Introduction

Calvin Seerveld writes that art has a place in God’s world. He values art in the larger context of human culture, stating that it belongs to the whole of society. Art is like every kind of work. It has its own worth within the context of our life and the world. Seerveld comes to this point after asking this question: Is art a luxury or is art a necessity? The idea that service to the Lord though the work of missions is more important than service to the Lord through art is a commonly held belief among Christians. Seerveld, however, does not see it this way. He states, that if “art is by its very nature part of God’s creation, inextricably historical, conditioned by the society in which it is made, and necessarily permeated by a committed spirit in one direction or another, then I believe it is wrong to view art as a luxury.” Thus, Seerveld would contend, that art is like plumbing, missions, or surgery. It is a basic God-given service provided for Christians living in God’s creation. Seerveld views art as neither superfluous nor extraneous. He sees it as a valuable service to the community of Christian believers. Tim Keller, author and senior pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, answers Seerveld’s question by proposing “that humans have art because they understand, perhaps at an intuitive level, that there is meaning in what
we do.” Christians may conclude, therefore, that art is both a necessary service to human culture and meaningful to human culture. If art is part of our world then it is necessary to build a framework to understand its place in our life.

This paper is written to help us as Christians gain perspective on a culture of pluralism from which contemporary art emerges, but also to help us uncover where there is meaning in our current cultural climate. Christians historically have been not only uncertain about what to do with contemporary art – what we often call ‘modern art’ – but uncertain about what to do with artists as well. At best, we view contemporary art as eccentric expressions of elite artists and aficionados who ‘get it,’ and, at worst, visible proof that the world is fallen and sinful. While both of these observations may be accurate, a closer reading of contemporary art is necessary. Contemporary art offers nuance and insight into the human condition that can be valuable to the Christian faith. It can change the way we think or say something difficult about the human mind, but it can also reflect the fallen state of human culture. The topic of this paper Making Art in an Age of Anxiety: the Character of Pluralism and the Construction of Meaning in

---

3 See Charles Harrison. *Modernism* (United Kingdom: Cambridge, 1997), 6-14. The term modern is problematic because it can imply a variety of ideas: *Modernization* refers to the technological, economic, and political process associated with the Industrialization and its aftermath. The social conditions and modes of experience that are seen as the effects of these process define *modernity*. *Modern* can refer to the current moment within culture, or the quality of being up-to-date. See also, David Hopkins. *After Modern Art 1945-2000* (United Kingdom: Oxford, 2000), 29. *Modernism* is reflected in the visual arts in the 19th century that exhibits the broad processes of modernization and their societal effects. For the American art critic, Clement Greenberg, *Modernism* as reflected in the visual arts is the aesthetic quality of formalism. The roots of Greenberg’s formalism are connected to aesthetic ideas of Immanuel Kant, the so-called father of modern aesthetics; in short that art is answerable only to it and is not assessed for its social purpose. For this reason, I will use the term contemporary to refer to art from the last twenty years rather than the term modern, current writers refer to this period as postmodern art. For a compelling view of *Modern, Postmodern and Contemporary*, see Arthur Danto, *After the end of art: contemporary art and the pale of history* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1997), 2-19.
Contemporary Art is to address the role that contemporary art plays in culture, and to address what contemporary art means to Christians engaged in culture.

In addition to the questions of cultural anxiety, pluralism and meaning found in contemporary art I will ask an additional question: what does it mean to make art within this context? One task is to present images and ideas about contemporary art and its audience, the other task is to place my art within the discussion. This twofold task would suggest that my interest as a professor of art at Covenant College lies not only in the discussion and criticism of contemporary artworks, but also in the making of art as response to contemporary issues. I will define cultural anxiety through a history of western civilization with an emphasis on the culture of the last century. I will also look at the work of Christian scholars who have created a grid through which to view culture, in so doing, they have developed principles of how to act within culture. Secondly, I will consider cultural anxiety in art and how cultural values are expressed through a paradigm of pluralism. I will then look at what contemporary art means to the Christian community distinguishing between true meaning and artistic meaning. I will describe the look of contemporary art and consider at least one example of from the most recent Whitney Biennial Exhibition. Last I will look at the role of Christians who make art within this context, and more specifically how I can be a responsible maker and viewer of art in our culture. I will examine Christian scholars’ views on the topics of responsibility, calling, relevance, and fittingness as they apply to art making. A brief consideration of my work as an artist will assist in the understanding of how meaning is derived from my subjects and media.

4 This paper comes in part, from a lecture I presented to the Covenant College Philosophy Club in the fall of 2001.
Anxiety – Culture – History

As a graduate student of art in the early 1990’s, my peers held a worldview different from mine. My classmates were in opposition to my Christian perspective. They asked how a ‘religious’ person could have an interest in the world of art. “Aren’t Christians opposed to contemporary art?” They were referring to recent uproar over the NEA public funding for the arts siting the work of Andreas Serrano’s difficult and contentious photograph, *Piss Christ* as an example. This was a challenging time for me, and through God’s grace I survived what seemed to me as a constant assault on who I was and what I believed. A professor encouraged me through my difficulty. She said, “this is a time to crystallize what you believe.” And so it was in a very real way.

This was true not only for me but for my peers as well. One of my classmates was on a quest for truth. She asked her peers how they defined the word ‘truth.’ One day she asked me about a conversation that took place between Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate. “Why didn’t Christ answer his question,” she asked. She was referring to Pilate’s response to Christ with the question, “what is truth?” (Jn. 18:38). I called to her attention that Pontius Pilate asked this question but with a different aim than her quest. Pilate was debating what to do with Jesus Christ. The Jews wished to put him to death. Pilate saw no reason to do so. He was in conversation with Christ to discern the ‘fate’ of his life. Pilate asks Christ if he is the king of the Jews, whereupon, Christ sums up the truth of the gospel for Pilate. He explains that His kingdom is not of this world and that he “came to this world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (Jn. 18:37). Pilate’s question, “what is truth,” suggests he didn’t know what to do with Christ’s truth and that he wasn’t looking for his kind of truth. “Is this the kind of truth that you want,” I
asked my classmate. She didn’t want a formalized religion she told me, but she told me that was curious about Christ. What she meant was that she was curious that Christ would call himself truth.

In a year she abandoned her search for truth. It appears that an experience in a philosophy class helped her see that pursuing truth is no longer a philosopher’s goal, and that there is no such thing as truth. She was ecstatic, visibly delighted, as she exclaimed to her peers, “you know that truth I was looking for – I no longer have to look for it! It doesn’t exist!” Her philosophy professor put the breaks on her understandable journey. When she completed her story her classmates congratulated her and affirmed that this discovery was inevitable. For some reason I had happened to watch my classmate descend from being a person who sought meaning to being a person who essentially gave it up. Her desire to find truth is now repressed and ignored. She told herself the lie that it is meaningless to look for truth. Her anxiety, therefore, is lost in a cultural malaise that has abandoned the truth of Rom. 1:20. “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

The notion of “an Age in Anxiety” is not new. Each generation can find roots of anxiety within its respective culture. Identifying “anxiety” is one thing. Discerning what to do with it is quite another. Anxiety is seen in many forms and is expressed in a variety of ways. How does art reflect the anxieties of its culture? To answer this question, consider how Christian scholars clarify cultural anxiety, and specifically how they use a worldview to engage culture through the inspection of art from the modern era
based on Enlightenment principles. It is worth examining how these scholars look at contemporary art and culture that is post-Enlightenment or postmodern.

