempt to inject the sacred, and the spiritual, back into Western visual art. Viola (1995) explains, “Western art can be viewed as the progressive distancing of the arts away from the sacred and towards the profane” (p. 105). In other times and other cultures, the sacred and spiritual in art were not separate. Viola (1999) further comments:

The history of art is not necessarily the history of objects. As a practicing artist, I look through art history for living sparks, the inner life of objects. I can see how the priorities of our culture at this particular moment in history have skewed our perceptions. The artists have always known this other dimension, they inhabit it, but their voices are not usually heard. Historians don’t usually tell the story from the artist’s point of view. Facts are far easier to codify than feelings and revelations. At other times, in other places, the emphasis was different. (pp. 92–93)

Deirdre Boyle (1988) states, “ This is what Viola’s art—what art of the most profound level—does: it restores us to lost psychic and spiritual balance; it gives us back our lives, only now they are changed, deeper, more fully our own” (p. 12).

Christopher Miles (1997), referring to the Whitney’s international traveling exhibition, *Bill Viola: A 25-Year Survey*, which premiered at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (November 2, 1997–January 11, 1998), describes the experience of Viola’s installations as “...rather like a tour of a psychological/spiritual fun house, amplified by the layering of sounds which emanate from the rooms as one navigates the corridors” (p. 21). Suzanne Page (1983), echoes this perception of Viola’s work in comments about an extensive exhibition at the Musée d’art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

(December 20, 1983–January 29, 1984), in which the artist’s imagery “takes in at once the most lyrical and the most meditative or spiritual approaches” (p. 3).

Viola and Postmodernity

Video as a postmodern medium.

Using installation and video as a means to express the spiritual dimension of human existence, Viola is immersed in the postmodern milieu. From the onset of his exploration in new mediums of expression such as video and experimental music, Viola championed the cause of developing these tools to explore spirituality. Chris Darke (2000) notes,

The issues relating to the life of the spirit that Viola’s work raises—whether expressed in metaphysical, religious or mystical terms—should not be dismissed as either abstract or arcane in nature but are of pressing concern right now. Viola’s tapes are a series of reports from the edge of perception that extend the visionary artistic tradition into a modern technological medium. (p. 184)

Darke points to the fact that as the term *postmodernism* was entering public discourse, Viola was beginning his career as an artist in the realm of new technology. Video and video art are one part of the technological innovations present in the postmodern age.

As technology adds to the complexity and delivery of art, Viola’s process may align with Lyotard’s notion of postmodernity, as Lyotard emphasizes advancing technology, knowledge as power, and the avant-garde as key components to the postmodern condition. In a Lyotardian notion, avant-garde artists such as Viola are key to understanding the innovative ways that art can dislodge pre-conceived ideas and notions about what art is and produce freedom and innovation.

Video and video art have done, and continue to create, this freedom and innovation. As an attempt to challenge the arts establishment, just as the avant-garde has

done in the past, video art has been successful in widening the scope and the definition of art in the realm of a larger context of the present technological society. In this vein, video art has been a part of the dematerialization of art that has been occurring since the 1950s (Walsh, 2003).

As an artistic medium, video art is a seminal postmodern artistic form (Ross, 1990). Beginning more as a clear voice of irony in the postmodern contemporary art environment, video has developed over time to allow for the development of a clear voice and vision of the artist (Ross, 1990). Viola finds video art to be more than just a means of personal expression. As Viola's work developed and matured over time, he placed more emphasis on the capacity of video to address larger issues beyond the artworld arena, and the theoretical constructs of postmodernism. Viola (1995) writes,

Media art, in its possession of new technologies of time and image maintains a special possibility of speaking directly in the language of our time, but in its capacity as art, it has an even greater potential to address the deeper questions and mysteries of the human condition. (p. 257)

For Viola, video has special qualities and a unique character that allows images to have a life beyond the static nature of material objects (Corzo, 1999). From another angle, the life of the moving image has allowed for the birth of a limited and temporal existence (Corzo, 1999). Video as a medium in itself stresses impermanence and rejects the idea of art as a precious object (Hall & Fifer, 1990). Just as video allows the image to move beyond a static nature, the temporal existence of video bridges a parallel world of darkness, stillness, and nothingness (Viola, 1999). Turn off the projector. Turn off the power to the installation gallery space, and the idea becomes clear that video art is indeed

temporal. In an interview with Holly Willis (1997) in *Artweek*, Viola states, “What other medium could show that fragility at the edge of existence?” (p. 22).

Use of technology: The postmodern artist and the spiritual.

Viola writes in one of his notebooks in September 1984, “In my work I have most strongly been aware of the camera as representation of point of view—point of consciousness.... I want to make my camera become the air itself. To become the substance of time and the mind” (Viola, 1995, p. 184). Viola in this sense is using the camera as a tool to present his visions and his dreams, to elicit a sense of spiritual awareness and awakening. The camera allows for access to the concept of the spiritual and the sublime. When Viola presents the images in slow motion, when the sequence is slowed, barely perceptible changes that would not be recognized in consciousness are brought to the fore.

By slowing down the speed of the images, or speeding up the images, accelerating the sequence of events, and by manipulating the viewer’s notions of reality, the subconscious can be tapped and the imperceptible nuances acknowledged. Here, the unrepresentable, that which is not readily accessible is given access. The use of the camera and the use of computer editing for Viola has allowed him to reproduce temporal states that would be experienced in sacred time—time that is not homogenous, but discontinuous (Hoberman, 1987).

In his interview with Viola, Lewis Hyde (1997) asks about the importance of technology when working in a spiritual dimension with one’s art. In response to Hyde (1997), Viola makes clear the level of attention technology requires and specifically the level of attention required for understanding one’s self:

One of the things that clouds this issue is that to be truly useful, any technology has to be unconscious. We are in a period where all these new technologies are still very conscious. It's not that we should ever stop questioning, but we need to know that we are using these things to go somewhere, to achieve something, to deepen ourselves and our knowledge. We don't pick up a hammer to have a "hammer and nail experience," we use it to build a house or a table (p. 152)

Elsewhere, Viola (1995) writes, "Technology always seems to lead us away from ourselves.... The real work of the contemporary video artist, then, after acquiring the necessary technical skills, is in the development and understanding of the self" (p. 71)

Syring (1992) remarks about the integral part technology now plays in providing the potential or the capacity for spiritual experiences:

The very nature of technology, therefore, makes video man's link to those spiritual experiences mystics and shamans have set an example by, through meditative practices in the Middle Ages, the Eastern religions and archaic cultures. Viola's concept of mysticism, it should be noted, is profane: the notion of a sacred space and iconic images is integral to the structure of human consciousness. (p. 26)

In his interview with Deirdre Boyle (1983), Viola sees a strong dichotomy between humanists and technologists when it comes to the artworld. The humanists feel that technology has nothing to do with the nature of art. For the technologists, art is all about the use of technology to expand the notion of art, and that art cannot exist without technology (Boyle, 1983). In a succinct description of the argument, Viola explains:

Video is positioned right in the midst of this traditional dichotomy, which I think can be expanded to include the familiar general arguments of the physical vs. the intellectual, hardware vs. software, and the separation of body and soul. The point is that they are one and the same thing and should never have been split off to begin with. (Boyle, 1983, p. 14)

Art, and its use of new technologies, also provides an opportunity to reduce the fear of new technologies in a spiritual or intellectual sense (Jasper, 1996). Donald Kuspit

(1996) suggests that Viola has a dislike for modernity because it disguises irrationality, and in this sense it must be clear that this supposed rationality that modernism presents, has provided the impetus for Viola to play the role of mystic. In Kuspit's (1996) words, the mystic is "...someone in pursuit of the experience of the sacred" (p. 266).

Experiencing the sacred is clearly what Viola is about.

Whether perceived as mystic or not, Viola utilizes the positive aspects of technology to better understand and explore the self and to express his many dimensions of spirituality. Viola uses technology in a unique way for crafting his work—he uses it to better understand humankind's spiritual nature and intellectual abilities (Jasper, 1996). Jasper (1996) states, "But from the earliest days of civilization, and now hugely accelerated, the development of technology has preceded the spiritual and intellectual ability of human beings to keep up with its demands" (Jasper, 1996, p. 16).

The postmodern lacks the sense of certainty or presence in the static nature of a hand-produced painting (David, 1998). A painting is absolutely unique and tied to a certain context of meaning that makes it authoritative; however, with the mechanical reproduction of images and the use of video, unity and stability of meaning are no longer possible, thus producing the infinitude of the sublime (David, 1998). The endless looping of Viola's installations and the multiple duplication of his videos and stills, present the infinitude inherent in the postmodern sublime.

The postmodern artist as philosopher.

