

Arts, Theology, & the Church

NEW INTERSECTIONS



DOUG ADAMS ■ MARY FARRELL BEDNAROWSKI
BRUCE BIRCH ■ FRANK BURCH BROWN
SIDNEY FOWLER ■ DEBORAH HAYNES
ROBIN M. JENSEN ■ CINDI BETH JOHNSON
DON SALTERS ■ KIMBERLY VRUDNY
JANN CATHER WEAVER ■ WILSON YATES

EDITED BY
KIMBERLY VRUDNY
& WILSON YATES

ARTS, THEOLOGY, AND THE CHURCH

N E W I N T E R S E C T I O N S



edited by Kimberly Vrudny and Wilson Yates



THE PILGRIM PRESS
CLEVELAND

TO *John Dillenberger and
Jane Daggett Dillenberger,
for their visionary contributions
in the field of theology
and the arts*

The Pilgrim Press, 700 Prospect Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44115-1100

thepilgrimpress.com

© 2005 by Kimberly Vrudny and Wilson Yates

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America and are used by permission. Changes have been made for inclusivity.

All rights reserved. Published 2005

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

10 09 08 07 06 05 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Arts, theology, and the church : new intersections / edited by Kimberly J. Vrudny and Wilson Yates.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8298-1651-8 (paperback : alk. paper)

1. Christianity and the arts. I. Vrudny, Kimberly J., 1969– II. Yates, Wilson.

BR115.A8A78 2005

246—dc22

2005047635

Contents

vii PREFACE

xi LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PART I: The Arts and Theology

ONE 1 The Theology and Arts Legacy
Wilson Yates

TWO 29 How Important Are the Arts, Theologically?
Frank Burch Brown

THREE 50 "Lump in the Throat" Stories
Narrative Art, Religious Imagination, and an Aesthetic of Hope
Mary Farrell Bednarowski

FOUR 71 Spirit Standing Still
Documenting Beauty in Photography
Kimberly Vrudny

PART II: The Arts and Interpretation

FIVE 105 The Arts, Midrash, and Biblical Teaching
Bruce C. Birch

SIX 125 Changing Patterns and Interpretations of Parables in Art
Doug Adams

SEVEN 139 The Portrait of God in Christian Visual Art
Robin M. Jensen

EIGHT 158 The *Place* of Art
Deborah Haynes

PART III: The Arts and the Practice of Ministry

- NINE 179 Liturgical Aesthetics
The Travail of Christian Worship
Don E. Saliers
- TEN 200 Engaging Eucharistic Images in Film
Ecclesiological and Liturgical Meanings
Jann Cather Weaver
- ELEVEN 217 Three Models for Arts Programs in Seminaries and Churches
Exhibitions, Residencies, and Collaborations
Cindi Beth Johnson
- TWELVE 235 Revelings
Exploring the Practice of Prayer and Photographic Images
Sidney D. Fowler
- 253 LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

The *Place* of Art

DEBORAH HAYNES

Imagine that you are approaching an intersection where several roads converge. You stop and consider which road to take, for they lead in different directions. The title of this essay is like that. What, we might ask, is the place of art in contemporary culture? Or, what is the place of art in relation to theology and the study of religion? Or, what does place itself, as literal physical site, have to do with art? Such questions have engaged me for many years. But unlike an intersection, where one cannot move in opposite or parallel directions simultaneously, language and ideas are more fluid. Using both personal narrative and theological ideas, I will examine some of the interconnections implied by these questions.

Clearly, the direction of my thinking has been shaped by the fact that I was not initially trained as a theologian, but as an artist. I came to the study of religion and theology from studio practice. Therefore,

my questions are directed not at how art can serve theology, but at the relevance of theological and ethical reflection for the visual arts. Today, I do not work in a theological seminary or a department of religious studies, but in a secular university in a department of art and art history. My location shapes what I do in innumerable ways and I think it is important to acknowledge this.

The first part of this essay creates a framework for what follows in two ways. First, by describing three of my gallery installations, I set a context for my concern with broad religious and moral issues. Second, in discussing four attempts to set forth a theology of art where the role of art is to serve theology, I set a context for the longer second part of the essay. In this second part, I offer three propositions and consider what a theology of the arts might look like when considered from the artist's perspective. Using the work of artists Kim Abeles, Mel Chin, and Agnes Denes, I try to show that even without an explicit focus on theological questions, these artists deal with ultimate concerns. The last section of the essay focuses on *[THIS] Place*, a project that expresses my theological and ethical commitments and is deeply informed by years of studying religion, as well as art history and theory.