During the 1960's and 1970's, Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer suggested that the reason the world in which we live is broken and is in such chaos is because we no longer have a moral or ethical foundation. He argued that Christians could view the demise of intellectual ideas in cultural and political lives by tracing the three lines of philosophy, science, and religion. The world Schaeffer described has lost unity. While it was at one time based on Christian foundations, it gradually settled on the foundations of the Enlightenment and the “religion” of science and reason. Art made in this context (a context of modernism) would therefore express the sentiment of its age. The 1976 film *How Should We Then Live* and subsequent book by Schaeffer influenced me as a young teen developing an interest in the arts. The notion that art reflects culture had a great impact on me. I found that studying art was a way to use God-given gifts, although, these God-given gifts came with a responsibility – a responsibility to influence God’s world through art. Therefore, I had no choice but to serve God. Equally important to me as a fourteen-year-old was my discovery of the notion of a world-and-life-view. Schaeffer stated that everyone starts with presuppositions which govern the way we look at life and which shape our decisions. People function within their presuppositions or worldview. This is similar to a conversation that I had with Cornelius Van Til, who encouraged me to see the truth of Christianity as it spoke to my interest in art. He said that Christians
should engage all areas within God’s world and that I should not be afraid to take part in it. Curiously however, Van Til never had much to say about art. 5

Hans Rookmaaker, Schaeffer’s longtime associate and collaborator also asserts that people’s decisions are based on their worldview and the outcomes and artifacts of these decisions exhibit a worldview. In his seminal work, *Modern Art and Death of a Culture*, he suggests that paintings give a philosophy of the world and life. He states, “[that paintings] are more than the decorations or simply pleasant to look at. They have a message realized by artistic means. The picture gets across what it wants to say, not just through its title, but by its own built in qualities of artistry and method.” If paintings have a message about the worldview of the artist then paintings must also exhibit a message about artists and their culture. In Schaeffer’s film I vividly recall paintings, sculptures, and film from ancient times to the present. Visually arresting images from the *Allegory of Good and Bad Government* by fourteenth century Sienese painter, Ambrogio Lorenzetti, exhibits depictions of devil-like creatures that tormented society, and, by contrast, images of noble citizens who justly governed society. I recall spectacular religious images and fascinating abstract images of modern art. As the film progresses, there is a sense of moving full circle, as the later images are not of paintings but of film footage of American youth embracing a worldview of self-absorption and self-abuse. Scenes of armored tanks in an eastern European city (Prague), exhibited a tension between the State and the masses of social unrest. Both examples are used to show that

---

5 The recollection of this conversation took place at his house some twenty-plus years ago, where I put a new roof on his porch. He invited me for a drink at local pub. I went along for the conversation. I think I had a coke and he had a beer.
the fears of a society of disorder and dystopia illustrated in Lorenzetti’s idealized
paintings are now realized in modern life.

Schaeffer’s thoughts about the chaos of the mid-to-late twentieth century are
relevant for the present generation as well. Schaeffer’s film chronicles humanistic
society with a progressive abandonment of biblical teaching, from Ancient Rome through
the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and to the age of the Enlightenment. He highlights the
Reformation as a short period of time when culture was not humanistic, a time when
“science and art were set free to operate upon the basis of that which God has set forth in
Scripture.”7 From there, he traces scientific, religious, and philosophical thinking
through the age of Enlightenment up to the present time of the film. For Schaeffer the
Enlightenment gave birth to modern pessimism and fragmentation. He notes that this
shift occurred first in philosophy, then in art. He views the art of the 19th century into
mid-1970 as sterile. “Art became the vehicle for modern man’s view of truth and life.”8 It
was a life that had lost touch with humanity. Art of the nineteenth and twentieth century
exhibited the weight and sin of a fragmented culture that was without unity. Such unity
according to Schaeffer can only now be regained in Biblical truth.

Rookmaaker too traces the human falling away from God and biblical teaching
through western history. He looks disapproving at the effects that the Enlightenment had
on modern culture. But Rookmaaker places Christians in the center of culture and asks
what kind of impact Christians will have on their culture, a notion that suggests specific
Christian responsibility to culture. He calls Christians to a Reformational way of life that
is in contrast to a mystical or dualistic view of life and culture. Rookmaaker states that

7 Francis Schaeffer. *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western thought and Culture*
(Fleming H. Revell, 1976), 86.
gnosticism influenced the mysticism of later ages including our own century. Gnostics views the material world as bad or sinful. Salvation would mean escape from the world and its passions. Gnosticism looks at material life as valueless – where one is separate from culture.

Another view of the western world before the Enlightenment maintained a dualism between nature and grace, a line of reasoning associated with the 13th century philosopher Thomas Aquinas and later Roman Catholic thinking. This dualistic thinking proclaims that there is a world of faith and religion (or grace) which is a higher world. Christian aims according to this view should be set in the world of grace. The other world is that of nature or reason. In the world of nature, there is no distinction between Christian and non-Christian. Both are governed by the natural laws of thought and action. Nature – grace duality is problematic as it removes God from culture and splits all human activity into either the spiritual or the material worlds.

Rookmaaker presents a final view – a Reformation attitude. It is an attitude that places Christians in culture. Rookmaaker asserts “[t]hat culture is the result of man’s creative activity within God-given structures. So it can never be something apart from our faith.”9 There is no duality between a higher and lower world here; there is no duality between nature and grace. The world belongs to God – he created it, sustains it, and is interested in it. A Reformational view includes the doctrine of sin and of a fallen world. Man brought a curse into the world upon all of creation and us. In his sinfulness man wanted to be autonomous – he wanted to be like God. In Jesus Christ Christians are bought back; we are redeemed. “It is not just the soul, the religious in the narrow sense

---

8 Schaeffer, 184.
9 Rookmaaker, 36.
that belongs to God – it is the fullness of life. Nothing is excluded.”

10 The work of Christ is central to understand Christians’ responsibility to creation. Albert Wolters suggests: “If the whole creation is affected by the fall, then the whole creation is reclaimed in Christ.”

11 It is this Reformational thinking that gives Christians direction today in the twenty-first century. “Christianity is about the renewal of life,” states Rookmaaker. “Therefore it is also about the renewal of art.”

12 He suggests “[t]hat Christian artists look to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the renewal of his life in Christ.”

13 Christians may conclude that art, politics, and marriage are just some of God’s redeeming work in our fallen world. Christians are to participate in God’s creation at this specific time in history which God has called them.

We live in a fragmented, disjointed world. God calls Christians to participate in it. Christians are called to be the salt of the earth and light of the world (Mt. 5:13-16).

Schaeffer insists that Christians need more than just knowledge about the right worldview. Christians must consciously “act upon that world view so as to influence society in all its parts and facets across the whole spectrum of life, as much as we can to

10 Rookmaaker, 37.
11 Albert Wolters. Creation Regained (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 60. Wolters tells the history of redemption that man sinned and was separated from God. Man rejected God’s sovereign rule. But the story of the creation and fall includes the story of Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection. Christ’s work was to restore creation and to bring about the coming of the Kingdom of God. Salvation through Christ changes the life of the Christian; as we are called to no longer conform to the world, “but [to] be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). Redemption means to buy back; reconciliation and renewal; it also means, as defined in 2 Cor. 5:17, to be a “new-creation” through salvation in Christ. Christ’s redemption is truly cosmic, states Albert Wolters, it includes “all things (Col. 1:20)” of creation to be made new. Wolters helps us understand the redeeming work through Christ: Christ sanctifies marriage; Christ redeems sexuality; Christ reforms politics; Christ claims the work of the artist; and, Christ transforms business practices Christ’s work in His people fulfills the task to tend and cultivate culture, and thus restores creation in anticipation of the final regeneration. Restoration of creation, for Christians, means to oppose sin in personal relationships and in public life and work.
12 Rookmaaker, 229.
13 Rookmaaker, 245.
exhort of our individual and collective ability.”

How shall we live? This is a question to Christians of all ages: for Ezekiel who first asked this question in the sixth century B.C.; for Schaeffer and Rookmaaker in the late twentieth century; and, for us in the twenty-first century. The answer of course for Christians in our culture was the same for Israel in theirs, to turn from the “evil ways” (Ezk. 33:10-11) and to influence society through a call to faithfulness.