Perhaps equally powerful to the idea of spirituality in his work, and the perception of that he may be a modern mystic, Viola is acutely aware of the power of images and the essential need for creativity. In a postscript to an interview with John G. Handhardt after

the events of September 11, 2001, Bill Viola speaks about the power of images and their role in the spiritual practice of the artist. Viola (2002) states:

Media technology has amplified and accelerated the creation and dissemination of images in an unprecedented way, but their power to enter our hearts and minds, to embody and provoke our darkest fears and most exalted visions, remains the same. Herein lies the importance of art, the value of history, and the social responsibility of image making, large and small, in contemporary society. In our time, there is an urgent necessity to have the creation of image be part of a true spiritual artistic practice and not merely a business profession. (p. 114)

This quote is a testament to the power of images, the responsibility of the artist, and the acknowledgment of an artist's spiritual practice. Scholars such as Stuart Morgan (1996), agree that Viola attends to the deeper aspects of the role of the artist. Viola does not shy away from his responsibilities of communicating and changing people's perceptions and awareness of the world around them. David Ross (1997) contends that Viola "elevates the creative act by insisting on its deeper social and spiritual function" (p. 24). Viola (2002) speaks so eloquently of the power of creativity and the extraordinary capacities of human consciousness when he continued his interview with Handhardt,

The most beautiful thing about consciousness is that it's not simply a registering/recording device—it's a transformative instrument. It takes in experience, translates it, and reformulates it. This capacity is the root of our creativity. It is the heart of who we are as human beings. Now this is a very deep, deep thing, and a very extraordinary thing, because that transformation brings something new into the world. (p. 91)

Viola and the postmodern role of art.

Critic and curator Kathryn Hixson (1999/2000), asks Viola as part of an interview for *New Art Examiner*, what the need is for art and how is it useful. Viola responds, "It [art] is useful for developing knowledge of how to be in the world, for going through life. It is

useful for having a deeper understanding, in a very personal way, of your own experience” (Hixson, 1999/2000, p. 41). Not only this, but Viola contends that art can provide a deeper understanding “of the nature of being alive” (Hixson, 1999/2000, p. 41). Viola goes on to state, “That’s what the great images are, that’s why they endure” (Hixson, 1999/2000, p. 41). Viola’s interview with Hyde (1997) also touches on this thought:

In the course of working, I’ve felt all along that I never lost faith in the image, My faith was never undermined in terms of an image’s ability to engage you in some genuine, real way, on some deep level that’s connected to you inner self and that can affect some kind of change or realization. (p. 150)

Talking specifically about his own artwork, Viola explains, “The work is about particular moments of small revelations that usually occur when you are alone, asleep, or walking home late at night: private inner experiences that change who you are” (Hixson, 1999/2000, p. 43). Putting this idea in another way Tina Yapelli (1994) states, “Viola’s videotapes and video installations pose the questions of how to harmonize the physical and spiritual selves, and how to then integrate a reconciled self into the natural and man-made worlds” (p. 6).

Viola not only continues to advance the notion of spirituality in art, but he also has gained the luxury of time to contemplate his influences and the influences of other artists in advancing art in general. Viola has great respect for the artist and the artistic profession and he makes predictions for the evolving nature of art and the role of the artist. Speaking to the ongoing role of artists Viola states, “So I think the artists of the future are going to understand the image as a surfeit, and their work as artists will be in the subterranean levels beneath the image, where the real reality is” (Campbell, 2003, p.

91). Art and the artistic process are part of a larger picture and the role of the artists is increasingly imperative to understanding the human condition.

Continuing to elaborate on this notion in a conversation with Campbell (2003)

Viola asserts,

These images we see that move us contain deep truth sometimes. They are not just passing fancies or momentary entertainment or feel-good boost. They are actually at the root cause themselves, deeply connected with the deepest knowledge human beings have evolved on this planet. So it is a privileged position that artists have. (p. 91)

His use of technology, his philosophical ideas, and his innovative nature, not only provide us with greater awareness and awakening, but they epitomize the postmodern condition that Lyotard so strongly promotes. Viola states, “Houston Smith, the great scholar of world religion, has said that the two primary forces that have the most profound effect on our existence in all aspects are technology and revelation” (2002, p. 111). This is certainly what Viola presents; by using the tools of technology he presents the spiritual and the sublime, steeped in revelation.

Viola too, clearly understands the role of the artist in this time in history. Just as Lyotard suggested that in the postmodern world the artist becomes the philosopher, so Viola takes this notion with a great deal of responsibility. In his interview with Jörg Zutter (1992) he explains about the present role of the artist in our society:

It [creating art] is also the biggest responsibility. It has taught me that the real raw material is not the camera and monitor, but time and experience itself, and that the real place the work exists is not on the screen or within the walls of the room, but in the mind and heart of the person who has seen it. This is where all images live. (p. 105)

Philanthropic Foundation Support for Bill Viola

Viola's quest for using art and technology as a means for spiritual expression and spiritual awakening has been supported and sustained by countless grants and awards that have allowed him to explore the many dimensions of his artistic process and his myriad artistic creations. Viola has received wide acclaim for his work not only in the artworld but also through his detailed and all-encompassing web site (www.billviola.com), his collaboration with the rock group Nine Inch Nails, additional presence on the Internet, and a number of television broadcasts. With this notoriety has come a series of support mechanisms provided by the foundation community.

In 1989, through the video program at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation he received a fellowship to support his work in the field of independent video. Throughout his career he has also received support from the Rockefeller Foundation, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. In 1998 Viola accepted a Scholar-in-Residence appointment with generous support from the Getty Research Institute of Los Angeles, which, as discussed above, had a crucial impact on his work.

Viola has received a number of commissions as well as over 40 one-person exhibitions worldwide since 1973. This large number of solo exhibitions, combined with a host of group exhibitions, allows for substantial philanthropic foundation support, whether direct or indirect, which has strongly impacted the research, development, implementation, and exhibition of his work. Large and small museums depend on the generosity of the foundation community to support the direct costs associated with Viola's exhibitions, commissions, and the acquisition of his work. Museums also rely on

foundation support to maintain the museum's infrastructure and associated indirect costs, such as personnel, with all aspects of exhibition presentation from research to execution.

As noted above, Viola's 2007 installation *Ocean Without a Shore* was commissioned by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, which signals again that foundation's belief in the artistic excellence of his work. The Guggenheim joins the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation as large established foundations that have supported his work. Additionally, museums, and individuals have helped sustain Viola's visions, his quest to create, and his undaunted ability to ask the larger questions, the questions that make him a philosopher of our times.

In terms of foundation funding, museums account for the largest share of arts grants dollars (Foundation Center, 2007a). According to the Foundation Center (2007a), museums received over \$682 million in foundation grants in 2005, and general visual arts programs received \$38.5 million. Major funding from the Annenberg, Andrew W. Mellon, Ford, and Gund foundations, along with corporate and individual contributions help support museums and individual artists directly. With this type of crucial support for the visual arts, Viola has and will continue to influence the artworld by infusing his unique transforming power of spirituality in art. Indeed, it may be prudent to note that, without foundation support, viewers would have less opportunity to engage with his work—in exhibitions, commissioned projects, museum collections, and publication—and miss its potential to trigger personal transformations. Viola's impact on the artworld would be lessened, his reach less substantial.

Conclusion

This case study provides a comprehensive view of Bill Viola as an influential contemporary artist who delves deeply into the sublime with an emphasis on spirituality and transformation. Viola presents videos and installations that demonstrate and weave together the complex notion of the sublime as it evolved through the philosophies of Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and Jean-François Lyotard. With exemplary explorations in sight and sound, Viola alludes to a feeling that there is something that can be conceived beyond the limits of experience. Through an immersion in spiritual disciplines and explorations into the complexity of being, Viola provides the opportunity for an awareness of the unrepresentable that evokes the sublime.

In Viola's work the spiritual and the sublime commingle, they meld into a complex exploration of the profound philosophical questions that are at the core of human existence. Viola exemplifies Lyotard's definition of the postmodern artist fulfilling the role of philosopher. He uses the camera as a tool to communicate his vision, from the structural phase where Viola is the focal point, to the content-driven examination of natural elements. Progressing artistically he uses the camera to seek out inspiration from such rich content as the vast desert landscape fertile with spiritual contemplation to the symbolically fecund nature of water as giver and destroyer of life.

Viola also incorporates the everyday and profound experiences of his own life into his artwork—his near drowning as a child, the birth of his son, the death of his mother, and his relationship with self—finding in them ways to engage his viewers and provide them with intense and potentially transformative experiences. His personal

experiences enhance his research into the concept of spirituality that is central to his work.

