Theology in Scotland
32.1 (2025): 39–51
https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v32i1.2904

Art, spirit, language

Kate Hennessy

Kate Hennessy is an American writer and artist living in Ireland. She is the author of Dorothy Day: The World Will be Saved by Beauty *and is a contributor to* The Tablet *and* The Catholic Worker.

Abstract

In this personal inquiry on the intertwining impulses of the religious and artistic spirits, Kate Hennessy, a writer and artist, reflects on the power of visual art and artmaking to help us move beyond the limitations of religious language. She explores how art can provide a visual dialogue imbued with spirit and transcendence that help us to understand what it is to be human in a relationship with God. Hennessy draws upon diverse influences, from the Paleolithic artists to Brice Marden, Anne Truitt and Mark Rothko, to provoke thought on perceiving art and artmaking, whether overtly religious or not, as a form of prayer, a practice of devotion and an ongoing expression of this human desire to live in full participation with life and with God.

We hunger for transcendent experiences, for full participation with life in all its glorious meaning, and for an awareness of God. We also hunger for art. But speaking of God is hard, as the historian Karen Armstrong said when her readers admitted to incomprehension; speaking of art is hard, too, I would add.

In the first sentence of her book, *The Case for God*, Armstrong describes the caverns of Lascaux and the 17,000-year-old art painted on its walls – 600 frescoes and 1500 engravings in a labyrinth some eighty feet down a sloping tunnel and sixty-five feet below ground level. ‘If the historians are right about the function of the Lascaux caves, religion and art were

inseparable from the very beginning.'[1] As someone who identifies both as an artist and a person with a religious spirit, this makes perfect sense to me. Art and religion both try to express the inexpressible and are inextricable drives of the human spirit.

Armstrong also said, 'Like art, religion is an attempt to construct meaning in the face of the relentless pain and injustice of life.'[2] The philosopher Alain de Botton (writing with John Armstrong) said, 'The true aspiration of art should be to reduce the need for it. […] The ultimate goal of the art lover should be to build a world where works of art have become a little less necessary.'[3] While I appreciate their points, I disagree, and I would be surprised if either de Botton or Karen Armstrong is an artist. Without that experiential connection, they have little understanding of what drives artists. Yes, there is much art that evokes a sense of horror (Picasso's *Guernica*), or despair (Munch's *The Scream*), or is dizzyingly and disturbingly transcendent (Dali's *Christ of St. John of the Cross*), but this is the secret that artists know – that when we face a blank surface armed with nothing but a mark-making tool and pigments, we are placing ourselves in a profoundly intimate embrace of mysterious forces. And, no matter how difficult the struggles may be, this is the place where the soul feels itself at home. If an artist suddenly found themselves transported to heaven, they would still show up at their studio and pick up their paintbrush.

Karen Armstrong goes on to say, 'The desire to cultivate a sense of the transcendent may be *the* defining human characteristic.'[4] She is referring to religion, but this is also at the heart of art.

Faith has not informed my art – art and artmaking has informed my faith, as perplexing as I find my faith. As a child, I was raised on the work of artists with clear religious sensibilities – Ade Bethune's saints as ordinary people going about ordinary tasks; Rita Corbin's delight in the beauty of simple things and quiet faces; Corita Kent's joy of colour; and Fritz Eichenberg's intense woodcuts. Fritz Eichenberg's *Christ of the Breadlines* is an image that as a child taught me more of the milieu in which I grew up with my grandmother, Dorothy Day, and the Catholic

[1] Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (Anchor Books, 2010), 8.
[2] Armstrong, *The Case for God*, 8.
[3] Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, *Art as Therapy* (Phaidon, 2013), 232.
[4] Armstrong, *The Case for God*, 9.

Worker movement than anything else. These artists helped form my understanding of what faith looked like; this is the theology I was raised on, and this began my exploration of the connection between art and faith.

We are, I believe, in a hinge moment of the relationship between ourselves and religious tradition. What is, or what has been, spiritually sustaining has also become spiritually wounding. A priest of a wealthy New Jersey parish once quoted to me, 'People enter church hungry and leave starving.' Is this a problem of language? Of authenticity? Artists who are authentic and unique are valued, but do we ask ourselves of our faith if it is authentic and unique? When faith and art both are called to conformity, is there an inherent conflict with our innate human push to deepen understanding and perception?