Rookmaaker does not offer a hopeful picture of modern art because it offers no answers for humanity: “We can look to the answers of modern art…but they tell us that everything is rotten, nothingness, putrid, empty, senseless. But where is beauty, where is truth?” This is the same question I had asked my classmate from graduate school. She had no answer. Modern art is the destruction of humanity, suggests Rookmaaker, as he looks at the work of Frenchman Marcel Duchamp. “Man is dead. He is nothing but a machine, a very complex machine, an absurd machine.” While art reflects a personal worldview, it also reflects the larger worldview of social climate. Duchamp’s work emerges in the years of World War One out of an art movement known as Dada, a random term that reflects a nihilistic and destructive worldview. If modern art is ugly and horrible, a period of history that is disjointed and fragmented as the “deep” and “dissolving” effects of the Enlightenment, then how do we live in such a cultural climate and what are we to do about it? Can we return to a time that Rookmaaker defines in the 16th and 17th century Reformation period where “there was unity in the whole of

---

14 Schaeffer, 255.
15 Rookmaaker, 209. See also note 3. Rookmaaker used the term ‘modern art’ to refer to art that was made after the enlightenment. He divided the period of art into three sections from 1800 to 1920. After the twenty’s he refereed to it as a ‘new era’ but he continued to refer to this era as ‘modern.’ I believe that he would refer to what I am calling contemporary art as modern.
16 Rookmaaker, 129.
culture.”¹⁷ I don’t think so. To suggest that Reformational Holland was completely unified seems unlikely. It was a culture that felt the effects of the Fall. More importantly, however, we need to tend to our cultural moment. We don’t need to recreate the forms of the preceding culture; rather we need to use the forms of our age. The problem presented for us is how to use these forms. Rookmaaker agrees, but presents a tension for Christians. On one hand he describes modern art as difficult and problematic, even bad. On the other he calls Christians to dialogue with culture. He never claims however, that modern art is dangerous for Christians. While I don’t agree with all of Rookmaaker’s examples of “horrible” modern art, such as his assessment of Picasso or Cézanne, for example, I do firmly agree that art reflects a human spiritual struggle with creation. Rookmaaker does suggest however, that we are to understand the world - not to retreat from it. He states “[t]hat Christians are not free to opt out of the period of history God has placed us in, nor opt out of the task He has given us to live as His children here and now.”¹⁸

Christians are to live out their faith in the culture around them. They are to act in relation to the structures of reality given to us by our Creator, redeemed through Christ (Jn. 1:1; Heb. 1:2). Therefore, we are bound by the created order, and freed through the work of Christ. Within a world of sin we have the freedom to belong to the Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). Ultimately our life in the created world is structured by “possibilities”¹⁹ found within creation. These are possibilities that God has given us in all of life – from the possibility of a good marriage to the possibility of a good job.

¹⁷ Rookmaaker, 186.
¹⁸ Rookmaaker, 133.
For Christians interested in the arts and culture, Rookmaaker’s legacy leaves a lasting road map to help navigate the geography of modernism in the visual arts. It helped me formulate a response to my contemporaries in college. The principles he established to understand human culture in a spiritual struggle with creation add clarity. It is empowering to claim, along with Rookmaaker, that Christians can insist on values in art that reflects the unity and wholeness of God. We are called to participate in a complete renewal of the church and life, engaging God’s redeemed creation.

Rookmaaker is helpful in building a perspective and framework to renew culture. His critique of modern art however, seems generalized and is in need of a closer view. His analysis of Cezanne, for example, suggests that for the artist he wants two things at once: “to paint only what the eye sees, and to paint the structure of reality as understood by human rationality.” Cezanne’s work certainly adheres to Enlightenment principles of rationality, but he was using his mind (the part of humanity most often ignored when looking at art) to analyze the landscape. Most often viewers walk away from artworks with thoughts about the artist’s vision. Seldom do viewers walk away from artworks and marvel about the artist’s mind. Rookmaaker’s analysis is missing a critical aspect of modernism. Rather than trying to fragment humanity, Cezanne and others like him were working with a fragmented world. This tension articulated in Rookmaaker’s work in 1970 reflects the tension and anxiety in the art world at that time. Rookmaaker’s work anticipates the anxiety to come. In this regard, Rookmaaker’s analysis of modern art is helpful. Modern art (as theorized by Kant and Clement Greenberg) stripped the social

19 Rookmaaker, 225.
20 Rookmaaker, 95.
responsibility away from the artist. Ten years later, Philosopher Nicolas Wolterstorff clarified the problem of modern art hinted at in Rookmaaker’s criticism.

Wolterstorff directs us to take a functional approach to art and not merely an aesthetic one. He proposes “that works of art are instruments and objects of action – and then, of an enormous diversity of actions.” The notion of art having social responsibility was revolutionary in 1980. This notion slowly infiltrated the teaching and perception of art institutionally grounded in formalism and abstraction. The prevailing theory of my education in the 1980’s was that the essence of art was about beautiful form. The way to evaluate art was through formalist principles of art constructed with lines, shapes, rhythm, and unity. Formalism dominated the notion that art must be true to itself – that it should serve no purpose other than to be fodder for aesthetic contemplation. Wolterstorff clearly asserts that this is not the main function of art. He looks at the work of the formalist critic Clive Bell. He confronts Bell’s notion that art is a religious experience of the divine. “Bell believed that in aesthetic contemplation the object becomes transparent, revealing to us the divinity in all things.” Bell believed in spiritual art; a divinity through abstraction, particularly abstraction that contained “significant form.” He purported that this form was a property common to all works of art. The modern artist defined the spiritual – he was the measure rather than God.

The notion that art can lead to the spiritual dimension is an outgrowth of modernism. In 1912 the Russian artist, Wassily Kandinsky in his book Concerning the Spiritual in Art, advocated for spirituality in abstract art. He suggested that the artist has an “inner necessity” to explore “spiritual expression.” According to Kandinsky, the

22 Wolterstorff, 49.
artist had the power to challenge the formalist dogma of modernism through “spiritual
abstract art.”24 In 1986 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art assembled a
comprehensive survey of western paintings under the title The Spiritual in Art: Abstract
Painting 1890-1985. The show’s thesis was to disprove the “myth” of modernism (that it
was only a movement concerned about formal and anti-social issues). It was, according
to the curators, a movement of very personal and meaningful artworks that emerged
through a culture of changing social attitudes and of technological and ideological
revolutions. While it gave examples of personal works of abstract art, it reinforced the
idea that the artist is at the center, when it comes to art production and consumption. In
Wolterstorff’s words, the artist “challenges God by seeking to create as God creates.”25
Regardless of whether the artist’s goal is a physical manipulation of form couched under
the mantra of art-for-art’s-sake, or spiritual, it is nevertheless, self-serving – elevating the
artist as a special seer. Modern art serves the artist, not the viewer, or the social structure
in which it is made.

If the purpose of art is action and not contemplation, then how shall we think
about art? Under what dimensions does this art serve? Wolterstorff suggests that we
tend to think of art as “divorced from life,” even though it “never has been.”26 The
notion that art is for aesthetic contemplation is also immersed in our concept of the
“institution of high art,” which belongs to the cultural elite who are concertgoers and
gallery-visitors. These cultural elite through their economic means, influences society
through choices that are either near the center or edge of artistic taste. We tend to think

23 Harrison, 41.
24 See Donald Kuspit. “Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art,” in The Spiritual in Art: Abstract
25 Wolterstorff, 56.
that the artifacts of culture belong in museum galleries and in concert halls and that the cultural artifacts are for the social elite. No wonder art seems far removed from our life. Art produced out of modernism was further removed from life as “artists for whom how a painting was done became increasingly more important than the ostensible subject.”

Being an artist was more important than making art.