A product of his time, Viola was exposed as a student to a burgeoning array of diverse spiritual teachings, including those of non-Western traditions, and these have continued to influence his work. Viola has investigated a variety of spiritual teachings and belief systems with his later work delving into religious art that depicts the enigmatic world of the mystic. His work continues to progress with the idea of leading himself and others toward self-knowledge (Walsh, 2003). His interactions with the masterpieces of religious iconography and religious art while a fellow at the Getty led Viola to conclude that one can know or conceive what is lurking beneath the surface of these historic works even if it is beyond the limits of one's experience. These works present the perception of the unrepresentable—Lyotard's defining notion of the sublime. Furthering Lyotard's postmodern view of the artist, and more specifically the avant-garde artist, Viola is seen as a non-conformist who disrupts the established ideas of the world by altering and challenging perception (Malpas, 2003).

Viola, in the midst of all his exploring, in his ability to arouse and awaken the viewer, and his musings in spiritual practices, has been supported and nurtured by philanthropic foundations that embrace the artistic quality of his work. These philanthropic foundations sustain Viola's visions, his need to create, and his undaunted mission to ask the larger questions, the questions that make him a philosopher of the times. Without foundation support, Viola's impact on the artworld would be lessened, his reach would be less substantial, and his creative explorations would remain somewhat hidden. The viewer would have less opportunity for engagement with Viola's art, and

with its creative underpinnings in ideas of the sublime, the spiritual, and personal transformation. Supported, sustained, and included in the collections of private and public collections around the world, Viola has the support and the means to impact viewers and the larger artworld in profound and multifarious ways.

CHAPTER 5
PHILANTHROPIC FOUNDATIONS, ART, AND SPIRITUALITY

Introduction

The philanthropic foundation community has been a stalwart supporter of arts and culture in the United States since the turn of the last century. Its support has remained consistent even as federal support for arts and culture has seen significant reductions and as state and local levels of funding ebb and flow with the shifting priorities of legislators and their constituencies, economic uncertainties, and shrinking state and local coffers. The number of foundations continues to grow, as an estimated \$41–136 trillion in personal wealth will transfer over the next fifty years from one generation to the next (Stanley & Danko, 1996). In order to contend with tax concerns and other responsibilities placed on those acquiring and distributing their wealth, an increasing number of families and individuals are setting up foundations to disperse their affluence to charities and causes that are of particular interest to them. The general process these individuals follow is to endow their newly formed foundation in order to allow the interest from this investment of funds to provide an opportunity for the family to grant monies to nonprofit organizations (Frumkin, 2007).

With older, well-established foundations augmented by many newer foundations—formed as a result of this transfer of wealth and by a number of younger, high-profile entrepreneurs—over 71,000 foundations now dot the American landscape, innovatively meeting the needs of all sectors of the nonprofit community (Foundation Center, 2007b). Arts and culture are only one area of giving for foundations, and their impact on a variety of sectors can be deduced from the sheer number of dollars committed to bettering society: according to the *Foundation Yearbook: Facts and Figures on Private and Community Foundations* (2007c), foundation giving has nearly tripled since 1996. In 2005 foundations gave over three billion dollars in scholarships and grants to individuals, resulting in over 120,000 individuals benefiting from foundation support (Foundation Center, 2007c).

Of special note, for the purposes of this study, is a report (Renz & Lawrence , 2003) that private and community foundation giving for the arts grew at a faster rate than overall foundation giving between 1995 and 2000. According to a recent study by the Foundation Center (2007a) funding for the arts from 1999 to 2002 saw an average annual rate of growth of over eight percent. Giving for the visual arts over the period 2002–2005 showed a nearly twenty percent growth in grant dollars (Foundation Center, 2007a). To the benefit of many artists and arts organizations, foundations hold the promise for maintaining the viability of arts and culture in the United States

Foundation funding is spread over many funding categories and subcategories, and the funding of particular categories or clusters of categories may demonstrate a particular foundation’s ongoing mandate or shorter-term giving priorities. A change in priorities may be the result of studies or research conducted in various areas of need in

the nonprofit community, or priorities may be altered due to donor or board wishes regarding the distribution of funds. Foundations with substantial human capital and substantial time and resources may conduct research in order to delve into areas of interest and of priority that best serve their constituents while also meeting the mandates that have been set for the dispersal of funds by the foundation, its overall mission, and the directives of its governing body. Foundation funding for the arts and artists ebbs and flows based on the same range of determining factors, but in the first decade of the new millennium, the commitment to arts and culture generally appears strong and steadfast.

Spirit-Infused Giving and Creative Philanthropy

However, slowly emerging, perhaps in a more subliminal way than outright statements in boardrooms and in foundation publications, is a new tendency in the ways foundations and philanthropic individuals choose to allocate their resources. Foundations large and small are not only looking outward, in the form of research, to identify the needs of the potential grant recipients or the collective giving trends of the foundation community, and so to determine their own giving priorities. They are also looking inward to a reflective notion, considering their collective values and motivations for giving. This reflective process of looking within is often associated with the term *spirituality* or *spirit-infused giving* (Lehman, 1998). It is gaining a foothold in the philanthropic community as another way of addressing the ills of society. This looking within, this evaluation of core values, and the impact of philanthropic giving in society at all levels, is now influencing decision making in the philanthropic arena in a profound way.

Peter Frumkin (2007), a professor of public affairs at the University of Austin, who specializing in philanthropy and community service, notes, “there is a critical element of philanthropy that in and of itself transforms the people who engage in it” (p. 375). Frumkin points to the fact that not only is the receiver affected in some way, but the act of giving also has a strong effect on the giver or the donor. Philanthropy in this instance becomes the actual manifestation of personal expression. With the inherent personal expression of particular donors, possible actions and reactions allow for a reflective, transformative, affirming notion of a donor’s personal achievement, value, and worth.

Spirit-infused giving is not an isolated incident; it is building in strength and capturing the attention of a variety of foundations that address a range of concerns in the nonprofit arena. Foundations are communicating among themselves, and convening in groups, to discuss the phenomenon of spirituality and philanthropy to better understand the idea of such an approach to giving and the impact of such giving. Conferences and similar sessions that have highlighted spirituality in a philanthropic context in the past ten to fifteen years offer one means of substantiating this trend. This particular series of groundbreaking gatherings began in 1995 when the first of three conferences titled “Spirituality and Philanthropy” was held under the auspices of the Center for Contemplative Mind and Society in Northampton, Massachusetts. Attendance grew from 25 donors and institutional grantmakers at the first meeting to over 100, and this group of philanthropists continues to grow and explore the integration of the inner life of the philanthropist with their philanthropic work.

The Council on Foundations, a membership organization of more than 2,100 grantmaking foundations and organizations worldwide, has also been at the forefront of this trend in the changing face of philanthropy. With the input and support of the Fetzer Institute, a private operating foundation that supports research, education, and service programs exploring the relationship among body, mind, and spirit, the Council on Foundations' 12th Family Foundations Conference was convened February 23, 1998. Rob Lehman (1998), president emeritus of the Fetzer Institute, delivered his remarks at the conference, speaking of the changes in the philanthropic community:

A deeper understanding of the purpose of philanthropy is arising. This purpose is essentially the spiritual challenge of bringing into conscious relationship the inner life of mind and spirit with the outer life of action and service. With the very survival of people and the planet at risk, we are being called to consciously integrate spirit into all aspects of our lives. This is the work of the inner life of our culture. This is the heart of philanthropy. (§ 4, 5)

Lehman (1998a) further states:

What I want to suggest is that 1,000 years from now historians might well point to the key role of philanthropy in responding to this movement and in nurturing this period of change. They might say that as the twentieth century ended, philanthropy, itself, began to provide conscious leadership that would integrate this new spiritual consciousness into the life of service—into the work of peace, justice, and the environment. (§ 10)

The *spirit-infused* altruism of which Lehman speaks, points toward a melding of spirituality and philanthropy to influence giving and the mission and reach of private foundations. When spirituality was linked with philanthropy in the past, it was associated, for the most part, with giving to religious organizations and causes (Damon & Verducci, 2006). The current trend is taking on a more secular agenda, and motivations for giving and the spiritual implications of philanthropy are being analyzed and discussed in the aforementioned arenas. Frumkin (2007) notes, "Giving may appear to be about doing

something for others, but the process of getting outside one's narrow needs is such that it often turns out to be transformative for the person who is giving" (p. 19). In keeping with Frumkin's notion, the affluent individual, the boards of foundations, and foundations' staffs are genuinely looking at spirituality, looking beyond themselves with a freeing transformative approach to giving in conjunction with their respective organization's giving processes.

Foundations and wealthy individuals are taking the word philanthropy to its Greek origins. Philanthropy is made up of two Greek words: *phileo* and *anthropos* and combining these two terms is generally translated as love of mankind (Schervish, 2006). Holding to the origins of philanthropy and combining interests in spirituality, this type of funding creates an all-inclusive community of diverse spiritual proclivity that spans a vast array of missions and endeavors to make a sizeable difference in the lives of people, communities, and the society at large. In essence, the philanthropists look deeply at their belief systems and explore their essential reasons for giving. Frumkin (2007) states, "Many small and large donors seek to make a statement through philanthropy, either to the public or to themselves about what they believe in and what their priorities truly are" (p. 165). These beliefs are translated and transformed into action, effecting the lives of individuals and greater society.