I believe so, and I believe art and artists can provide some deeper understanding of these questions. Artists are particularly suited to take the language of religion and turn it on its head if our religious beliefs are to have any relevance and power in the challenges that face us individually, with humanity, and with the very health of all being. Art is its own language, and it continually asks us to examine our language. It speaks to us in ways doctrine and theology cannot. It speaks of desire, beauty and sorrow. It wrestles with the most intractable elements of the human condition without the need to find solutions or to control them. Art asks, can you see the fundamentals of yourself without the lens of gender, religion, race, class, profession, familial relationships, nationality, or ethnicity? This is a terrifying question, but isn't it trying to see how God sees you? And then art asks, can you do the same with others and the world around you?

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to visit the home and studio of the artist Brice Marden in Tivoli, New York, which, extraordinarily enough, was where the Catholic Worker Farm had been from 1964 to 1979, and where I had spent my childhood summers. There, along with visiting my grandmother's old bedroom, empty but otherwise untouched, I was confronted with a series of works-in-progress on the walls of what used to be the men's dormitory and in the Peter Maurin house where the library had been kept (mostly books on theology, which held no interest for me). There I was led to ask myself just what it was I was seeing, as it was not what I was familiar with. (Liturgy or abstract art – isn't this a question of what we each find incomprehensible, and to find, in response, what speaks to our condition?) This confrontation started me on a path that

changed my understanding and perception of the role of art, particularly as a spiritual practice. What began with the representational art of Fritz, Ade and Rita moved into the world of the abstract expressionism and minimalism of Anne Truitt, Mark Rothko and Brice Marden, leading me to be aware of a whiff of something that I felt intuitively these artists were pursuing: an edge of awareness, sometimes the edge of anxiety, and an opening of the doors of perception. Truitt, a sculptor and painter who was also a writer, said, 'The most demanding part of living a lifetime as an artist is the strict discipline of forcing oneself to work steadfastly along the nerve of one's own most intimate sensitivity.'[5] Whether successful or not, whether others understood what they were exploring, for me the driving energy of these artists I felt to be the same driving energy of faith.

According to the art historian Simon Schama, Mark Rothko had a particular disdain for what he called, 'verbiage'.[6] Christianity does have a language problem. Its exclusionary language, its highly controlled prayers, its triumphalism and certitude – its verbiage – are alienating. Catholicism has a verbiage problem. I enter church and am overcome with a sense of being trapped in a nineteenth-century paternalistic and moralistic time warp, and I leave starving for both a timelessness and universality of faith that can also address the here and now.

Artists rarely are writers, and even more rare is the artist who writes of faith informing their art. One such artist is Makoto Fujimura who makes a baffling claim. With a series he was painting, he intended to 'fulfill' Mark Rothko's art: 'As a Christian, as someone cognizant of biblical reality that points to a New Earth and New Heaven, I do have an advantage: I create from a vision of the world to come, and not just from the broken realities I experience today. […] Thus, Rothko, a great master, can describe only the edges of the abyss; I, as a Christian, can describe the world beyond them.'[7]

This is the danger and fallacy of religious language – we believe that because we write and speak of what is profound, often in beautiful ways, that we know the unknowable. Creeds and doctrines don't serve well the path of the artist. Rothko, who was raised in Orthodox Judaism and therefore deeply aware of the religious spirit, understood this danger. I feel

[5]Anne Truitt, *Daybook: The Journal of an Artist* (Scribner, 1982, 2013), ix.
[6] Simon Schama, *The Power of Art* (Bodley Head, 2009), 439.
[7] Makoto Fujimura, *Art + Faith* (Yale University Press, 2020), 126.

Rothko's art comes from a desire to show God something of the human condition and human brokenness in all its beauty and messiness, and *this is enough*. (The greatest compliment he would say of a person was that they were a 'human being'.[8])

We are a verbal species, and what wondrous things we speak and write of! But can we really talk our way into knowing what is unknowable? This is one reason why we hunger for art. The work of art in the service of faith is to cut through all of what we believe and simply place our very human broken selves in the hands of a force that we probably haven't the slightest chance of understanding.