A FRAMEWORK

As a young student and then as a practicing artist, I was impelled for many years by the need to express "the sacred" through clay work, drawings, environmental installations, and performances. Admittedly, the "sacred" is a vague category, but I use the term in this sense: to be sacred, a thing, person, or activity must be highly valued by us and it must hold power over us. For me, the earth is sacred; human relationships are sacred; the mysterious context of our lives is sacred. My installations of the late 1970s and early 1980s reflect these values.

In my 1979 *Gaea* installation, for example, I expressed concern about the extinction of species, depletion of natural resources, pollution of the environment, and overpopulation. In preparing to install the piece, I drove across the state of Oregon, collecting stones, earth, sand, and sticks from various sites. Then I spent several days arranging these materials in a nine-by-twelve-foot room in a gallery to form a figure on the floor.

After I had completed the installation itself, I posted a word-tree image on the wall:

The earth is precious,
a sacrosanct body on which we live.
She is a goddess, and this work is named after
the Greek goddess, Gaea, who is the sure foundation
of all that is, the first being born of chaos and from whom
all else evolved. Here Gaea is composed of naturally occurring
materials, collected from my regional environment, and replaceable
in that environment. The *prima materia* is transformed by arranging
rather than by unalterable firing. Increasingly I choose to work in ways
that sidestep our habitual cycles of production and consumption, ways
that resist the commodity market, that neither pollute nor use non-
renewable resources, that loosen the boundaries and constrictions
of Mind, and that express an attitude of reverence for the
earth and coexistence with all sentient beings. Still,
my grasping mind asks, "But what is art?"
My spirit gives an elusive answer:
"This body is a vision.
I am the earth as the sea is my blood.
I am clay,
sand,
stone,
stick,
string,
cinder,
and seed."

In two *Temenos* installations during 1980 and 1981, I worked in much larger galleries than I had earlier. I sought in both of these installations to create spaces for contemplation, using mostly found materials as I had in *Gaea*—sand, stones, sticks, clay, and cloth. The Greek word *temenos* means sacred precinct, a share of land apportioned to the

god or goddess and a center of worship. Many cultures have defined sacred space using enclosures, temples, and gardens. In these gallery installations, I wanted to evoke the presence of a temple where the world might be resanctified. "As I witness the literal destruction of life on the planet," the gallery materials proclaimed, "a sense of urgency arises. I seek to reestablish a sense of connection with the body/earth, and to rediscover the holy in all spaces and living beings." In retrospect, I view these installations as courageous, but partial. There are, of course, limitations to all such gallery work. While it might provoke reflection, it does not actually create change in a place. I will come back to this idea later in this essay.

My art grew out of strong religious and moral values, and in the early 1980s I felt an urgent need to formulate a theoretical basis for this practice. I thus began to develop a theory of creativity based on a theology of the arts. I was drawn to study world religions and theology in an attempt to articulate that theoretical basis. There were guiding questions I pursued: Are there moral imperatives to which art of necessity should attend? What is the relationship of human creativity to divine creativity? How might theology serve the artist in the creative process? And which theologies might be most helpful? How can the insights of art historical and theological study be appropriated and used as vehicles for change?

In the years since I undertook graduate study in religion and art history, I cannot say that I have ever satisfactorily answered these questions. As a writer, however, I have consistently returned to one theme: the reaffirmation of the critical and revelatory potential of art within our commodity-driven culture that largely repudiates concern with religious and moral values in the arts. From one perspective, all of my work in the subsequent years has been an attempt to expand upon this.¹ Certainly I am not alone in this quest, and it will be helpful to acknowledge some of the theological work that forms part of the stage on which I create a different set and enact another play.

When it was first published in 1987, Wilson Yates's *The Arts in Theological Education* offered a vocabulary for understanding the subtleties and nuances of the relationship of religion and the arts, especially in relation to Christian theology and the arts. As Yates wrote, a theol-

ogy of the arts delineates the role of the arts in revealing the religious meaning of culture and faith. It also sets forth the limits of what the arts can and cannot do for theological understanding.² At the foundation, a theology of the arts is based on the idea that images are an especially efficacious means for expressing human understanding of the divine.