In addition to philanthropists looking inward for motivations for spirit-infused giving, Helmut Anheier, a professor and director of the Center for Civil Society at UCLA's School of Public Affairs and Diana Leat, visiting professor at London's Sir John Cass Business School, present a new model of philanthropy—*creative philanthropy*—for consideration by foundations and the larger philanthropic community. Anheier and Leat

(2006) suggest that the foundation community has reached a critical point of overall malaise, lost in outdated models of giving, and that foundations need to rise to their enormous potential in modern democratic societies by embracing alternatives. *Creative philanthropy* parallels the characteristics of Lyotardian postmodernism, suggesting a paradigm shift from past models of staid, methodical giving to more dynamic and innovative ways of approaching philanthropy. This pioneering approach to philanthropic giving brings foundation funding into contemporary postmodern society, a society steeped in complexity and dynamic change. Creative philanthropy then “provides a space for alternative thinking, voices, and practices” (Anheier & Leat, 2006, p. 39).

Foundation Support of Spirituality and Art

Since its inception in 1936, the Henry Luce Foundation has had a strong interest in both theology/religion and the arts (Cook, 2001). More recently, it has been a leader in supporting discussions about potential connections between the two, and about the controversies that have sometimes divided the arts and organized religion. Beginning in 1994, the foundation supported rigorous social science research in response to the National Endowment for the Art’s decrease in funding and political backing due to protests from religious and political conservatives questioning federal support of controversial artists such as Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe (Arthurs & Wallach, 2001).

One of the Luce Foundation’s interests was to foster a more constructive dialogue between leaders from a broad spectrum of viewpoints in order to understand the root causes of controversies in art and religion, opening up paths to greater understanding and

acceptance. Over the next seven years, the foundation and the Center for Arts and Culture, an independent think tank in Washington, DC, that has since disbanded, conducted research and convened discussions with artists, religious leaders, scholars, and journalists representing a spectrum of religious, racial, cultural, and ideological communities (Cook, 2001). The results of this wide-ranging public dialogue about art, religion, and spirituality were published in a seminal book, *Crossroads: Art and Religion in American Life* (2001), edited by Alberta Arthurs, former director of arts and humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation, and Glenn Wallach, a professor at Yale and Georgetown Universities, which has continued to stimulate ongoing discussion.

Robert Wuthnow, a contributor to the Arthurs & Wallach (2001) publication, has proven to be a key figure in documenting the present-day role of religion and spirituality in art. A professor of social sciences and the director of the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University, Wuthnow has a long track record of research, which he has published in two recent books, *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist* (2001) and *All in Sync: How Music and Art are Revitalizing American Religion* (2003). Both studies were based on research funded by the Henry Luce Foundation and the Lilly Endowment and have garnered attention from artists, arts organizations, spiritual leaders, religious organizations, and the philanthropic community.

Wuthnow (2001) suggests that we can learn a great deal about the emerging trends in spiritual exploration by looking to artists, religious organizations, and arts organizations that embrace spirituality today. Although he uses *religion* as a key term in his research, Wuthnow delves deeply into describing and analyzing the broader role of spirituality in American culture. For *Creative Spirituality*, he and a research team,

interviewed 100 artists in northeastern Pennsylvania; northern California; Santa Fe and Taos, New Mexico; and New York City. For *All in Sync*, he conducted 400 more in-depth interviews and also collected quantitative data to study the correlation between spiritual growth and the arts (Wuthnow, 2003). His quantitative data came through national surveys of a representative sample of the U.S. population; he also conducted focus groups highlighting the impact of religion, spirituality, and the arts in people's lives. The accounts by the clergy, church members, arts organizations, and the general population show a clear connection between the arts and personal spiritual growth and development.

In *Creative Spirituality* (Wuthnow, 2001), the artists surveyed, whether working in ceramics, glass, painting, sculpture, or a variety of other media and artistic disciplines, demonstrated a great devotion to their work and spoke of using their passion for their creations to search for meaning in a fragmented culture. The participants also connected their drive to create and the process of creation to their idea of a spiritual self. They tended to downplay the exhibition of their work, whether in informal or high-end gallery settings, as a motivation, compared with the spiritual transformation they experienced. The accounts by the artists often mentioned some cataclysmic event or life-altering experience that prompted them to explore the spiritual through their art.

As the result of Wuthnow's studies, the phenomenon of spirituality, in its broadest sense, is being explored by a diverse group of artists, organizations, authors, and scholars in and out of mainstream institutional settings. This exploration is prompting a dialogue that explores the interaction between the arts, religion, spirituality, and science, as well as a multitude of other disciplines. The interest and the scholarly attention the spiritual in art

is receiving now holds promise for an open and ever-expansive dialogue that examines the complexity of spirituality and art (Wuthnow, 2003).

Philanthropic Foundations and Exhibitions

Another way to assess the importance foundations place on spirituality in art is through the funding support artists, arts organization, museums, and galleries receive to develop and implement exhibitions and other public projects that focus on spirituality in art. Some examples of private foundations that have funded exhibitions that explore spirituality and art include the Samuel S. Fels Fund, the Atlantic Richfield Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, the J. Paul Getty Trust, and the Brown Foundation. These particular foundations have provided galleries and museums the opportunity to stage exhibitions, publish catalogues, and convene a variety of symposia surrounding the sublime, spirituality, transcendence, and art. These foundations are providing opportunities for art to flourish, increasingly initiating dialogue regarding the commonalities inherent in religion, spirituality, and art. The following are a select number of exhibitions that have explored the interaction between spirituality, the sublime, and transcendence in art.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art's *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (November 1986) offered a monumental survey encompassing art and artists from the early European and American abstractionists through the abstract expressionists and beyond. This exhibition traced the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the work of artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Hans [Jean] Arp, Marcel Duchamp, Kazimir Malevich, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko, all of whom drew to some extent on spiritual motivations. The exhibition moved the viewer

beyond a formalist approach to particular works, offering ways to experience the works. The abstract nature of the artworks provided new possibilities for viewing—possibilities for transcendence and alterations of consciousness. This exhibition received substantial funding from the Atlantic Richfield Foundation.

The Deutsche Guggenheim's *On the Sublime: Mark Rothko, Yves Klein, James Turrell*, in Berlin (July 2001), found common ground among an abstract expressionist painter (Rothko), a pioneer of French *nouveau réalisme* and of performance and installation (Klein), and a contemporary figure known for his explorations of light and perception (Turrell)—on the basis of their shared interest in the sublime, with all its spiritual connotations. The exhibition brought the idea of the sublime from the transcendental attributes of Mark Rothko's paintings to Klein's use of a signature blue color that referenced the void—the limitless of space—and to the elusive, limitless perception of light in Turrell's hypnotic installations (Bashkoff, 2001). This exhibition received substantial funding from the Guggenheim Foundation, demonstrating the interest of the foundation community and the artworld establishment in exploring the nuances of the sublime and spirituality in art.

The City Gallery at Waterfront Park's *Thresholds: Expressions of Art & Spiritual Art*, in Charleston, South Carolina (South Carolina Arts Commission, December 2003), became a traveling exhibition that art critic and independent curator Eleanor Heartney created with a goal of representing the array of spiritual and religious belief systems followed or investigated by fifty-three contemporary artists. Heartney's intent was to create an exhibition that allowed the artist and the viewer to contemplate the mysteries and diversity of the spiritual in art. In clarifying her aims for the exhibition, Heartney

states, “the artists here meditate on the boundaries between heaven and earth, body and soul, matter and spirit, human and divine, living and dead” (South Carolina Arts Commission, 2003, ¶ 4). This exhibition offers another example of how the actuality of spirituality in contemporary art is legitimized, here both through the profound commitment of Heartney’s commentary and the caliber of the work she selected.

Lynn Herbert curated the Houston Contemporary Arts Museum’s *The Inward Eye: Transcendence in Contemporary Art* in 2001 with the support of the Brown Foundation, George and Mary Josephine Hamman Foundation, and the Mithoff Family Foundation, among other individuals and corporate foundations. Intuitively selecting twenty-nine artworks in a variety of media, Herbert draws inspiration from James Hillman’s (1998) idea of an immediate aesthetic response to artworks where viewers gasp in astonishment. Herbert explains, “This exhibition explores how someone can look at a work of contemporary art and be transported, going beyond the given limits to another place entirely, in effect accessing one’s spiritual side” (2001, p. 14). From a deep philosophical exploration, Herbert included works that she hoped would allow viewers to ask larger questions about existence. In referencing the definition of transcendence without its baggage, she suggests that the viewer embrace the notion of going beyond the limits (Herbert, 2001) Despite these exhibitions, however, the concept of spirituality in art has not established a consistent place in the exhibition-making practices of major contemporary art museums and galleries.