I was raised by writers, talkers, and storytellers, and I started writing as soon as I was physically able to wield a pencil and haven't stopped since**.** I, too, have a verbiage problem, which is why as a writer I keep turning to artmaking, and why all of my best religious experiences have been either in a language I didn't understand or in no language at all. Can we truly plumb the depths of the human condition and the divine-human exchange without going deeper than the verbiage?

Joseph Campbell said, 'The best things cannot be told; the second best are misunderstood. After that comes civilized conversation; after that, mass indoctrination; after that, intercultural exchange. And so, proceeding, we come to the problem of communication: the opening, that is to say, of one's own truth and depth to the depth and truth of another in such a way as to establish an authentic community of existence.'[9]

How can we, as thinking, language-bound human beings, give way to mystery? Isn't this the quest of the artist? Artists have many roles, including as cultural, religious or historical storytellers, propagandists, or decorators for the walls of the wealthy, but we need to do more. We need to allow art to break us of the habit of confusing faith with words. Could Christianity, or any religion, ever have survived, and will it survive, without art – these creative acts I call voices of the heart and dances of the soul?

Religion's verbiage has led to spiritual hunger in me, and the call of artmaking responds to this hunger. To be an artist is to be both a stranger in a strange land and yet to intimately know the land. Barry Lopez, the

[8] Schama, *The Power of Art*, 439.

[9] Joseph Campbell, *Masks of God, Volume IV: Creative Mythology* (Condor Press, 1968), 84.

writer and ecologist, said, '[…] no one is quite as alert [to the landscape] as an indigenous hunter who is hungry.'[10] Can anyone know faith with as much alertness and as intimately as the spiritually hungry? The artistic drive meets spiritual starvation with beauty. Art is our response, engagement and ability to perceive beauty in both its tangible and intangible presence. As Mary Oliver said, 'paying attention is the beginning of devotion'.[11]

St Anselm says theology is faith seeking understanding (*Proslogion* I), but isn't it also a fixation on and fascination with our *ideas* of God? Artmaking is a theology of the hands. We all form this stunning mind, heart and hands of God. Our minds desire to make sense of existence, to understand, leading us to wrestle with the angels, while our spirits want to be utterly transfixed by the beauty of the world. In other words (the verbiage!), while the left brain is discussing theology, the right brain is out dancing with the Holy Spirit.

Estimations of the dates of our oldest artwork keep being extended further back in time. Cave paintings discovered on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, badly damaged but indicating a story being told, are estimated to be 51,200 years old.[12] The oldest musical instrument found so far, made from the bone of a bear in Slovenia, is at least 60,000 years old.[13] When art historians speak of this human impetus to make images emerging some 50,000 years ago, they speculate that these may have been imbued with magical properties, worshipped, or were hunting instructions, or perhaps were simply a statement of, 'We were here' (which, I admit, is my favorite explanation of these). Perhaps we are not only underestimating our ancestors but also overthinking what they were up to. Are we so very different from them? How much have we really changed in evolutionary terms? Is it possible that the very reasons why we are still artists today were the reasons they were artists back then?

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[10] Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (Scribner, 1986), 272.

[11] Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (Penguin, 2016), 8.

[12] Adhi Agus Oktaviana, Renaud Joannes-Boyau, Budianto Hakim, et al., "Narrative Cave Art in Indonesia by 51,200 Years Ago", *Nature* 631 (2024): 814–18, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07541-7.

[13] Matija Turk, Ivan Turk, and Marcel Otte, "The Neanderthal Musical Instrument from Divje Babe I Cave (Slovenia): A Critical Review of the Discussion", *Applied Sciences* 10, no. 4 (2020): 1226, https://doi.org/10.3390/app10041226.

Artists rarely can explain their process of artmaking. All artists, I think, are in a sense deeply religious in that they know the flavour of what cannot be described. They know that while they may spend years honing their skills with their chosen materials, ultimately artmaking is out of their control, and they wonder at this enigmatic state in which they find themselves producing their best work. Perhaps this is why artists can appear superstitious to non-artists in their reluctance to speak of this. Faith without the creative spirit leads to atrophy and verbiage. Art without faith is impossible. Every creative act is an act of faith, whether the artist is aware of it or not.