Jeremy Begbie's *Voicing Creation's Praise* and George Pattison's *Art, Modernity, and Faith* both attempt to provide the basis for a Christian theology of art by examining historical antecedents. In setting forth his Christian theology of art, Begbie proposes a cognitive understanding of art—that art is capable of providing genuine knowledge of reality beyond human self-consciousness. Building on the critiques of Kant developed by Hans Georg Gadamer and Michael Polanyi, he argues persuasively for art that expresses our embeddedness in creation, instead of abstract aesthetic experience, and for art as a form of action rather than disinterested judgment.³

While many current theologies of art remain focused in Christian faith, the last chapter of Pattison's *Art, Modernity, and Faith* discusses how a contemporary theology of art might be in fruitful dialogue with other traditions, such as Zen Buddhism, where there has been an integrated relationship of the arts and religious practice for centuries. I agree with Pattison's assertion that a theology of art, although it does not require artists to become overtly religious in their work, does require a certain seriousness of intent—a "serious humour, a serious tenderness, a serious play and a serious joy as well as a serious doubt and a serious despair."⁴ It is important to remember that modern and contemporary artists often work independent of particular religious traditions, and this raises a different set of questions regarding art and religion, as well as the meaning of a theology of art.

From Paul Tillich and theologians working in the neo-Calvinist tradition of South African Abraham Kuyper, to Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, and John Ruskin, Begbie and Pattison offer readable summaries of previous theologies of art. This work of recuperation provides useful background and history for all efforts to articulate the relationship of theology and the arts.

In *Religious Aesthetics* and *Beauty and Holiness*, Frank Burch Brown and James Alfred Martin, respectively, engage a series of significant ques-

tions concerning the relationship of religion and aesthetics, and they indicate directions for future scholarship and study.⁵ What *is* art and what *is* religion in our postmodern era of cultural pluralism and diversity? Analogously, what is aesthetics, especially from the standpoint of theology? How might a dialogue between these two reenergize each of the partners of the dialogue? Brown studies a number of aesthetic categories such as taste, norms, and standards. Martin focuses on classical and contemporary formulations of the concepts of beauty and holiness. Drawing from the Hebrew Bible, Plato and Kant to Gadamer, Derrida, and Bakhtin, these writers have created a useful intellectual genealogy and compendium of information about key religious and aesthetic categories.

Certainly there are many other significant resources linking religion and art, theology and aesthetics from the last two decades. Here the work of Margaret R. Miles, John Dillenberger, Jane Daggett Dillenberger, Thomas Martland, and Samuel Laeuchli, among others, stand out. But I mention Begbie, Pattison, Brown, and Martin primarily to clarify the point that theologies of the arts are usually, and understandably, articulated by theologians who are looking at how the arts might further theological agendas. This is why the language used emphasizes how the arts express theological doctrines and thus may enhance liturgy and worship.

But what happens when we invert the usual questions? We know that the arts can serve theology, but how can theology be of service to the arts? In trying to answer this question, it is worth remembering, as Wilson Yates has suggested, that there are at least three crucial points of commonality between theology and the arts.⁶ Any answer to the question of how theology can be of service to the arts presupposes these shared aspects.

First, both art and theology are products of creative imagination. In relation to the visual arts, this is a truism, although we may well wonder about this in the age of cultural appropriation. I recently saw an exhibition of a young New York artist whose paintings were direct copies of Lucas Fontana, Ellsworth Kelly, and other modernists. I had thought that the 1980s and 1990s were the decades of appropriated, stolen, and copied images, but evidently such work continues unabated. Nevertheless, for most artists, the creative imagination is the source of the work of art.

In relation to theology, I suspect that this claim may be contested. Some theologians assert that theology is divine revelation, but constructive theologians such as Gordon Kaufman have another view. Kaufman's theological corpus is based on the presupposition that theology is an imaginative and constructive activity, an open and evolving discourse, rather than a set of revealed and tradition-bound doctrines.⁷ Imaginative theological construction is a form of creative authorship that helps us to articulate our place within the cosmos. As an artist, trained to consider my own creative work as imaginative and constructive, and knowing that my creative acts also help me to find a place in the world, such an interpretation of theology remains compelling. In this regard, theological ideas can serve as a model for and inform the creation of art, just as the arts can serve as a model for theological construction.