Wolterstorff argues that we need to place art back into our lives. To do this we must consider the fact that works of art have many different dimensions: economic, moral, psychic, and aesthetic. Artworks have a moral dimension when they claim an understanding of the human condition relevant to the moral dimension of our life. This thought alone contradicts Kant’s notion that art should be considered “answerable only to itself,” and that it “has no social responsibility,” it must not, address a “moral order,” or share the “artist’s intentions or circumstances of its production.”

Wolterstorff suggests that we need to see art performing a variety of roles in human life. Art can praise great men and express our grief; it can evoke emotion and communicate knowledge. Our conclusion from Wolterstorff, at this point, is that if we are to marry art with life, then we need to see how artworks communicate to us in a way different from any other. Art has the unique capacity to address meaning in human life where the written word or spoken language, or the touch of a hand, does not. Each of these communicative aspects embodies in part the fullness of being human.

In summary, Wolterstorff helps define cultural anxiety as self-serving and anti-social. In contrast, he sees art as part of God’s very good work for human benefit for the

---

26 Wolterstorff, 27.
27 James Malpas. Realism (United Kingdom: Cambridge, 1997), 11.
This good work is the redemptive work through Christ’s death and resurrection. Art is part of society as it serves and brings meaning to humanity. Critics of modern art in 1970 grappled with the same tension illuminated by Wolterstorff and Rookmaaker. Both writers offer a response for Christians who wish to engage in the critique of art and culture. Rookmaaker encourages Christians to know the history and traditions of artworks, but to also look at the present. Wolterstorff challenges us to think of artworks as part of life. The writings of Rookmaaker and Wolterstorff give us direction as we seek to navigate the terrain of contemporary art. Modern artists created quasi-religious experiences for many people; they substituted art for true religion. However, there is a sense today that artists are socially aware, and that they create works that exhibit diverse ideologies. The spiritual quality of art has shifted in focus from speaking about a transcendent God to speaking about a personal spirituality found in the post-Enlightenment age. This personal spirituality is found in this present age in the potpourri of beliefs captured under the umbrella of pluralism. In the next section we will examine contemporary art, specifically looking at meaning. We will also consider the possibilities available to Christians interested the arts.

Pluralism and Meaning

What is at the root of our interest in contemporary art? Is its meaning elusive; difficult to pin down? How do we read and interpret artworks that use seemingly non-rational structures to communicate ideas or beliefs? The Philosophy Club of Covenant

29 Wolterstorff, 4.
30 Wolterstorff, 76.
College was not the only group that requested input on the role of art in academic disciplines. Presenting a lecture to a class on aesthetics titled *The Problem of Taste* was a natural venue for a discussion on contemporary art issues. I also presented lectures entitled *Conversations with a Father* and *She’s got the Look*, to the disciplines of sociology and psychology. I also lectured to a theology class about contemporary art and Christian themes. The quest to unravel the mystery and the meaning of contemporary art confirms the difficulty and the confusion of it. In each of my presentations we looked beyond the fallen structures of contemporary art and began to explore meaning for us as Christians. In considering the question of meaning we need to look at current visual culture and the variety of worldviews it possesses – a worldview of pluralism. We need to dig deeply into the question of meaning as established in both visual and text communication. To demonstrate this point, I will consider a work from the most recent Whitney Biannual. This piece will highlight the complexity and anxiety of the contemporary visual experience. Finally I will examine the calling and responsibility of the artist through the grid of a theological world and life view. I will also ask the questions “why is contemporary art so compelling? What does it mean?”

Theologian William Dyrness writes: “We live in a generation raised on a steady diet of the visual.”32 Consider how much we are surrounded by visual images: billboards, magazines, and advertisements. Our lives are filtered through mediated experiences such as television, film, and the Internet. Seeing is a big part of our daily life. The amount of disposable cameras and the number of roles of film developed each day is mind-

---

31 See Robert Hughes, “Decline and Fall of the Avant-Garde,” *Time*, 18 December 1972, 111-12. Hughes laments the demise of art that “there is no aesthetic criteria for dealing with such works.” Ten years later Arthur Danto declares the “End of Art” and Suzi Gablik declares that “Modernism has failed.”
boggling. It is difficult to conceive of a world without printed or moving images. Technology has advanced to the point of instant imaging. From satellite transmissions of weather systems to medical imagery of inside the human body, we live in a culture barraged with rapidly moving visual stimulation. The art theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff asserts “[t]hat the human experience is more visual and visualized than ever before.”

We are surrounded by images that just slip into our daily life without critique or reflection. The task of unpacking the depth and meaning of what images indicate is a daunting, although it is not an altogether impossible task. Mirzoeff is writing about visual images while emphasizing the breadth of the visual experience. The purpose of this paper is to look at the production and meaning of contemporary art works. It is difficult to talk about contemporary art today without encountering commercial technology. Therefore, when we consider contemporary art we must be knowledgeable about the artist’s media of choice: traditional materials (such as paint on canvas and modeled clay on a wheel) or materials of popular art (such as video and digital technology).

Art today looks different not only because the artists’ use of different media, but more significantly because the strategies of art making have changed. Most importantly the strategy of appropriation (common in contemporary art) has changed how we think of artistic vision and genius. It is what Arthur Danto calls “the major artistic contribution of the decade.” In short, the appropriated image is the taking over an image with established meaning and identity, and giving it new meaning and identity by giving it a

---

33 In the year 2000 there were 865 million rolls of film processed and 20.5 billion pictures taken. On a daily basis there were 2.4 million rolls of film processed. PMA industry trends, pma.org
35 Danto, 37.
new context. The American artist Fred Tomaselli, for example, extracts the Adam and Eve figures from Masaccio’s famous image of *Expulsion from the Garden* (1424-8), from the Brancacci chapel in Florence, Italy. Tomaselli takes the fallen figures from Masaccio’s painting and places them in a cosmic world of bugs, butterflies and birds in his image. He not only strips the figures from Masaccio, but the title as well: *Expulsion* (2000). In Tomaselli’s image, the figures leaving the garden at the bottom right of the large (82” x 120”) rosin-covered panel are not expelled by an angel figure as seen in Masaccio’s image, but by a whirling power of wind seen in the far right of the image. Furthermore he has striped the flesh off of Masaccio’s figures and exposed the interior circulatory system, compounding the meaning even more. By means of appropriation, Tomaselli has added meaning to Masaccio’s original Renaissance image. When we first encounter Tomaselli’s appropriation we see a familiar subject expressed in a new and foreign language. While it is visually arresting it is difficult to define. And for some viewers, because it is difficult to define it is meaningless.

Contemporary art is concerned with imaging reality not through mimesis but with juxtaposition. The language of mimesis is grounded in the ancient Greek notion of mirroring reality through recognizable and realistic forms. Realism had particular resonance in the art and artists of the Renaissance. It was the predominant mode of expression in western art until the development of modernism at the end of the nineteenth century. Modern art as viewed through the eyes of Picasso and Kandinsky seemed to dismantle at least in part the language of illusion and space in western painting. Analytical cubism gave way to synthetic cubism that spawned abstraction, as we know it. The language of painting reality by mirroring life through linear or atmospheric
perspective was no longer important, as the language of painting communicated life through fragmented and partial perspectives. Whereas the art of modernism was a rational deconstruction of forms that were rebuilt into new forms altogether, the art of postmodernism is the structuring of an image by means of juxtaposition of seemingly disconnected forms. The language of juxtaposition is neither a linear structured narrative as viewed in a Renaissance painting, nor is it a restructuring of reality as seen in a cubist image. It is one that is more like a network of hyper-links made known to us through our use of the Internet. Often forms that are juxtaposed are presented ostensibly in contrast to one another; as evidenced in Tomaselli’s work.