How can we hone in on that connection that seemingly lies beyond our conscious, intentional selves, often even beyond our skills, that is some expression of some other force? Perhaps this is the same force that resulted in artists beginning to draw images with charcoal and earth pigments *at the same time across the globe*, from the European continent to Indonesian islands. And isn't art such as Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel an interpretation of that moment that the art historian John-Paul Stonard calls 'a light turning on in the human mind'?[14] And also in human hands and heart.

I choose to believe that this 50,000-year-old impulse to draw and paint, along with the impulse to sing, dance, play music and tell stories, is the desire to join in the joy, mystery and gratitude of the holiness of being and a desire to meet creator to Creator. And, yes, to say, 'Here I am.' It is the urge to tell our stories of who we are in all our humanness, not only to each other but arguably more so to God. It is an insistence on our own existence. And it is the oldest unbroken lineage of this relationship, far older than any of the religions that exist today. Religions have come and gone, while the human impulse to make art, that dialogue between humans and the Divine, endures.

And what a miraculous lineage this is! (Louise Bourgeois, in response to a student who asked how to work through the torment of making art, said, 'It isn't a torment to be an artist; it is a privilege.'[15]) That is why it is no problem for me to live with both Marden, who referred to painting as a

[14] John-Paul Stonard, *Creation: Art Since the Beginning* (Bloomsbury, 2021), 3.

[15] BBC Scotland, "Tracey Emin on Louise Bourgeois: Women Without Secrets", *Secret Knowledge*, 25 November 2013, YouTube (Art Documentaries channel), 00:06:34, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiGjzV7Nk48.

'sounding board for the spirit',[16] and Eichenberg, a German-Jewish Quaker, both of whom are imprinted on my Catholic consciousness.

At the same time, I am not suggesting that all artists are beacons of faith, hope and love. It's difficult to describe the thirst artists have to do their work, sometimes to the utter detriment of themselves and their families. Artists are in just as much danger of doing terrible wrong as priests are. There are artists who are morally bankrupt and artists whose better angels may have been wounded beyond healing – human failures exist everywhere.

Artmaking is a small, personal recognition, an intimate awareness that creation is still occurring, and we are called to join in with some small gesture, creating something new, in which it does not matter what you believe, or who your tribe is, or how you define your faith. Some striving for an authentic voice, and the authentic voice, which is also a vulnerable voice, is necessary for religious and spiritual development. Without that, we are spinning in circles. We must change and evolve.

The artist desires, unconsciously or not, to be a part of this continuity, this telling of the human story and the story of creation. Aren't we spiritually – in consciousness and practice – evolutionary beings? Isn't that practically the definition of being human? Is the blindness of religion that what began in mystery has turned into the belief that the story has been told, and we have no more story to tell? The instinct of the artist says there is much more to be told. Art says that even religion does not have the final say. Art says we are not completed human beings. Art also has its own pace, and we may need another 60,000 years, or more, with which to explore this condition of existence.

Why not call it dancing with the Holy Spirit? Why not call art and artmaking a spiritual practice?

There is something profoundly beautiful in the connection between art and spirit – art as spirit in action. Our art spirit and the Holy Spirit understand each other. Art and spirituality are in an intimate relationship with the beauty of existence. Faith needs to be breathed in and out, and artmaking is a form of this breath. The calling of the artist is to grasp this curious embodiment of spirit – and this lies within both representational and abstract painting – along with the physical reality and limitations of

[16] Quoted in Mark Stevens, "The Big Chill", *New York Magazine* (Oct 26, 2006), https://nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/24373/.

material, and then hang on for dear life, following an edge of nerves, the edge between what is known and what is not known. And to say again and again, this is not only meaningful but necessary, and it's worth the pursuit, the struggle and the failures.