Second, art and theology share common artistic elements, such as the use of imagination and intuition, mythic language and evocative symbols, metaphor, image, and narrative, and awareness of the dramatic moment. In analyzing art as metaphorical communication, Jeremy Begbie points out that art may be performed or viewed repeatedly, but its interpretation is never fully disclosed through discourse.⁸ I would add that, like all theological insight, the work of art is not reducible to literal statement. As a function of such shared aesthetic elements, theology can serve art as a document and source for understanding the nature of both historical and contemporary art.

Third, both art and theology present images and patterns of meaning regarding the ultimate nature and meaning of existence. This was one of Georg Hegel's main insights, though he saw philosophy as the highest manifestation of Spirit. This is also one of the reasons why, trained as an artist and after working as an artist for some years, I wanted to study theology. When I encountered the idea in Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* that the self-conception of the artist and theoretical interpretations of the creative process were borrowed from theology, I knew that my own theological study made sense.⁹ Theology can serve the arts as a resource for helping to identify and understand the central questions of human existence. It can help the artist to understand the character of contemporary culture, and especially its spiritual longings. Of course, there is no singular contemporary culture, but here I am

thinking of the ways in which liberation, feminist, and ecological theologies, for example, speak to our present cultural condition. In my view, these common factors provide a compelling foundation from which to examine other questions.

A THEOLOGY OF THE ARTS FROM THE ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE

With this background in mind, what might a theology of the arts look like from the artist's perspective? How might theological doctrines and liturgical practices inform and enhance artistic practice? While I cannot answer these questions comprehensively, I seek to address them by offering three propositions and discussing a number of works of art.

Proposition 1: Theology can provide the arts with insight about vocation and, specifically, about the vocation of the artist. I begin here, because this is where I began, at least in one aspect of my scholarly work.¹⁰ Over many years of study and writing about the artist's vocation, I concluded that there is a great need today for artists who will cultivate visionary imagination, as well as prophetic and critical faculties. Theology, and the world's religious traditions in general, can provide much needed insight about what visual imagination and prophetic criticism look like.

I believe that the artist has a personal calling to interpret the dilemmas we face, thereby giving voice to hopes and fears, experiences and dreams. In doing this, the artist's work is oriented to this world, to the present as it moves inexorably toward the future. And, it is active: it urges engagement and commitment to the world in order to bring about the political, social, and cultural transformation necessary for the embodiment of values such as peace, love, and justice. Certainly, such statements are highly rhetorical, but they indicate the central values that guide my understanding of the vocation of the artist.

Proposition 2: Theological doctrines related to prophecy, revelation, and sacrament can serve as a resource for the arts. From this foundation of considering the role and function of the artist, it is possible to address a second set of general questions related to the prophetic, revelatory, and sacramental potential of the arts. Art is efficacious. It has power to move us in profound ways, as well as to provoke fury and rage. The history of iconoclasm provides ample evidence of this power.

Images reveal insights about our historical moment, they criticize what is going on in the present, and they point the way toward the future. From Goya and Daumier to contemporary environmental artists, this prophetic potential of art has often been expressed. Here I offer four examples of such contemporary work, moving from sculpture to projects where artists shape an entire environment. Each of these works of contemporary art reveals present broken relationships, patterns of human destructiveness, and loss and disconnection—or, in theological terms, sin and evil.

Artist Kim Abeles carefully tracks changes in the sky and pollution levels in Los Angeles in her *Smog Collectors*. Abeles made her first images using smog and particulate matter in 1987, but she did not develop a series of smog collectors until the 1990s. A *Smog Collector* is made by cutting a stencil—Abeles has used images of body organs, industrial sites, and presidential portraits—and exposing it for up to sixty days to particulate matter in the polluted Los Angeles environment. At one point, the artist placed the stencils on the roof of her studio, but they have also been placed at other sites as well. For instance, a sculptural series of smog collectors was commissioned by the California Bureau of Automotive Repair in 1991–92; these were set up throughout Los Angeles. When the stencils were removed, the images created by the smog were then exposed. Of course, much more is exposed with such works. As Abeles eloquently put it: “*The Smog Collectors* materialize the reality of the air we breathe. . . . Since the worst in our air can’t be seen, *Smog Collectors* are both literal and metaphoric depictions of the current conditions of our life source. They are reminders of our industrial decisions: the road we took that seemed so modern.”¹¹