Foundation Support of Religion

Even as some foundations, such as the Henry Luce Foundation, have made a commitment to exploring the diverse linkages of contemporary spirituality and art, many others have funding priorities that favor the more established realms of religion, although they too may focus on more pluralistic approaches that incorporate spirituality. Though many foundations have shied away from funding religion and spirituality in the past, some are now reconsidering their giving priorities in order to support religion and spirituality. They are recognizing the plurality of spiritual beliefs in American culture, addressing the needs of a spiritually diverse society, and honoring the varying belief systems of individuals and communities. Foundations are recognizing among their constituencies the influx of distinctive cultures, religious traditions, and spiritual beliefs many regions of the world that are now a part of the landscape of American society.

At a 1994 conference in Washington, DC, titled *Philanthropy and Religion in a Civil Society: Experiences at the Interface*, James A Joseph (1994), a professor at Duke University and former president and CEO of the Council of Foundations, suggested, “Civil society begins at the intersection of spiritual values, benevolent traditions and public responsibility” (p. i). The theme of the conference was that responsible and informed funding allows for the acceptance of a broad range of beliefs, ways of approaching giving, and the distribution of wealth that considers the whole person. Joseph and other conference participants discussed the religious and spiritual diversity of American culture and the need to acknowledge differing belief systems throughout an array of cultures.

Foundation Support of Spirituality

Philanthropy and Religion in a Civil Society is one example of foundations and individuals convening to explore the plurality of religious and spiritual beliefs. However, spirituality and religion are not just topics for discussion in conference roundtables. Foundations have developed, and are developing, specific guidelines that incorporate spirituality, reflecting a change in their giving priorities. The potential for melding spirituality and art may be a way to explore the diversity of spirituality in and among artists and their subsequent artistic process. Comparatively assessing the foundation community's burgeoning interest in spirituality as a funding priority allows for a possible inclusion of support that combines spirituality and art beyond such longtime stalwarts as the Henry Luce Foundation and the Lilly Endowment.

A much more extensive agenda is being put forward by a number of foundations to identify the broader impact of spirituality in the culture at large through funding a variety of health, science, and social service organizations. While understanding spirituality's influence in these areas of support, research and discussion about spirituality and art have been developing in the arts community. Comparing and cross-referencing similarities in funding spirituality in health, science, and social service organizations with that of arts organizations and individual artists may further expand the support of spirituality and art.

The actual term *spirituality* is appearing in a variety of foundation's stated guidelines and areas of interest. This is a relatively new development and demonstrates the willingness on the part of the foundation community to embrace such terminology and incorporate it in their mandates and giving priorities. Beyond foundation support of

organizations that focus on healthcare needs, scientific exploration, and social programs, foundations are reaching out to wellness programs, and delving into programs associated with religious causes. Those foundations that incorporate the term *spirituality* in their funding guidelines include the Fetzer Institute, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, and the Lilly Endowment, which was ranked sixth largest by total giving (\$427,465,199) and fifth largest by total assets (\$8,360,760,584) out of all the foundations in the U.S. in 2005 (Foundation Center, 2007c). The Templeton Foundation was also in the top 50 largest foundations in assets with a total figure to date of \$1,080,335,362 (Foundation Center, 2007c). Lilly Endowment and Templeton Foundation as suggested by their assets, overall giving, and Foundation Center rankings are not small, insignificant foundations that have negligible impact on nonprofit organizations and individuals but are leading players in the field of nonprofit grantmakers. These foundations have chosen to specifically tailor their guidelines to address spirituality in giving, representing a significant endorsement of this idea.

The Lilly Endowment and the Henry Luce Foundation are two foundations that have provided funding for research in spirituality and art; more foundations may potentially follow as research is dispersed and disseminated to the greater philanthropic foundation community. The research and findings that result from this study, it is hoped, will lead to further, more in depth research on the impact foundations may have in supporting a dialogic process in areas specific to spirituality and art.

The social responsibility of affluent individuals and the impact of financial support are now strongly being considered in contributing to particular causes that have spirituality as a core component of their giving priorities. One example is the

controversial and often-misunderstood Templeton Foundation, founded by financier and Wall Street tycoon John M. Templeton. The Templeton foundation awards \$20 million per year out of nearly \$45 million in total giving, to researchers in order for them to find evidence of the Divine by utilizing scientific inquiry (Foundation Center, 2007c). The foundation investigates spirituality's effects on health and human behavior and how the concepts of love and altruism are affected by one's religious beliefs (Herman, 2004).

The Templeton Foundation's mission statement is unique in the philanthropic community. A portion of it reads: "The Foundation typically seeks to focus the methods and resources of scientific inquiry on topical areas which have spiritual and theological significance ranging across the disciplines from cosmology to healthcare" (2002-4, ¶1). Its guidelines state: "The Foundation seeks to promote a deeper understanding of the influence spirituality, beliefs and values can have on human health" (2002-4, ¶1).

The Nathan Cummings Foundation has included support of community-based projects concerned with healing, women's spirituality, and meditation. Rabi Rachel Cowen (1994), director of Jewish Life Programs for the Nathan Cummings Foundation states, "We encourage the Jewish principle 'tikkum olam,' that we are each responsible for repairing the world. We believe that each of our lives is elevated by an identification with the transcendent" (p. 21).

Philanthropy Embraces Belief Systems

Within the multicultural worldview prevalent in postmodern society, where diversity and multiple voices are embraced, the philanthropic community is moving beyond a strictly Judeo-Christian mindset for funding religion and spirituality. This is clear with the

variety of faiths represented in foundation conferences and symposia, not just mainstream Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, but Buddhist, Quaker, Sufi, Hindu, Wiccan, Theosophist, and Anthroposophist, among others. Many faiths have now been consciously made part of discussions in the funding community so as not to silence or exclude any identifiable “Other.” Reverend Nathan D. Baxter, tenth bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania, stressed to the foundation gathering at the conclusion of the 1994 conference *Philanthropy and Religion in a Civil Society*, “In some ways your philanthropic mission and your practical interpretation betray a certain religiosity that is not necessarily identified with a particular creed, but something that is deeply committed to a sense of higher calling” (1994, p. 54).

Conferences Meld Spirituality and Philanthropy

The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University’s 14th Annual Symposium, on October 25, 2001, also took spirituality and philanthropy as its overarching topic. The goal of the symposium, titled *Taking Fundraising Seriously: The Spirit of Faith and Philanthropy*, was “gaining a better understanding of the relationship between spiritual motivation and identification in philanthropic practice” (Burlingame, 2002, p. 1), and its papers were compiled in *New Directions for Philanthropic Fundraising*, a publication sponsored by the Center on Philanthropy and the Association of Fundraising Professionals. In describing some outcomes from the symposium, editor Dwight F. Burlingame (2002, p. 1) further explains, “By bringing scholars and practitioners together to debate, discuss, and examine a variety of findings from different viewpoints, we were able to gain a deeper understanding of philanthropic action based upon spiritual and religious beliefs.”

Not surprisingly, the tragedy of September 11, 2001, provides a poignant backdrop for the three key points Burlingame (2002) identifies. The events of 9/11, he notes, should prompt learning about diversity, faith practices, and other cultures; understanding religious pluralism is essential to prevent exclusion of other peoples' traditions and values; and instead of emphasizing investment philanthropy, philanthropists need to consider the "why of giving." Other papers from the conference investigate additional aspects of its theme.

Claire Gaudiani, professor at the George Heyman Jr. Center for Philanthropy and Fundraising at New York University, (2002) suggests that our philanthropic system of giving in the United States is built on sacred texts, mainly Judaic and Christian, which have shaped how we act in the world and our relationship to one another. She contends that key elements of these teachings, such as treating others as one would wish to be treated, are consistent in other religions, spiritual practices, and disciplines. She identifies similar elements in the teachings and traditions of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism and further explains that all of these belief systems emphasize giving as part of their teachings.

Paul Schervish, a professor of sociology and director of the Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at Boston College, and Mary O'Herlihy, a writer and speaker on trends and patterns in charitable giving, were also contributors to the conference and have been studying and researching the spiritual dynamics of wealth for over eighteen years. The main question that drove their study was "whether those who become financially secure, that is, those who have redundant resources, ask deeper questions about the meaning of life and pursue deeper answers to these questions" (Schervish and O'Herlihy, 2001, p.

25). The inquiry was not limited to individuals; it was expanded to become a greater cultural question that involved the inclusion of affluent societies in general. One of the respondents to Schervish and O’Herlihy’s study noted that wealth might empower the individual by allowing them to diversify their thinking and to expand their focus. (Of course, such empowerment does not guarantee the quality of spiritual interests or the care with which they are pursued).