Tomaselli’s image is compelling. It is an eight-foot by ten-foot image comprised of cutout objects, pills, and leaves covered in multiple coats of rosin. Seemingly there is a disconnect between reality and image. If we think of Tomaselli’s image, forgetting what expulsion from the garden looked like, we can focus more on what expulsion from the garden meant. The paradoxical disconnected images and flying creatures are placed in a circular pattern that suggests the stars or the cosmos. The cosmic system is upset and out of order because of the actions of the first man and woman. In Masaccio’s image the focus is of the Fall of humanity as seen on the facial expressions of Adam and Eve. In Tomaselli’s image however, the focus includes not just humanity but also the cosmos. Sin has disrupted the order of the world. There is fullness to Tomaselli’s work that is absent in Masaccio’s work.

36 Dyrness, 132. Here Dyrness references the work of Mitchell Stevens’ The Rise of the Image and the Fall of the Word, who suggests that there is in postmodern culture the triumph of the visual as seen in moving images. Dyrness states that Stevens is a cultural optimist who “believes we will shape our arguments more like music than prose, through juxtaposition rather than linear structure.”
When we encounter artwork today we are confronted with a myriad of questions. These include questions that are not only about meaning but questions about the artist’s intent. When we encounter a work of art, we intuitively search for its meaning. The contemporary visual experience is complex, but rewarding. There is meaning embedded in artworks. It takes effort to draw it out. Viewing artworks today is as much a theoretical activity as it is an aesthetic or visual one. The invitations of colleagues, to their classrooms, suggest that they recognize that knowledge, information, and ideas are brought to us not only through words and text but also through pictures and images. Interpretation of artworks requires discipline and discernment to get at meaning. It also requires knowledge of history and tradition of art making and practices. Contemporary art is difficult and at times confusing, but its meaning is not unreachable. An encounter with contemporary art can reaffirm our faith and challenge us to articulate it.

One of the reasons art is confusing is because it presents various ideologies. We have already seen how a worldview is imbedded in art. When we judge art as fallen and fragmented we limit our ability to understand the artwork. We need to encounter artworks reflectively to discover what their particular worldviews are communicating. How are we to do this when the state of contemporary art seems to be standard-less, and at best, is described as “anything goes”? Contemporary art is described as pluralistic. There are many modes of expression, where not one mode dominates. Timothy Van Larr, states that this pluralism equals diversity, which “arises from such things as the many belief systems out of which artists produce works, the multiple social roles artists take on, and the varied audiences they address.”

---

multiculturalism. The belief systems expressed in multicultural art may vary, from aesthetic or formalist concerns to feminist or outsider concerns. These belief systems give insights into the human condition as they attempt to give meaning to the producers and viewers of the work. As viewers of art, we recognize that despite the worldview of the artist, the art can do things in a way intended or unintended by the artist.

I have already noted that artworks have social functions. Through the work of Nicholas Wolterstorff, however, we see that works of art not only have different functions but, artists themselves have different functions in creating their works. Art runs the gamut of social function: contrasting light and darks to decorate a wall, but also challenging a social class, assaulting its audience, or even confirming a group’s social beliefs. One artist’s function may be to “transform society,” while others may want “to investigate the formal properties of color,” or “celebrate nature,” or “express themselves.”

Viewers, however, need to get at meaning beyond aesthetic contemplation. Questions of the intent of the artist and the function of the art are now important to the viewer of contemporary art. These questions are necessary as we seek to understand the diversity of the contemporary experience.

Let’s look at an example from my own work and the work of a friend as we explore diversity. Suppose that I wish to make a realistic drawing of electric towers with small arrows over the entire page, while my friend may wish to make a painting full of gold and copper-colored dots. What do the arrows mean in my works and what do the colors represent in the work of my friend? You may read my statement about my art in which I suggest the arrows represent directions the wind was blowing while I made the drawing, but I also suggest they could also symbolize energy and electricity. You may
also discover that my friend is Korean and her work is based on pigments and textiles from her cultural heritage. However, we must not entirely trust the artist statement for interpretation. We need to look a little further. To do so is to look at the world behind the work noting how each artist is practicing in a different art tradition. My work is rooted in the tradition of landscape and conceptual art, while my friend uses her history and cultural heritage as a source for her. While working through two different art traditions, we are also working through two different religious traditions. My cultural heritage is linked to my Christian belief, specifically the Reformed tradition; my friend’s religious belief is rooted in Buddhist tradition. Both belief systems inform our work, whether we are conscious of it or not. Even if viewers of our art do not know this information it is important to the structure and organizing principles of the work. Therefore, to uncover the complexities of contemporary art, viewers need to look at the purpose and function of the art, although this is not always the case.

My students often claim that they like art because it can be anything they want it to be. They are surprised when I suggest that this is not the most helpful way of approaching art. Art making in this system is completely relativistic with few guiding values. The problem with this view of pluralism is what Van Larr calls, “wishy-washy relativism and indifference to principle.”39 Art is a discipline rooted in tradition and history. Artists are students of history. They make art in response to previous traditions, while at the same time exploring new strategies to make art. Viewers must consider that artists are often conscious of the structure and principles that guide their work; that art making is an intentional practice. For Van Larr, understanding the complexities of art

38 Van Laar, 7.
39 Van Larr, 18.
requires an open dialogue, not necessarily between the viewers of art and the producers of art, but among viewers of the art themselves. In his view an open dialogue is an effective way of working with pluralism. This language is something acquired through “responsible questions.”40 If we are to engage the contemporary then we must be prepared to gain meaning not by making claims about what the art means, but by asking questions about the artist’s intent, and the general purpose and social function of the artwork. Now, a larger audience can enjoy art once reserved for the artist and cultural elite. There is a shift in how to think about art. Artworks are no longer just objects for aesthetic contemplation – the end result for modernist aesthetics. Although it can perform this function, we can consider a work of art as useful for a varied viewership. A religious audience views for spiritual ends, a corporate community with a bent toward economic status and investment, or the private individual for personal enjoyment. We discover meaning in art by looking at the artist’s worldview or the world behind the work. We also explore the artistic structures behind the work, and have conversations about the work. Art after all lives in a social context, and therefore, requires social interaction.

Wishy-washy pluralist art has an additional problem. If it is all about openness where anything goes, then it is “empty at the center,” states Suzi Gabilik. She continues to highlight the problem of contemporary art in her book, Has Modernism Failed, and subsequent writings. Art has lost its “visionary function.”41 Art has lost its ability to speak about eternal and transcendent truths. We are at an impasse between a modern mode of expression and a contemporary one. The modern version of artistic expression

40 Van Larr, 19-20.
41 Quoted in Dyrness, 119.
has stripped away the social function of art and the postmodern version of art has stripped away the authority necessary for artists’ to lay claim to absolutes or universal truths. Gablik concludes: “Once art no longer lays claim to the dignity of the absolute, it loses its charismatic ‘meaning-giving’ function.” These attitudes I believe are changing, there are artists today who hint at meaning that is neither neutral nor individualistic. It is art that points to the transcendent. Artists like Fred Tomaselli, Robert Gober, and Mark Wallinger point to something eternal yet they remain distant from claiming absolute truth. How then do artists create meaning and how do viewers discover meaning in art? Before considering how we are to construct meaning in contemporary art let us consider one more view of pluralism.

Another problem for modernism and postmodernism is how each movement approaches unity. This is the problem defined by Rookmaaker in the previous section. Man’s quest for unity in modernism was one without God. Man sought autonomy through a grid of science and reason to define himself. The artworks he created echoed this personal pursuit – not just what was created but how it was created. Roger Fry writes of modern artists who create significant form, almost as God would create. He continues to suggest that artists do “not seek to imitate form, but to create form, not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life… In fact, they aim not at illusion but a reality.” Artists in this paradigm are viewed as special creators, and the art created is viewed as a special kind of art that functions as a special kind of creation. Modern artists, therefore, approach the world through an autonomous lens seeing the world through god-like eyes.