Mel Chin’s project *Revival Field* was a powerful example of another kind of ecoproject. In 1990, at the Pig’s Eye landfill in St. Paul, Minnesota, Chin and scientist Rufus L. Chaney began a project to reclaim ravaged land. Their goal was to detoxify a sixty-square-foot area in the landfill by doing green remediation, using plants known as hyper-accumulators to extract heavy metals such as zinc and cadmium from the soil as they grow. After it was originally planted, this “garden” was cared for by St. Paul’s Maintenance Department; and in fall of 1991, the plants were harvested, dried, ashed, and analyzed under controlled conditions

by Dr. Chaney. As of October 2002, the site had been closed and the project considered finished.

Chin and his collaborators hope that eventually land restoration projects such as *Revival Field* will help with the cost of healing toxic landfills. For the tenth anniversary of this first project, Chin initiated a similar collaboration with the Institute of Plant Nutrition at the University of Hohenheim in Stuttgart, Germany.

In 1982, Agnes Denes began work on a site near Battery Park in lower Manhattan, close to the former World Trade Center. She called the project *Wheatfield, Battery City Park: A Confrontation*. There, she cleared debris from four acres that had been used as a landfill, spread an inch of topsoil, and planted two acres of wheat. For four months she cared for the field until it was fully grown. In August she harvested a thousand pounds of grain and fed it to horses from the New York City Police Department.

Then, between 1992 and 1996, Denes undertook a much larger project called *Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule*. In Ylorski, Finland, Denes built a hill on top of gravel pits, approximately 420 x 270 x 28 meters. She shaped the hill as an ellipse, and then invited ten thousand people from all over the world to plant trees there. Each tree bears the name of the person who planted it and is designed to bear the names of that person's ancestors for four hundred years. Her intention is both to transform a blighted landscape into an abundant forest, and to engage a diverse community in a massive collaborative project. Works such as *Wheatfield* and *Tree Mountain* are examples of what Denes calls "philosophy in the land." These monumental ecoprojects are conceptualized and designed at the intersection of philosophy, mathematics, science, and community.

As far as I know, none of these three artists is actively engaged in studying or thinking about theology as a resource for their work. I believe, however, that theological ideas can help us to interpret their work responsibly. The work itself speaks about the fragility and contingency of human (and all) life in our mysterious planetary context. Each of these examples highlights human relationships to the sacred context of life.

Proposition 3: Theology itself, as the discipline that aims to articulate religious doctrines about God, the divine, and the sacred, can aid the arts. Here one looks straight into the core of theology. What God

is, how we conceptualize the divine and the sacred, is one of the first explicit tasks of theology. The question of how the arts can visualize such ideas is open to the interpretation of individual artists. Art can be didactic, like some theology, or it can narrate its truths in a less overt way.

As an example of how this proposition might be given artistic form, I turn now to a description of a creative project titled *[THIS] Place*, which I began in 2000 (ill. 25). The unusual bracketing and italics in the title are meant to emphasize that I live and work in *this* place, and that the project is itself about place. Over time I will both work on and write about it. *[THIS] Place* is challenging, though difficult to theorize. In its broadest conception, my aim is to define the *topos* or place of art.

I could say that in general my art expresses my theology, or more precisely that *[THIS] Place* reflects a pantheistic spirituality. But I fear that for many people in religion and theology, such language will seem hopelessly vague. Nevertheless, I have recently been inspired by Owen Thomas, who argued in several articles that spirituality is a term in need of redefinition.¹² Spirituality is as much concerned with the outer life of the body, community, our institutions, and so forth, as with the inner life. Thomas suggests that the term is actually more inclusive than "religion," insofar as all people have some kind of spirituality, while some claim they do not have a religion. What follows, then, may perhaps best be described as an account of my art as spiritual or contemplative practice.