There may be only two concerns for the artist – beauty and sorrow. Both are, of course, lessons of love. First is to love even what you don't understand, to love in the face of deep fear and anxiety (art without fear is necessary, and yet artists are a fearful lot), and to love when it seems impossible. Second is to fall in love with your materials, to respect them, to learn them and to learn from them – there is an interior hum that happens when you know you have found your artistic partner, whether a musical instrument, voice, canvas and pigments, or dance. And the third lesson of love is that moment when you present yourself to these first two loves with all your inadequacies, your fears, your mistakes, your regrets, and all the cracks and brokenness are standing there naked and asking the paint brush to somehow move with love. To respond with love. And even if you've done it before, are you sure you can do it again?

The artist discerns in a line of a cheek, or a cast of an eye or clasp of the hand the embodiment of beauty even in the face of the saddest of human conditions. The musician listens to sounds and silences – of wind and water, tone and notes. To respond is a call to beauty and to see one another truly. The trees, the creatures, the land – these, too, call out to be seen. Through our eyes, our hearts and hands, we reach out. Our spiritual needs are at their source, a need through which we can meet the Creator as creators, leading us to a deeper felt sense of what it means to be alive. Are our small acts of creation in essence sacramental acts? Are our scribbles, our throwing of paint around, our thoughts, experiences, and desires how we feel the embrace of God? I can't speak for anyone else, but for myself, I say, yes and yes. My creative acts are my prayers and a deep, quiet, honest dialogue with God. It doesn't matter if we are 'bad' at our art-making. Anything we put down, any mark, any colour, is a prayer. That is to say, a gift of deep attention.

God speaks to us in a stunning array of languages and yet also in a paradox of deep silence. This comes hand in hand with the cacophony of the world, and artists tease out which element of the cacophony is theirs to embrace and then open themselves up without fear, without expectation, without outcome. All senses alert, the artist picks up her pen or paintbrush and gets to work, paying attention to even the simplest and quietest of

things that bring a sense of delight and joy. Artmaking is wonderfully satisfying (all those delicious colours!).

Sometimes, though, we aren't ready for the voice of faith seen through the eyes of the artist. Van Gogh's perception of a world sparkling with an aliveness was so intense, so unfiltered that few nineteenth-century viewers understood what they were seeing, and some wondered if it was the product of mental illness. Art may push viewers to go where they aren't ready to go, and artmaking may push you to go where you aren't ready to go.

The challenge for artists who live with a religious spirit is to work from a knowing that lies beyond dogma, language and tradition to try to make sense of what is deeply disturbing – why something rather than nothing? And to try to express what is electrifying – the pulsing, breathing sense of spirit in everything. Artists in pursuit of deep feeling and awareness have a burning mission – to open the doors of perception in some way that points to this utterly beautiful, utterly astounding miracle of being. To help lift us out of ourselves, out of our obsessions and fears and worst impulses.

People hunger for answers, and religion likes to respond, as does science; artists learn to live without answers. That is the faith of an artist, and the fate of an artist. Good artists have no desire to prove anything. They are too busy trying to ride the waves between blindness and perception, to move beyond themselves and their own smallness to a glittering world. That's the perception of an artist. Feeling both the pulse of being and the abyss of nothingness – that's the perception of an artist. Feeling beauty in every atom – that's the perception of an artist.

For me, art doesn't represent faith or help me interpret faith – faith is in the very nature of the practice. Artmaking is the visual pursuit of burning questions. It is also love of colour, form, line, texture, and of making. Powerful art is when these two elements come together in unique ways, leading viewers to perhaps think a bit differently about themselves and the world around them. To lead them to perhaps feel the poignancy of the human condition – art does not care whether we are male, female, Christian, Jew, Muslim, old, young, beautiful, ugly – and to wonder about themselves, the world, 'reality', and conventional wisdom. To provoke, too. But, then, many artists, when asked what artmaking does for them, simply say that it fills them with joy.

Why am I an artist? Because I love the materials, I love making things, I love thinking visually. The practice of making art brings me contentment,

joy, and a deep sense of rightness. It suits me to my core – the inspirations, the explorations, the happy accidents, the line, colour and form, and the ways it calls me to a deeper richness of awareness, attention, devotion. In artmaking I feel alive in ways I never found in conventional prayer. Without artmaking I would diminish in every way possible. It is my personal dialogue with this pulsing awareness of what may not be possible for us to know, responding in the only way I know how – with my humanness, my hands, heart and mind. And to pursue probably unanswerable questions, and, yes, to express myself – my pain, sorrow, joy. And this is the power contained by even ordinary artmaking by ordinary people.