42 Quoted in Dyrness, 119.
43 Quoted in Danto, 53.
In the art of postmodernism the artists’ quest for unity is expressed through a model of neutral pluralism. If everything is permissible in art, then nothing has authority and therefore nothing has influence. As Christians, if we are to engage this cultural climate that is “empty at the center,” then we must work to unify it not in modernist claims of autonomy and freedom, but through a redemptive calling of God through the work of Christ, and the unity found in the Spirit. Because of Christ’s resurrection and redeeming work in creation, as artists, we are free not to add to creation, but to partner with the Spirit in proclaiming the glories of our Savior. We tend to think that the difficulty with contemporary art is that it is full of disconnected forms and fragments that don’t make sense. Rather, we need to realize that the current modes of expression (forms playfully juxtaposed against each other) are not the problem. The problem we have with pluralism is the same one we found with modernism, and all that came before that. Our human social structure is fallen, and artists working within this fallen structure are seeking to create unity without God.

Theologian Jeremy Begbie proposes a model that exemplifies the principles of unity and diversity or what he calls an “enriching plurality.”

He looks at the unity of God found in the doctrine of the Trinity to define this plurality. The Trinity, he states, “is this form of oneness which God is committed to enabling within creation.”

The plurality of the Trinity is a fully connected unit that is also diverse. In contrast to this Trinitarian model of plurality, Begbie sees the current permeation of pluralism as one filled with greed and fragmentation by competing communities. This disconnected unity today is similar to that found in the story of Bable in Genesis 11. The creation of

---

44 Begbie, 115.
45 Begbie, 115.
languages developed in the account of Bable was an “alienating plurality” rather than an “enriching plurality.” The sin at Bable was in essence the result of a disunified plurality. Humanity was unified in purpose but fragmented from God. Basically our world community is a broken and frustrated model that is groaning to be made whole (Rom. 8:22). Begbie describes our current culture (postmodern) competing against itself in reality, as no different from the previous culture (modern); both turned their backs on God. Therefore, the work of Christians in art is unique and different from these two competing cultures. Christian artists are responsible to interact with other people, the physical world and the Creator. We would agree with Begbie, “[t]hat it is only through the work of the Spirit who makes it possible.”

Begbie looks at the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost as an example of diversity and unity. Pentecost embodied cultural diversity, restoring the fragmentation and alienation found at Babel. In the whole of creation, we are free through the work of the Spirit to respond to the Creator. Christians can explore all of God’s good work engaging it and understanding what it means to be fully human, in what Begbie calls, “distinctive particularity.” Working within this paradigm of distinctiveness, Christian artists would reflect neither modern autonomy nor postmodern neutrality in their art, rather Christian artists would make art that bears the imprint of the Spirit using their particular gifts. The focus on particular gifts of Christian artists serving the Creator points to the work of Bezalel who designed works in precious metals for the Tabernacle. Bezalel was filled “with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge” (Ex. 31:3). The Israelite artist willingly responded to the call of God with his storehouse of gifts.

---

46 Begbie, 115.
47 Begbie, 116.
Our search for meaning in art draws us to look to the character of God distinguished by the diversity in the Trinity. Begbie states that a more theological perspective can be gained where the arts give voice to creations’ praise. We can extend the voice of creation singing together the praise of his glory when we responsibly interact with God’s creation.  

This is the place where there is meaning in art and in God’s world.  

Tim Keller asserts that we have artists and art because there is meaning in what we do. Keller quotes the art theorist Arthur Danto when he states “[t]hat art is getting across indefinable, but inescapable meaning.”  

Keller, rightly, distinguishes between artistic meaning and transcendent meaning. “If artists pick up some aspect of meaning and if all meaning is some aspect of the glory of God, things mean something only because they have something to do with the glory of God.” He goes on to suggest, “[t]hat we can’t possibly see the whole thing.” Art, therefore, is like marriage, a good job, or church fellowships that each of these institutions means something as a part of God’s kingdom, giving Him glory and praise. We only get pieces of God’s glory because we wait for the glory to come through Christ. Wolterstorff too, is quick to remind us that “art does not provide us with the meaning of human existence. The gospel of Jesus

---

48 Begbie, 109.
49 In Keller, 80. See also Danto, 194 -5. Danto asserts that we need something more than Hegel’s contribution to “map the anatomy of criticism.” “Hegel writes,” quotes Danto, “what is now aroused in us by works of art is not just immediate enjoyment but our judgement also, since we are subject to our intellectual consideration of the content of a work of art and the work of art’s means of presentation, and the appropriateness or in appropriateness of both one to one another.” Danto continues: “To be a work of art is to be about something and it is to embody its meaning. Embodiment is captured in part of the essence of art and that essence is encapsulated in the spirit of the age of its production.”
50 Keller, 86. He is thinking of Moses who, after venting anger with the Israelites, asks of God, “now show me your glory.” What happens next is astonishing. God says, “I will cause my goodness to pass in front of you and I will proclaim my name, the Lord in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But, he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Ex. 33:12-23). Then it happened as God said it would. Moses saw the glory of the Lord, but only a piece of it.
51 See Romans 8:18-27
Christ does that.” If artworks are to present meaning, then why is meaning so difficult to discover? How are we to uncover meaning if it is indefinable? Shouldn’t an artwork present a clear message? Keller offers two possible reasons. We need to view art as a place to “wrestle with the message,” and we have to use our imagination to “sense something has meaning because we cannot cognitively grasp the glory of God.” Visual messages are difficult to decode at times because they are meant to be problematic and challenging and they require an imaginative and thoughtful viewer. Difficult and unfamiliar art challenges the viewer to ask questions. These either confirm or disprove presuppositions and induce thoughts of change. Wrestling with the message also induces pleasure. Viewers use their imagination to find meaning in art because imagination adds insight about God’s world and about self.

Artworks also reflect indefinable aspects of what it means to be human. Calvin Seerveld states that artists work in part to unravel the majesty and mystery of God’s creation. “Artworks,” for Seerveld, “are allusive objects which tickle your imagination with nuances of knowledge, giving you insights especially into the hidden crevices of human deeds and the wonderful recess of God’s world at large.” Seerveld suggests that allusiveness is the quality in artworks that permits us to consider them as “playful,” and as objects with “suggestion-rich ambiguity.” Seerveld’s concept speaks to Danto’s indefinable and inescapable meaning and adds invaluable insight into being human (what Danto calls essence). This notion is difficult for us to grasp as it suggests that things are not always seen as concrete or logical, they don’t seem to make sense. We tend to think

---

52 Wolterstorff, 196.
53 Keller, 80-82.
that the language of art is foreign, un-interpretable, only understood by the cultural elite. However, we need to allow artworks to not only present nuances of the glories and richness of God’s creation, but also to surprise us. Seerveld suggests that art has the power to challenge your belief and “nudge you to repentance.” Art can place the viewer in the confessional stance, of recognizing personal sin. This can be a painful assaulting process, thus illustrating why interpretation and criticism are so important to the Christian community. Art criticism is like aesthetic and hermeneutic discourse in its attempt to clarify the paradox of meaning.

We use critics to guide our contemplation of artworks as well as to assist us in acquiring new sensibilities about art. The critic’s most important responsibility, however, is to give language to artworks, especially those pieces difficult to understand through linear thinking. The language of propositions is much different from the language of images. Propositions are constructed through rational and logical structures, which are different from the visual juxtapositions of forms and seemingly unrelated images or symbols. Like words and sentences, artworks are constructed with a language that needs to be taught. All language, after all, must be learned. Thus, the critic becomes a teacher. Visual language is constructed with metaphors used to tell a story through visual symbols. These are read though linguistic systems of things seen (the signifier) and things meant (the signified). Art theorists have borrowed from literary theorists to

---

56 Seerveld, 28.
58 Mirzoeff, 13.
develop strategies of interpretation. Interpreting art, however, is different from interpreting propositions.