On one level, *[THIS] Place* is simply where I live: a one-acre polygon in Jamestown, Colorado, with a view of Mt. Porphyry and bordered on its longest side by the James Creek. The house is located on the south side of the James Canyon, near three other structures—an underground sanctuary, small office, and studio. It was known as Ivydell long before we moved here in 1999, because of a small sign that hung on the porch. There are several discrete areas. The upper terrace, behind the house, is home to a variety of native plants that are adapted to the dry Colorado mountain climate. Water from springs behind the studio is captured in three cisterns to the east, along the upper bench. There I cultivate wild volunteers: nettles, raspberries, mullein, feverfew, and mugwort. On the river bench I grow edible and medicinal herbs: garlic and greens, bee balm and purple coneflower, sage and horseradish, motherwort and Saint John's Wort, lemon balm and chocolate

mint, skullcap and rehmannia, astragalus and valerian. Along the river walk, I planted rhubarb a few years ago. It is slow growing, but finds its place among bluebells and false campanula and water parsnip. Willow trees abound. During the past two years, I have planted seven fruit trees. As Russell Page commented, "To plant trees is to give body and life to one's dreams for a better world."¹³

Daily I circumambulate the site and rake its paths, entering into relationship with this *temenos*, this sacred place. The circumambulation path consists of nearly three hundred red sandstone tiles from a local quarry. Mindful walking along this path has become part of my daily meditative practice. Sitting on various perches, I watch the light play across trees with their branches stretching one hundred feet into the sky. And the sky! Cerulean, azure, pristine. In cities from San Francisco to Boston, from Vladivostok to Lucknow, this blue appears faded, the air varying shades of brown. I track changes in the landscape and sky, in the creek and animal life. This year I have been smitten, once again, by butterflies. The snakes that I sometimes see on summer days were evasive this year. I always felt blessed to catch sight of one.

The activities within the overall structure of *[THIS] Place* include the mundane affairs of daily life—sweeping, mowing, scraping old paint, and repainting the sides of a building. There is gardening and its attendant elements: digging, hoeing, planting, watering, tending, weeding, mulching, pruning, harvesting, gathering seeds. But my activity also includes what we more easily call creative work—reading and writing, drawing and marble carving. I write scholarly essays and read learned tomes on the fate of the concept of place by Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Casey, and others.¹⁴ I draw. I have been working for several years on a series of drawings called *Marking Time*. In August 2003, I finished a five-by-twelve-foot drawing from this series that took nearly ten months to complete. The subject of the drawing was my contemplative walking practice at *[THIS] Place* over nine months.

And then there is the marble. I work outside between the studio and the medicinal garden, in the stone yard, usually under a tarp to protect myself from the sun and rain. Marble is a beautiful stone. In hardness, it is halfway between alabaster and granite. This means that marble may be carved by hand, and that it yields easily to pneumatic

chisels. I use both. Just now, I am working on a large stone, weighing about 250 pounds. Moving stone is its own challenge. Without a forklift or Bobcat, I get help from neighbors, or use ancient techniques perfected by the Egyptians, rolling the stone on small metal cylinders, or using logs and levers to raise and lower it.

On the surface, my stone work bears some resemblance to other artists' work, such as Ian Hamilton and Sue Finlay's fourteen-acre garden in Scotland, titled Stonypath, or to Jenny Holzer's stone benches with sandblasted "Truisms" carved into their surfaces. There are, however, significant differences between my work and theirs, not the least of which is my own direct engagement with the stone. I am also less concerned about the art world, and more concerned with how to live a life worth living and how to establish a relationship with a place. Out of my ultimate concern, I have decided to give my creative energy to *[THIS] Place*.

Several years ago I began to write Greek and Latin words in stone: *temenos*, *vocatio*, *amor fati*. Sacred precinct, calling, love of fate. In historical sites from the Samothracian sanctuary to Sardis, stone inscriptions provide us with knowledge about the ancient past. Now I carve words in marble and place them around *[THIS] Place*. "Ivydell," reads the large triangular stone at the driveway gate. This was the text of a small sign that hung above the door on a cabin that occupied this site early in the twentieth century. *Temenos* rests at the base of the steps leading into the medicinal garden (ill. 26, 27). At the top of the steps, a five-foot-long marble bench declares "The vocation of the artist is the *reclamation* of the future." A threshold stone, *The Sisters*, marks a group of nine crack willow trees (ill. 28). In 2002 a gifted stonemason named Ezekiel Lopez helped create an outdoor sanctuary among the trees. I am currently working on a stone for a platform inside this patio with the words of the Buddhist *metta bhavana* meditation. *[THIS] Place* is a large standing stone that now rests on a beautiful sandstone-covered base on a special pin, so that its two discrete faces can be turned. Lying in the stream, an old marble chunk reads *Water* (ill. 29). In the year since placing it there, the marble, which is composed of calcium carbonate, has eroded, leaving a delicate surface texture that would be hard to replicate with tools. *Dona Nobis Otium Sanctum*

provides a seat beside the creek. With such words, phrases, and sentences, I feel as though I name the world.