According to Schervish and O’Herlihy, “The wealthy neither ask nor answer the question of deeper spiritual existence more frequently or better than anyone else” (2001, p. 28). The wealthy do, however, influence and affect the lives of countless individuals in their giving priorities. As their priorities become clearer they also have the capacity to grow spiritually and influence the lives of the people they support and fund. “The spiritual secret of wealth is the deeper hidden dynamics by which financial security liberates wealth holders from the demands of accumulation and orients them toward the desire for productive allocation” (Schervish and O’Herlihy, 2001, p. 37). In conclusion, they state, “The positive potential of wealth to open a path to a happier and more caring existence is one of the most important unexamined themes of what we call spirituality in an age of influence” (p. 39).

Jo-Anne Stately, vice president of development Indian Land Tenure Foundation, and contributor to the conference, presented a paper on the spirituality of the American Indians and their relationship with philanthropic foundations, including the Emerging Funds for Communities of Color, which is administered by the W. K. Kellogg and David and Lucille Packard Foundations to identify cultural giving in Indian communities. Stately, a Native American herself, evaluated the importance of the collaboration Kellogg

and Packard developed to support, value, and respect Native American spirituality and culture. She noted several potential limitations in foundation philanthropy, such as that the dominant traditions and language of philanthropy are exclusive and not inclusive, the language of giving reflects cultural norms, and philanthropy, though defined as “the love of mankind,” is more often consumed with money and finances (Stately, 2002). In contrast, she said, within Native American communities, wealth is defined by spiritual qualities, collective material goods, and shared behavior not by net worth, and giving is a system of sharing, a spiritual act without a moral hierarchy (Stately, 2002).

Susan Pudelek (2002), executive director of the Stauros Foundation, an organization that helps people with addiction, and another participant at the conference, spoke about connections between spirituality and philanthropy in the following terms: “Spirituality is about our relationship with God, the other, and all creation. It is about being connected.... Philanthropy, the love of humankind, is an expression of relationship. Reflecting on the nature of our relationships leads us ever more deeply to the intersection of spirituality and philanthropy” (p. 121). The thoughtful remarks of all these commentators lend credence to the notion that the foundation community is in a position to further illuminate the impact of philanthropic giving within a spiritual context.

Embracing Spiritual Diversity

The makeup of foundations is becoming more diverse on a variety of levels, and with that diversity comes the respect and acknowledgement of a variety of faith and belief systems. This is not just a token gesture to appease certain constituents and certain authorizers but reflects steps consciously developed to fully embrace diversity so as to remain in touch

with different groups' constituencies and the larger society with which the foundation communicates and interacts.

Increased awareness and understanding of multiple perspectives of belief enhances the impact of philanthropic giving and expands the mission of foundations and their reach in communities and causes. In effect it is showing the foundations' constituents that their voice is important, their voices in all their variety and spiritual persuasion provide broader depth and impact of foundation giving. The foundation communities embrace and inclusion of diversity shows promise for potential support of the inclusion of artists of a variety of spiritual persuasions in discussion and perhaps future support (Burlingame, 2002)

Conclusions: Foundations as a Philanthropic Safe Haven

Both large, mainstream foundations and smaller, more idiosyncratic groups provide support and open up avenues for discourse in the area of spirituality and art. Definitions of *spirituality* vary and may be in some cases couched in terms of religion or expressed in support of religious causes. The Henry Luce Foundation and Lilly Endowment in particular have supported research into the interactions between religion or spirituality and artistic expression. There is also, as is the case with the Templeton, Lilly, and Fetzer foundations, a strong interest in discovering the role spirituality and religious beliefs play in science, healthcare, and healing the human body.

Since the tragic events of 9/11, and in part in response to them, some voices in the philanthropic community have expressed interest in cultivating broader understandings of spiritual traditions internationally as a way to foster tolerance and cooperation.

Nonetheless, despite some significant gatherings and studies, there is room and need for significant additional research.

The notion still exists within some artistic communities and realms of discourse that the spiritual may not be a suitable topic for discussion or expression in contemporary art. The term itself can have negative or pejorative associations and be dismissed for its potential affiliation with New Age fluff (at one extreme) or religious conservatism (at another) (Perlmutter, 1999). A substantial need exists for spirituality, the sublime, and transcendence to be openly addressed and analyzed, with misunderstandings and contradictions revealed. One safe haven for such a discussion remains with philanthropic foundations that support the future and sustainability of the arts in American society.

Foundations by their very independent makeup and operation allow for a multiplicity of ideas and belief systems to float unencumbered in the public domain, ultimately resisting simple resolutions and a number of society's "preferred" solutions (Frumkin, 2007). Foundations, like other sectors of the philanthropic community, promote diverse thinking, challenging discourse, and to an extent the freedom of innovation. Foundations have the resources to convene forums and bring a variety of artists and other participants together, and the fiscal independence to entertain pioneering, innovative, and forward-looking ideas.

With this capacity to explore issues and ideas, foundations are able to explore ways in which artists and the arts challenge our society and our culture as a whole. A number of foundations not only have the resources to explore and facilitate dialogue, but they also have a vested interest in supporting cultural, artistic, and spiritual endeavors as part of their mission and purpose. Many foundations embrace pluralism and free

expression, though in many boardrooms these are less tangible than statistical measures and evaluative outcomes (Frumkin, 2007).

The inquiry into the dialogue between art, religion, and spirituality is of special note, since to date relatively little attention has been paid to such developments, despite some evidence of growing interest. The studies and research that have been done in melding, contrasting, and comparing the influences of art, religion, and spirituality with subsequent foundation support of such explorations are widely dispersed and come from a variety of perspectives and vantage points. The intent of further research designed to analyze and interpret some of these areas of inquiry to show their similarities, differences, and the possibility for the expansion of research in a variety of directions will help enhance a greater understanding of spirituality and art.

CHAPTER 6

SYNOPSIS AND CONCLUSION

Review of Study's Purpose

The overall purpose of this study is to trace the emergence and define the role of spirituality in the contemporary visual arts and to examine and propose possibilities for nurturing that role through philanthropic foundations within the context of postmodern American culture. In the preceding chapters, I have described the issues and changing attitudes regarding spirituality in art by tracing concepts related to spirituality in postmodern philosophy, with particular reference to the ideas of the sublime espoused by Jean-François Lyotard, and by analyzing the work of contemporary artist Bill Viola. I have also examined and evaluated the impact of spirituality in art within the context of two new paradigms in the philanthropic community: *spirit-infused giving* and *creative philanthropy*.

The intent of this concluding chapter is to discuss, within a Lyotardian construction of postmodernism, the possibilities that might result from the common interests of visual artists and contemporary philanthropic foundations in a broad concept of spirituality that embraces possibilities for dynamic change and transformation. Two relatively recent approaches in philanthropy are significant in this regard: In *spirit-*

infused giving, philanthropists look inward, self-reflectively, to considering their collective values and motivations for giving (Lehman, 1998). In *creative philanthropy*, philanthropists consciously build an organizational structure that “provides a space for alternative thinking, voices and practices” (Anheier and Leat, 2006, p. 39), as noted above in Chapter 5.

Synopsis of Research

Throughout the course of this study, a number of basic propositions have guided the discussion as I have sought to elucidate the phenomenon of spirituality in contemporary art using several qualitative research methodologies, including historical, content, and philosophical analysis, as well as an extended case study of Bill Viola and his work. The first proposition is that within a philosophical discourse of postmodernism, the Lyotardian sublime—the presentation of the unrepresentable or the nondemonstrable—equates with spirituality. The second is that Bill Viola’s work demonstrates the presence and acceptance of spirituality in contemporary art through its expression of this postmodern sublime and its enthusiastic reception by the artworld establishment. The third proposition is that, simultaneously with the exploration and presence of spirituality in the artworld, the philanthropic foundation community is discovering new possibilities for using spirituality as an impetus and motivation for giving.

The Lyotardian sublime: The first proposition.

Lyotard brings the discourse of the sublime to the present day, drawing from and melding prior versions of the sublime which involve strong links to the idea of the postmodern

that have particular import for the contemporary artworld. In addition, Lyotard develops his ideas by referencing avant-garde artists such as Kazimir Malevich, Vassily Kandinsky, and Barnett Newman as exemplars and perpetuators of the sublime and the spiritual. These artists present the allusion of the invisible within the visible (Lyotard, 1982). This progression builds momentum toward Lyotard's conclusion that the artist has become the philosopher of the postmodern era.

The analysis of the sublime also builds toward a connection with contemporary spirituality. This correlation is constructed by again using artists to clarify and refine specific nuances of spirituality, which in contemporary society refers to a melding of eclectic and sometimes esoteric teachings from scriptural components, sacred texts, premodern belief systems, psychology, mysticism, and secularized thought, among other influences. Beyond experimentation with varying beliefs and teachings, contemporary spirituality encompasses individuals' rights to determine their own belief systems and to make decisions on what impacts them most, emphasizing an independence from dogma and religious doctrine.