Art language is not literal. It is a language that requires a set of symbols and codes set apart from written and spoken forms. How can we understand something without the language to communicate that understanding? John Dewey suggests, “[t]hat understanding art is like understanding another person.”59 He asserts that we may know how to interpret a beloved’s smile, but we have a difficult time summarizing it into a sentence. Knowing something in this sense suggests that there are other ways to communicate without words or text. Whether artworks or smiles, a written or spoken interpretation is usually required to communicate meaning to the outsider. The critic’s role is to interpret the indefinable meaning (even the meaning of a smile like the one seen on Leonardo’s Mona Lisa). The critic’s interpretations are grounded in art theory. There are as many forms of art theory as there are forms of art. In our discussion we will look at two of them: expression theory and cognitive theory. Expression theory focuses on the “feelings” and “desires” expressed in a work of art. Cognitive theory focuses on the ideas centered in a work of art. These theories help us to see how meaning is constructed in artworks. Expression, desire, and ideas, while difficult to articulate, are components of being human. Art theories guide interpretation helping us see the art better so that we can think about the work more fully. Viewers need to be taught how to read the forms and symbols of artworks, but they also must remember that artworks exist in a social space as well. We need to look at art in the context of life. It is this context that can be uncomfortable for us.

59 Quoted in Cynthia Freeland. *But is it Art?* (London: Oxford University press, 2001), 149.
Is some art overly uncomfortable or excessively difficult for Christians to engage? To answer this question is to consider the role of faith and discernment in our Christian life. Christians cannot escape the reality of evil in the world and naturally artworks reflect the ugliness of sin and the pain of suffering. The art that reflects this fallen order can most readily illuminate the need for a Savior – Jesus Christ. But we still ask where is beauty, where is truth? Shouldn’t we avoid evil? William Dyrness, suggests that discernment is not a matter of rules – what to engage or not, nor is it a matter of complete freedom to do as we please. It is a skill learned in community over a period of time.60 The role of community is essential to the argument for cultural engagement. It is within community that we learn appropriateness, enabling us to “discern what is best” (Phil. 1:10). In community we are questioned, challenged, and encouraged to do what is right. Discernment, however, does not hold us to the easy things in life, it allows for explorations into difficulty. As we grow in maturity we will be able to encounter more difficult things, not because we are seeking sin and suffering, but because we are called to use our gifts to grow up in all things (Eph. 4: 9-16). Maturity in Christ means that we will no longer live on infant’s milk but on solid food (Heb. 5:13-14). The Scriptures empower us as we encounter contemporary art and the culture that makes it. “We will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:14).

Current artworks attempt to bring unity and new meaning to Christian themes but often fall short because they never give the whole story of God’s creation – fall – redemption. Contemporary artists who use Christian themes seem to focus on how

60 Dyrness, 149.
humans have misused religion for personal gain, and use their images to provoke viewers. This is not an entirely bad strategy, although it is incomplete. While the images are ironic and laced with satire, they fail to speak of the fullness of Christ. Contemporary artworks have the power to bring joy and pleasure but also discomfort and anguish. They can also however, astonish you. The most difficult and unfamiliar images and ideas presented in these works can pierce into the depth of human emotions and experience. Let the following description demonstrate the way artworks use Christian themes to attempt at true meaning but fall short. Let it also affect the way we “approach the throne of grace with confidence” (Heb. 4:16). As we encounter contemporary art, we need to use Christ as the ultimate interpreter to guide us through our particular cultural moment.

“The Holy Artwork” is a video production by the artist Christian Jankowski in collaboration with Peter Spencer, pastor of Harvest Fellowship Church in San Antonio Texas. The video, made in residence at Artspace in San Antonio but filmed at the Harvest Fellowship Church, involves the artist, the television evangelist Spencer, and his praise band. This video was televised on a San Antonio cable access station just like all of Spencer’s worship services. What distinguishes this service from the others is that it blurs the boundaries of performance and reality. The nature of the artwork and its title, “holy art” further confuses the margin between art and religion. “The Holy Artwork” seems to suggest that there are no boundaries between faith and art and that this artwork is, at minimum, both holy and art. At first glance the artwork seems to be neither art nor holy. At its worst it is irreverent and disrespectful; at its best it is parody and satire. A quick read of the artwork would lump it into an ostensibly growing category of the contemporary art that seems to hold contempt for Christian themes and imagery. As I
reflected deeper however, I began to see something; something prompted through the internal “itch” of the Holy Spirit.

“You don’t like this piece,” said my viewing companion, “because it mocks your religion.” I affirmed. In March 2002, I saw “The Holy Artwork” and other contemporary art pieces at the Whitney Biennial in New York City. Every two years art curators from the Whitney Museum of American Art comb the nation in search of challenging and significant art. Each exhibit is different from the previous one. It is agreed that the art displayed in this exhibit is not necessarily representative of the “best” of contemporary art. Nevertheless, it is a showcase of provocative and meaningful art. As I reflected on the exhibit, “The Holy Artwork” continued to bounce around in my thoughts. In my view it was neither the most technically savvy, nor the most adventurous work I had seen. It was not the most visually appealing exhibit, but it was compelling. The question remained days after my visit to the Whitney: did it really mock my religion?

The setting for the artwork is a real-life contemporary-Christian worship service complete with an evangelist wearing a collar-less tee shirt and a tweed jacket. There are live trees behind the pulpit and there is a praise team in the periphery waiting to accent the real life worship service. All this takes place in real time before church attendees and transmitted to a television viewing audience. As the service begins the artist, Jakowski, is introduced to the audience who then approaches the center stage with a handheld video camera. We assume the artist is making a video about the preacher. While the audience returns their attention to Spencer, Jakowski suddenly collapses on the stage at the feet of the preacher. It is at this point that the narrative becomes both satire and seemingly disrespectful. Spencer begins to preach about the artist at his feet. He talks about the
fallen man with language most associated with sermons about Jesus Christ. Where the audience would most expect to hear the name of Christ or God they hear the name Art. In effect art has not only replaced God it has become god. It was this realization that provoked me to an initial reading of mockery. I realized however, that it had a more frightening element. As I reflected on this art I came to the realization that I too had the capacity to in effect create my own “holy artwork.” I could replace my faith in Jesus Christ with a “faith” in art. The potential for the gift God has given to me (my art) to be more important than the gift of the giver (the saving work of Jesus in me) is a daunting and haunting tension.

The intentions of Christian Jankowski are quite possibly far from my own conclusions about his work. I believe however, he would encourage me to question the role of art as it relates to religion. He would allow me to think about the tension of art in my life as it relates to my faith. His artwork has challenged me to consider my calling and vocation as an artist and professor of art. Interacting with art leads me to reaction and reflection. “The Holy Artwork” challenged me to do both. To engage the contemporary is to engage a world of the unknown and to take risks to strengthen faith and belief. Contemporary art has the ability to lend meaning to faith but not the power to overshadow it.

Art has the ability to provoke and stimulate the viewer. Wendy Stiener suggests: “Art is a realm of thought experiments that quicken, sharpen, and sweeten our being in the world.” Art has the powerful ability to “speak” about our culture in a way that words cannot. There is power in visual art and in the aesthetic and critical experience. The power in “The Holy Artwork” was its ability to expose the depth of my sin. In so
doing, it also revealed the depth of God’s grace in my life. Art is not a luxury nor is it incidental to life. It is an intentional act to be constructed by artists and consumed by viewers. Art requires, no, demands viewers to pause so that both artist and viewer can begin to interpret and apply it to their respective lives. “We must stop long enough in its presence to allow it to work on us,” writes William Dyrness, “bringing all our critical faculties and especially our understanding of the presence of God to the experience.”62 Viewers’ critical faculties are developed through a continued looking, describing, and interpreting art. Viewers need to do research and think of artworks as possessing something more than an aesthetic power. Dyrness suggests that art can become a part of our prayer life. I don’t believe he is suggesting the use of art in prayer life as a sacred object or to use art like the ancient or modern mystics, rather he is proposing that art can illuminate the goodness of God and the depth of our sin. It is when viewers stop in time to reflect and pay attention to life in a new way where there is potential for growth and witness. It is the element of reflection and action that Christians find meaning in art.