Part of my fascination with this activity is the way the process of carving words in stone clarifies and focuses the mind. It is a spiritual practice in its own right. As in prayer, meditation, and mindful sitting, stillness and concentration are cultivated. One-pointed attention, the opposite of continuously interrupted attention and multitasking, is absolutely essential. Quite literally, the mind must stay focused on the tip of the chisel. Steadiness of mind and hand and evenness of quiet breath are necessary in order not to gouge or damage the stone. I do not mean to glorify or misrepresent this process, for carving marble is also full of other moments, moments of frustration, adversity, and the boredom of repetition.

Nevertheless, carving an "S" is a dance of slow sensuous curves, as the chisel glides through stone and the body moves to accommodate the letter's twists and turns. A "B" is half a dance or a set of intricate steps where right angles meet roundness. A "T" is a long straight meditation, its two lines creating a special crossing point. In plant geometry, the crossing point is that unique layer in a plant, sometimes only one cell wide, where energy moves up toward the sun, then down into the earth, where the life force changes direction. It is a metaphor for the way inner self and outer reality separate and connect in turns. M. C. Richards described the movement as resembling a figure eight or Moebius strip, "where what is enclosed and digging down turns into what is open and lifting up. . . . The two realms are an organic breathing continuum."¹⁵ My "T" reverberates with her images.

So, on one level, this place is where I live, where I read and write, draw and work in marble. On another level, however, *[THIS] Place* is a creative project about contemplative practice in a particular place, and about belonging and community. I am exploring the vagaries of living at a particular time and place, this *chronos* and *topos*, cultivating both my powers of perception and engaging the land, its history, and its present state. The Southern Arapaho tribes spent summers in this canyon before the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864. That history is detailed in Margaret Coel's book, *Chief Left Hand, Southern Arapaho*, which recounts a sad and all-too-familiar tale of deception, broken promises, and murder.¹⁶ Later in the nineteenth century, the area was a

major center for mining gold, silver, and other metals such as fluorite. The legacies of that activity currently include reclamation of wetlands and cleanup of toxic mines. The Honeywell Corporation is currently working on the restoration of one of the largest mine sites. The fact that *[THIS] Place* has also had its own history is pertinent to how I think about and interact with it. I have begun research on the history and use of the area with a colleague who is an environmental engineer.

In recent years, a few writers have eloquently spoken about establishing this connection to place. In *Opening Our Moral Eye*, for example, M. C. Richards wrote passionately about "the renewal of art through agriculture."¹⁷ Claiming that art is a form of spiritual perception, she urged artists to develop their imaginations. Yet, how do we enhance our powers of imagination? Imagination is nurtured through carefully observing the cycles of life and death around us, looking at how all things live and how they die. Color gives us direct experience of time, especially the changes of color associated with different times of day and year. Watching clouds, light and shadow, and stars, both farmer and artist learn to read the sky. Tending plants and observing the world, we learn meditative attention. We develop both outer sight and inner vision.

Related to Richards's ideas, Wes Jackson suggests that artists should become "homecomers," persons who choose "not necessarily to go home but to go someplace and dig in and begin the long search and experiment to become native."¹⁸ Given the fragmentation of our lives and the loss of connection to the physical world, such artists can model what genuine reconnection might be. Michael Pollan, building on the work of J. B. Jackson, Wendell Berry, and others, suggests that we should look to the garden for a new ethos, a new set of values for living in the twenty-first century.¹⁹

Barbara Gates's *Already Home: A Topography of Spirit and Place* offers a vivid example of this new ethos. In the narrative, the author explores the geological and cultural history of her Ocean View neighborhood in Berkeley, California, including its five-thousand-year-old history as the site of Ohlone Indian shellmounds. My interest in and commitment to place (and to a particular place) is not unique to me. In fact, that is one of the major points that surfaces throughout *Already*

Home. "The whole universe—past, present, and future—is right here in this room," Gates says near the end of the book.²⁰ Not only are we connected with our historical ancestors on the spot we currently inhabit, but my own aspirations to know *[THIS] Place* are connected to Barbara Gates's fascination with her neighborhood thirteen hundred miles away.