Viola's spirituality and the sublime: The second proposition.

Video artist Bill Viola infuses a richly developed melding of the sublime, the spiritual, and the transcendent into his works, his artistic process, and his writings. Highly respected and deeply entrenched in the larger artworld establishment for over thirty years, Viola explores spirituality and the sublime through the creation of videos, installations, and sound environments that create a complex interplay of emotive and sensory expressions. In these works, Viola allows for the sublime of Lyotard (1984), the idea that there is something beyond the limits of experience that we have the opportunity to

envisage, even if we can't know it completely. In addition to his myriad creations, Viola is a meticulous writer when it comes to documenting, describing, and elucidating his process.

In Viola's work the spiritual and the sublime commingle, they meld into a complex exploration of the profound philosophical questions that are at the core of human existence. Viola also exemplifies Lyotard's definition of the postmodern artist fulfilling the role of philosopher. He uses the video camera as a tool to communicate his vision and incorporates the everyday and profound experiences of his own life into his artwork, finding in them ways to engage his viewers and provide them with intense and potentially transformative experiences. Spirituality is evident in the prolific writings that Viola has produced throughout his career. The writings, as important as the artworks themselves, further demonstrate the presence of the sublime, the spiritual, and the transcendent. In his notebooks, Viola explains that his writings and art are used "for developing knowledge of how to be in the world, for going through life. It [art] is useful for having a deeper understanding, in a very personal, subjective private way, of your own experience." (Walsh, 2006, p. 91)

Through my experiences with Viola's work, my reading of his writings and notes, I would suggest, though somewhat disconnected in the expanding technological age of late capitalism, Viola provides commentary that suggests that people are increasingly becoming more isolated, separated from empathic interaction. His recent work addresses and prompts connectedness. Not only are we moving apart from each other on a local, regional, national, and global sense, we are moving further and further away from ourselves, from our essence. What can bring us back to each other and to ourselves, to

allow us to connect on some meaningful level? I would suggest it is in art, art such as Bill Viola's, art embedded with deep experiential spiritual significance.

Building to the third proposition developed in this study, it is important to note that Viola's work has received considerable support from philanthropic foundations, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation, allowing him to take risks, explore true innovation in media studies, and to continue a steady path of creativity which impacts spirituality in art. Without foundation support, it may be prudent to say that Viola's impact on the artworld would be lessened, his reach less substantial. People would have less opportunity to see and engage with his work and miss out on its potential for prompting personal transformation. Supported, sustained, with his artworks included in private and public collections around the world, Viola has the ability to impact viewers and the larger artworld in profound and multifarious ways.

Philanthropists, foundations, and spirituality: The third proposition.

While artists and scholars such as Viola are delving deeply into the spiritual as it pertains to art, members of the foundation and the philanthropic communities also are grappling with spirituality in their giving initiatives. A few large mainstream foundations and smaller family foundations provide support and open up avenues for discourse in the area of spirituality and art. Among major philanthropic foundations, the Henry Luce Foundation and the Lilly Endowment, in particular, have supported research into the interactions between spirituality and artistic expression. The Templeton and Fetzer foundations are among the foundations with strong interests in discovering the role spirituality plays in fields such as science and medicine. If Templeton and Fetzer

broadened their giving interests to include the support of spirituality in art and artists' creative process, the arts might well inform their current areas of interest in the interaction of spirituality, making a larger impact in their respective areas of support.

Since the tragic events of 9/11, and in part in response to these events, some voices in the philanthropic community have expressed interest in cultivating broader understandings of spiritual traditions internationally as a way to foster tolerance and cooperation. Nonetheless, despite some symposia and studies, there is room and need for significant additional research. Even before those events, the concept of *spirit-infused giving* was gaining ground in some areas of the philanthropic community. According to this model for philanthropy, spiritual values should both motivate giving and guide decisions about it. In addition, the relatively new paradigm of *creative philanthropy*—which advocates a shift from staid, methodical giving to more dynamic and innovative ways of approaching philanthropy—brings foundation funding into the philosophical arena of postmodernism, with its emphasis on complexity and change.

The spiritual lives of both artists and philanthropists might be said to be developing greater prominence in their respective work and practices. Documentation of such developments demands careful scrutiny and observation to detail the impact and the congruencies of such occurrences. Attention to and adequate documentation of this phenomenon is essential to understanding and encouraging contemporary creative processes and spiritual explorations in all their guises.

Implications for the Research

What might be the potential impact and contributions of this study for artists, curators, educators, philanthropists, and foundation administrators, as well as for each of their respective fields of study? Heightened awareness of the role the sublime and spirituality play in postmodern discourse opens the way to investigating many possible intersections and interconnectedness within and between spirituality in art and spirituality in philanthropy. I contend that this research may inform the development of artists and curators, academicians, teachers, students, philanthropists, and those of us trying to gain our footing in the postmodern condition of the twenty first century. This research sets implications for the Academic Arena, Just as the spiritual in art presents the unrepresentable and artists have become the philosophers of our time, so it is that artists such as Bill Viola, have the opportunity to move beyond the limitations of the postmodern condition—capitalism, malaise and angst.

Informing the academic arena.

This research may inform the academic arena, providing avenues for dialogue that explores spirituality in art. Again, relatively outside of the market and somewhat supportive of free expression outside of governmental and political restraints, the academic arena may allow artists and scholars to discuss openly the impact of spirituality in art. One example of discussion and critical discourse of spirituality in art is through the research that is present in this study. In addition to this study, another example of critical discourse and analysis in the academic arena, is that of Deniz Tekiner (1992), in his dissertation entitled *Spirituality in Contemporary Art: Struggles for Critical Vitality*. Now an author who specializes in sociology and modern art, Tekiner provides an analysis

of a sociological perspective that emphasizes the constraints on artists' work that delves into the spiritual. In his study he notes that critics in interpreting artists' work, dictated the interpretation of artwork for an elite few who are specially trained (Tekiner, 1992). He analyzed the way artworld constraints have been placed on artists working in these styles and ascertains the viability of this resistance (Tekiner, 1992). With an open discussion that infuses this type of dialogue, rich nuances of the spiritual in art can be developed and sustained.

Tekiner's work provides another avenue for exploration through writings about artworks. My study could not have been conducted without the content analysis of the writings employed to ascertain Viola's work in the sublime and the spiritual. Critical writing and analysis preserves the nature of dialogue for future generations. Looking back, fifty years from now, how will we know of the importance of spirituality in art, just as Kandinsky and Newman wrote about the spiritual influences in their work? Written accounts are therefore crucial and need to be funded and supported.

Within the academic arena, this research also has an impact on art education specifically to broaden the perspective of art in the educational community and integrate a variety of constituents that emphasize the importance of dialogue regarding spirituality in art. Spirituality in art emphasizes the whole person, the broader view of what it is to be human and to grapple with philosophical ideas and concepts beyond mainstream formalist traditions, this is an essential role this research can play in expanding the field of art education in and out of the classroom. Considering concepts of spirituality and art in the broader field of art education provides a view of postmodern contemporary artists

working to communicate and broaden their perspective of the nature and the role of the artist in postmodern culture.

Art education is not limited to the classroom, but with growing museum education programs, art education is being infused in the museum within and beyond the walls of the gallery space. Within this museum education process, if a spiritual component is not considered, museum educators and curators run the risk of contributing to the loss of impact of artists' artwork and creative processes. The artist and their subsequent creations run the risk of losing their impact, an artwork's thrust to illumine, to inspire, to enrich the very lives in which the artworks were created, conceived, and understood.

One way to prevent artworks' loss of impact is the documentation of spirituality in art through the writings of artist and scholars. Viola alone has contributed to five biographies and has over 45 books and catalogues centered on his work to which he has contributed. Biographies such as *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973–1994* (1995), *Bill Viola: Hatsu-yume = First Dream* (2006), and *Going Forth by Day: Bill Viola* (2002) are of special note, as they contain a detailed documentation of rich contextual writings—elaborating on Viola's work.

Viola's actual journals are reproduced, replete with sketches and notes to his artistic process with special note to his works from a nascent stage of the development of concepts to the full development of his works. His writings are not only the documentation and recounting of his motivations from his research in such arenas as religion, spiritual belief systems, psychology, and anthropology among others, but also his documentation of technical specifications, and the incorporation of technical advances in video, film, sound, and installation construction. His prolific writings about his work

and artistic processes are also supplemented and enhanced with numerous museum catalogues, exhibition programs, and text panels.

In order for the phenomenon of spirituality in art, and its contributions to the greater body of artworks and the artworld establishment, to be better understood, additional research and writings are needed to reach a critical mass. Just as the Los Angeles County Museum's exhibition explores Kandinsky's seminal work *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1914/1977) and other writings, such as those of Barnett Newman, are reproduced in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition catalogue (Hess, 1971), additional writings should be documented to be analyzed over time.