We see art in many ways, as political, commercial, cultural, educational, historical, religious, autobiographical, functional, or as forms of propaganda or protest, but Paleolithic cave art feels free of all of this (though I hope I am not succumbing to an artist's interpretation of the Garden of Eden). Perhaps it *is* the human struggle to understand the meaning of our existence following the edge of our most intense and intimate sensitivity and sensibilities. Truitt was more able to cross that divide than most, and yet she was excoriated by critics and viewers for her sculptures, which were stripped down to a handful of lines and a deep, painstaking layering of color. What profound courage she had. In a way she was exploring with form, line and colour what molecular biologists explore – the most basic elements of our existence fueled by this drive to know what it means to be human.

I understand when Truitt speaks of '[…] a blue shape, another blue shape, gray—my heart was wrung. Another arrangement of color slightly different in proportion—my heart lifted. Color and form in themselves […] had a meaning to which my whole being answered.'[17] When she wrote of seeing 'my first Barnett Newman, a universe of blue paint by which I was immediately ravished. My whole self lifted into it. "Enough" was my radiant feeling—for once in my life enough space, enough color',[18] I found myself caught by Truitt's words, regardless of Rothko's judgment on verbiage.

I believe in the power of art and artmaking. I would not be able to find a nourishing, sustaining sense of the sacred without it. It gives me what my religious tradition is failing to give me – a home, a sense of belonging

[17] Truitt, *Daybook*, 74.
[18] Truitt, 155.

in this 50,000-year-old endeavour to understand the meaning of our own existence, to thrive and feel alive, and to feel the breath of the Divine. Art and artmaking contain a religious language that speaks to me.

Enough space, enough colour. I have yet to experience that sense of enoughness Truitt felt, but it is there, waiting for me.

Can the combination of art and spirit change the course of things? I don't know, but I trust the artistic spirit. This spirit I see flowing from those Paleolithic artists right up to artists of today, from that 50,000-year-old art to the fleeting art of Andy Goldsworthy or Tibetan Buddhist sand mandalas, is arguably the longest continuous line of our religious spirit. Because of this, I don't have it in me to critique anyone's art, just as I wouldn't critique anyone's prayers.

Fujimura, I think, is mistaken as to his relationship to Rothko. There is no fulfillment needed. They are simply two artists – one a Japanese-American Episcopalian, the other an American Orthodox Jewish immigrant from Latvia – standing side by side sending out their prayers. (Granted Rothko's prayers are more like what my grandmother said of the playwright Eugene O'Neill in that while he was interested in man's relationship with God, his relation was a war in itself, rebelling against man's fate.) I can't help but want to defend Rothko as he isn't here to defend himself, but I suspect that if he were, he would gaze sadly at the two of us, and say, 'Verbiage.'

Of those four artists who helped form my Catholic and artistic consciousness as a child, two came to change their relationship with Catholicism – Rita Corbin left the Church, and Corita Kent, a religious sister of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, left her order. Can artmaking be a bad influence on faith? If faith requires conformity and turning away from mystery, then I think so. Artists must also be mystics, living with this felt sense, this experiential relationship with God. Without it, artistic endeavours may be decorative, which can be deeply satisfying, but for those of us who are aware of this intimate edge of exploration, here we are at the edge of unknowing armed with nothing but a paintbrush, some pigments, and any surface we can find.

I can't answer my questions. I can only, as Rilke advises, love them.

I end this verbiage, with which I have unsatisfactorily tried to explore the sacred task of the artist, with a piece of wisdom attributed to John Cage: 'When you start working, everybody is in your studio – the past, your friends, your enemies, the art world and, above all, your own ideas – all

are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave.'[19]

[19] As quoted by Philip Guston, speaking on "The Philadelphia Panel" (transcribed in *It Is*, no.5, Spring 1960, 36–38).