Artists use a variety of strategies in their quest to locate meaning in contemporary art. Although the art-making strategies have changed from previous eras, the essence of meaning has not. Meaning in art can be found in how the artist uses God’s creation and extend the praise of it. As God acts in His creation through the renewing work of Christ, they point to a final glory to come. True meaning is only found in the gospel of Christ. Meaning in art and in life is only found as we point to God’s glory. However, this does not mean that landscape paintings must be idyllic pastoral fields of trees and waterfalls immersed in a heavenly light. We must be prepared to see landscapes that exhibit images

61 Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 8
62 Dyrness, 147.
of decay and brokenness. Difficult and unfamiliar artworks are at times the most expressive, but are often created in a most elusive manner. Therefore, as a community of Christians, we need to act as critics giving language to read and interpret this part of God’s world. We are not to retreat from something difficult or challenging to our beliefs. We need to unpack them with discernment. Artworks are important not only because they give glimpses of God’s glory, but also because they have a social function that forces dialogue between Christians, and the world. Understanding our role in this culture of pluralism necessitates that have an active faith in a Triune God, and through the work of the Holy Spirit guiding us to saving grace through Christ. Our quest for meaning can be realized in the power of art that simultaneously challenges and confirms our belief.

Making Art – Community and Calling

At the beginning of this paper I suggested that I have a twofold passion as a professor here at Covenant College: to lecture and critique contemporary art, and to make art. Lecturing about art requires viewing and researching the current cultural moment. Making involves an action – distinct from viewing or researching art. While this act shares some of the same activities as that of a researcher such as describing, interpreting, and judging art, it is also different. The researcher reflects on artworks and reacts to them either by engaging or walking away from them. The maker of art reacts to contemporary art by making and creating artworks as a thoughtful response. Therefore, the most significant for art and artists is the work “lives” within a community.

Tim Keller (like Seerveld, Rookmaaker, Schaeffer, Begbie, and Dyrness) calls for Christian artists to interact in community because artists will not only benefit the
community, but the community will benefit artists. Artists will add a dimension of God’s truth, while the community will chasten and support the artist. Moreover, artists add a dimension of “otherness” and difference that Begbie refers to as a “distinctive particularity.” Keller asserts that the church needs art because we cannot praise God without it. Begbie claims that the artist extends the praise of God’s creation. Through the work of the artist the church can reach out to the world because Christian artists know that there is truth and meaning only through the work of Christ. The unbeliever gives up on truth and seeks meaning in fractured communities. Keller gives us direction through which we can talk to a world that no longer pursues truth and transcendent meaning. We need to create artworks that will allow the world to wrestle with the truth of the gospel.

While community is important for the artists, each individual Christian artist must recognize that there is a personal calling attached to doing God’s work. It was my interaction with Wolterstorff’s *Art in Action* about twenty years ago that made plain to me that God calls me to responsibility (not to serve myself but to serve others). Christian artists have a responsibility to creation, to others, and to God. This is what makes the artist important in God’s creation. Not only are Christians to subdue and “garden” God’s world, we have a responsibility to restore His creation through the work of Christ. All Christians are responsible to, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). But we are also responsible to acknowledge and praise Him as the Creator. Artists are included in this responsibility. Wolterstorff’s book has particular resonance today. Without prescribing the types of materials and forms artists’ are to use, he speaks of the art of making. Artists are to master their materials, as the work of art emerges from a dialogue between artist and material. While Wendy Steiner sees a work of art as a conversation

---

63 Keller, 86.
between the viewer and art, Wolterstorff sees that a work of art is a conversation between artist and materials. More importantly, however, is Wolterstorff’s notion of fittingness. Artists somehow capture the intuitive level of meaning that Keller alluded to earlier in this paper. It is appropriate to quote Wolterstorff in full.

But artists are workers in *fittingness* – all artists, inescapably, not indeed in the sense that their work is *made out of* fittingness, but rather in the sense that fittingness is a feature of the reality within which we all exist. It is a feature of which we are all aware, artist and non-artist alike, and which the work of art inescapably shares in, partly by the artist’s intent, partly not.\(^{64}\)

Fittingness is how the Spirit engages the artist to use his/her skill, ability and knowledge to speak to the fullness of God’s Creation. While contemporary artists try to fill the void of pluralism through a variety of expression, Christian artists can fill it with meaning in the work of Christ. Christians can praise God with joy and thanksgiving for the freedom, responding to his/her calling as an artist. Praising God is to take delight in Him (Psm. 111:2) and to delight is to “play” within His creation.

Making art is about the praise of God through serious play. That is playing with ideas that are structured differently from those expressed through text or verbal language. There is joy working with materials, shaping and crafting them to unexpected results. Whether the media is traditional or whether the media is the most current, all are available to artists. Artists have the freedom to work in established traditions, but they can also take risk and explore new territory. There is sheer delight in arriving at new ideas and new ways of doing things. It is here that Seerveld’s call to artists seems most applicable. To find meaning we need to have the tools for speaking the current cultural language. We are not called to be reactive to culture by taking secular forms and

\[^{64}\text{Wolterstorff, 96.}\]
Christianizing them, but called to do authentic Christian work. To work within God’s Creation is to wonder about the glory and majesty of His world, and to create artworks that affirm His glory and majesty. It can also mean delighting and wondering about the goodness and the mystery of God. Imagine what art made from this point of view will look like. Certainly the Christian can make art that the rest of the world will notice. Not of work that sentimentalizes Christianity, but art that speaks of a true pluralism, the unity and diversity found in the Triune God.

There is as much pleasure in making art as there is in viewing art, although, making art can be difficult and problematic as well. The pale white canvas is as daunting to the painter as a blank white page is to the writer. In spite of this difficulty, my interest in painting continues to grow. Recently my own role as an artist has shifted from scientist to explorer. I have worked with the landscape for about twenty years. For the first fifteen or so years my vision was to describe the landscape as I saw it. I was interested in the beauty of God’s world and amazed at how the sublime presented itself. My goal was to document the landscape not in a form of realism but through interpretation. I sought to know the landscape. I spoke of the work as shorthand notations of the physical world. Recently I have noticed a shift in my work from the wonder of the sublime to the mystery of the everyday. As I look at the landscape I am fascinated with the mystery of the biblical poets and the things about the landscape that I do not know or understand such as wind or electricity.

A year ago a colleague came to visit my office for a meeting. The purpose of his visit was to consider with me the future of the art department and the intended proposal for an art major. The ensuing conversation was fruitful and meaningful. Before he left I
showed him some of my recent art. This included drawings described earlier in this paper, to which he exclaimed, “You’re anxious!” It was an unsolicited interpretive statement that was not only an accurate understanding of my artwork, but of me as well. My artworks could be described as anxious, not so much about the anxieties of culture but about the groaning discovered in the landscape. They are also images that speak of the mysteries of the creation addressing the unanswerable questions asked by God of Job in Job 38. God asks of Job about the earth’s foundations and dimensions. He asks Job about the oceans and the waves. God also asks, “What is the way to the place where the lightening is dispersed, or the place where the east winds are scattered over the earth?” (Job 38:24). We answer like Job, “I am unworthy – Low can I reply to you?” (Job 40:4). And in his final response to God, Job says, “I know that you made all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). So too, for me as an artist who makes art in God’s creation wonders about the mysteries of God and exclaims along with Job, “Surely I spoke of things too wonderful for me to know” (Job 42:3).
Bibliography


Harrison, Charles. Modernism (United Kingdom: Cambridge, 1997).


Malpas, James. Realism (United Kingdom: Cambridge, 1997).


Schaeffer, Francis. How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western thought and Culture (Fleming H. Revell, 1976).