Informing artists and their creative processes.

The main application of this study for artists is to propose that they not only open up to their own spirituality, but that they also embrace and help raise awareness of other artists who delve in the spiritual, other artists who embrace the spiritual, the transcendent, and the sublime. The postmodern condition, as presented and analyzed by Lyotard, demonstrates the idea that there is little room and less encouragement for creative exploration and artistic contemplation because emphasis is placed instead on consumerism and the market driven economy. Artists need to be encouraged to explore and create, because they have the potential to be the philosophers of our time, and because spiritual discovery (and self-discovery) has been and remains a significant aspect of philosophical inquiry, it too has a role in their endeavors. If artists are, as Lyotard suggests, the philosophers of our postmodern condition, spirituality may assume a prominent place in their practice, as a motivator, a subject for investigation, and even, as in Bill Viola's work, an effect their work might seek to evoke or stimulate.

Bill Viola is presented here as exemplifying an artist working in the spiritual and sublime whose art might offer models for looking at the work of other artists or groups of artists. One possible avenue for this is exploring the work of other artists who, like Viola, have engaged in a process of studying and drawing inspiration from Western and non-Western religious and philosophical traditions. Another is to investigate works that examine models from other cultures in a way analogous to Viola's engagement with Christian art. Embracing the presence of spirituality and the sublime in artists' processes, implementation, and resulting works also opens up possibilities for embracing diversity and inclusion in ways that move beyond the standard notions, broadens the scope to include spiritual diversity and the potential for accepting a host of spiritual influences and spiritual proclivities.

Implications for analyzing spirituality.

Robert Fuller (2001) in his compendium of studies presented in *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*, states that forty percent of the U.S. population considers themselves leading a deeply spiritual life, rather than seeing themselves associated with a particular religion, dogma, or creed. In this sense we are in the throws of facing an awakening of spiritual diversity, a melding of sometimes disparate beliefs and spiritual teachings outside the institutions of Judeo-Christianity or other established religions. With this melding of different belief systems, the commingling of various cultures, and the promulgation of expanding avenues of spiritual exploration in our pluralistic society, the study and analysis of this segment of the population begs careful study and analysis. Americans are finding new ways to define their increasingly eclectic array of spiritual beliefs as with artists, asking larger

philosophical questions (Wuthnow, 1998). This important distinction denotes the prevalence of a space and the possibility for dialogue and interaction in the artworld establishment and the philanthropic community.

Spirituality in a broadening and deepening sense needs to move beyond what I stated in a previous chapter, Robert Fuller's notion of New Age circles and self-help arenas—the “Barnes & Noble as synagogue.” Certainly self-help books which incorporate a form of secular spirituality are important and have a place in American society, but artists like Viola take the idea of spirituality presented in his writings beyond a paperback on the nightstand filled with self-help platitudes. In my experience with his writings and his installations, Viola makes a clear attempt to draw out the larger questions. He is concerned about empathy for others, the struggle of the human condition. I propose that foundations hold promise for providing a safe haven for people to ask these larger questions whether artists or non-artists we continue to ask. Simply stated, we need artists' work like that of Viola in our lives. We need to understand that there is something beyond our senses and the tragic display of abuse, neglect and suffering of the human condition. As Viola states, “...I am interested in the path of the liberation of the self—liberation of human beings from suffering.” (Elliott, 2006, p. 183).

Implications for the foundation community and philanthropic studies.

In the growing field of philanthropic studies, specific attention is being paid to philanthropic foundations; they have become the potential powerhouses of creative thinking and working that modern society needs (Anheier & Leat, 2006). Continuing research would enhance understanding of foundations' role in shaping the future of the arts and artists in postmodern American culture (Fleishman, 2007). Specifically, more

research is required to understand the impact of foundation giving on a dialogue regarding spirituality and art in open forums, roundtable discussions, conferences, and subsequent publications.

I contend that the critical intersection between artists working in spirituality and the philanthropic foundation community can be investigated through the lens of the dialogue surrounding spirit-infused giving and creative philanthropy. Both these approaches suggest ways that philanthropic foundations might simultaneously draw from and support heightened awareness of spirituality's import in contemporary society. Specifically, further consideration should be given to the timely investigation and exploration of spirituality in general and spirituality in art more particularly. The goal is to obtain clarity and a deep understanding of art and the artist in postmodern society and the influence of spirituality and the artistic process that continue to make a dynamic and expanding cultural impact in an oft-perceived postmodern culture of materialism within the capitalist mindset. To the extent that foundations are relatively insulated from the market forces, Lytoard's notion of breaking free from consumerism and the capitalistic system is applicable to foundations as well as to artists. And what better way for foundations to signal their support of the freedom and innovation creative philanthropy champions than by engagement with the arts and artists?

How do we experience spirituality in art, and more importantly how do we directly or indirectly interact with those creators of this art? We can directly experience Viola's work within the museum establishment or in site-specific locales. Another way is in the Viola's writings, interpretation and critical analysis by scholars, critics, and curators. Another place is a philanthropic "safe haven," provided by the foundation

community within the realm of symposia, forums, and open discussions. Foundations provide a forum that is outside of the market, outside of substantial governmental and political control. Foundations have the ability to bring together people with diverse viewpoints, creative minds, and innovative thinking.

Artists then as well as scholars need a safe haven to explore art with spiritual embeddedness. They need support for their process, for their development, and the time it requires to create their work, whether the actual creation of a painting, sculpture, or video or such avenues as writing a review, a book, critical analysis, or a scholarly journal . With monetary support from a philanthropist or foundation, artists and writers are provided the means to continue exploring and to continue creating, to respond to the malaise and angst of the postmodern condition. Foundation support affords artists and writers the time, resources, and the ability to delve within or interact with others, taking risks, unfettered by a market-driven art market that stresses a commodity, a fetish, and an investment; over the artwork's imbued qualities (Tuchman, 1986).

This study, other studies, and exhibitions that analyze spirituality, the sublime, and transcendence in art could not be produced, or certainly would not be as effective at attempting to contribute to a body of knowledge surrounding the phenomenon of spirituality in art without support from the foundation community. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art's (1986) publication and exhibition titled *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, for example, has added to a body of knowledge surrounding the impact of spirituality in art. The exhibition was made possible by grants from the Atlantic Richfield Foundation and the catalogue's interpretive critical discourse

on the artwork in this exhibition was funded by the Drown Foundation, according to Earl A. Powell, former director of the Los Angeles County Museum.

The Journey

Viola takes us on a journey. He asks us to look beneath the surface of his work, beyond the reaches of the projection screen. He leads us into a dark room and we wait as our eyes adjust. We are in the silence and the stillness for just enough time for us to anticipate the next moment. What is it that will be presented? We see the dim flickering light on the screen, the sequence is looping and we are here again to witness another spectacle, another occurrence of the ability for art to engage, for art to present the unrepresentable, the nondemonstrable.

The room is suddenly flooded with images and a roar of sound, crackling fire, drips of water that expand to a torrential deluge. Something is lurking, just outside of our comprehension.

Through this experience I can talk about the notion of opening up and expanding. As I speak to other artists, to colleagues in arts education and community arts administration, to researchers, and to philanthropists about how the impact this has had on me, I have opened up a forum for discussion. I have been provided the platform to relay an experience. As philanthropists go deep beneath within themselves to understand the impetus for and the motivations for their giving, so are Viola and I going inward on a very personal journey. Deeply questioning as Viola ponders the spiritual and the sublime, philanthropists ponder and assesses the potential impact of their altruism, through their generosity. Now foundations too are in a space to provide freedom of ideas, to allow

thinking, to react to the angst of the postmodern condition, to allow others, in this sense artists to provide input, ideas, solutions and resolutions. There is still the inherent ambiguity for discovery and innovation.

When the artist and the philanthropist come together, they can support each other in unique and multifarious ways. The philanthropist allows the artist the financial means to explore and create. The artist provides the philanthropist with the openness and freeing ideas of innovative creative exploration, allowing them to ponder their purpose for, and the meaning behind, their giving. If we bring together philanthropist or philanthropic foundations and the artists working in spirituality, the artists may be provided with the space to look deeply within for their creative motivations and the philanthropists can look within for their motivations for giving. Both have the potential to enrich the greater civil society.

Viola will continue to create art, complex architectural installations, providing the space for transformation, for the rare beauty of the transcendent. I ask that just as Viola is presenting his ideas and views, that the philanthropist, support this important exploration. With that possibility, ideas are expanded, both benefit, and perhaps both are changed.

Viola writes:

I believe in the human capacity for survival, against all odds—that life will always find a way to go on, and that within ourselves we will always discover the will and ability to rise up again to overcome obstacles, to transform and transcend who we are. This is why I believe in the power of art, and especially media art, to speak across borders and barriers, transcending language, culture, socio-political differences, and even space and time, to become a universal expression and reflection of mankind (2007, p. 11).

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