I am engaged in the process that such writers describe. I live in a place that I want to study and to know. I seek knowledge of what grows and lives here and of how the elements change over the course of days, months, and years—knowledge that comes from observing and listening to the world. This is *gnosis*, a deep spiritual knowing. If we can more thoroughly understand our relationship to where we are, to the chronotope we inhabit, then we may be able to live ourselves into a new relationship to the future. As many of us spend our lives increasingly online in a dromocentric, or speed-centered culture, some must nurture connections to the earth and remember the phenomenological world. One way to do this is by entering into relationship with a place. If time is motion, then place is a pause in time's movement. It takes time to get to know a place. As Yi-Fu Tuan put it, "[Place] is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. It is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms such as times of sunrise and sunset, of work and play. The feel of a place is registered in one's muscles and bones."²¹

In my view, place is an ontological category: it helps us to define ourselves and our existence. Place tells us who and what we are in relation to *where* we are.²² For me, this is not only a philosophical point, but a religious, theological, and spiritual insight as well. Religions connect us to the world, in particular times, cultures, and places. Theologies offer us orientation toward the divine, the world, and the human. In the end, I admit that my art expresses my theological perspective in ways that I find difficult to articulate fully in verbal language.

As a young adult I was inspired by the contemplative architecture and gardens of India and Japan—from the Stupa at Sanchi to the Zen gardens at Ryoanji. My commitment to creating aesthetic experience rather than art products was further strengthened not only by creating installations and performances during the 1970s and 1980s, but also by

years of writing art reviews and witnessing the art world close-at-hand. *[THIS] Place* reflects both this intellectual and artistic history.

As an artist, I believe that a theology of art must address the theological and ethical dimensions of creativity. Some artists claim that their art evolves out of “pure” unmediated experience, or that it expresses no particular relationship with others, with history, nature, or the cultural worlds. I think this is nonsense. Creative activity never occurs in a vacuum, but is always connected to one’s past experience, social location, and to various strands of life in the present. Considered from a broad perspective, the products of artistic creativity may be considered as religious and moral acts precisely because of their consequences in the world. From this point of view, the creative process is also intrinsically religious and moral insofar as it involves actions for which we are responsible and accountable within a given community.

I began this essay by asking a complex question, what is the place of art? I believe that the place of art is in daily life, in the actual *places* we inhabit. We create ourselves as we create art; we nourish and renew ourselves as we affirm our particularity in a place. It is crucial to remember that such creation, renewal, and affirmation happen in and through the mundane details of everyday life. In *[THIS] Place*, I give form to this conviction.

But I also asked at the outset about the place of art in relation to religion and theology. For the theologian, art can express theological truths and moral values. It can give visible form to what often remains invisible, and this is part of its unique power in all religious traditions. However, for the artist who approaches the intersection where theological ideas, religious history, and contemporary manifestations of spirituality meet, a rich and creative journey awaits.



NOTES

1. In a new book titled *Art Lessons: Meditations on the Creative Life* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2003), I articulated my ideas about theology of the arts. In a chapter “Toward a Theology of Art,” I outlined several interrelated questions that are at the core of this enterprise. But even that description seems quite limited. This present essay might therefore be read as an expansion of, or perhaps more accurately as an inversion of, the issues discussed in *Art Lessons*.

2. Wilson Yates, *The Arts in Theological Education* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 144.
3. Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) and George Pattison, *Art, Modernity, and Faith: Towards a Theology of Art* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991).
4. Pattison, *Art, Modernity, and Faith*, 154.
5. Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), and James Alfred Martin Jr., *Beauty and Holiness: The Dialogue between Aesthetics and Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990).
6. Yates, *The Arts in Theological Education*, 101–4. I am reframing Yates' formulation slightly in what follows.
7. This point of view is articulated throughout his work, but most comprehensively in Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).
8. Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*, 233–55.
9. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).
10. My second book explored this theme in considerable depth. See Deborah J. Haynes, *The Vocation of the Artist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
11. Kim Abeles, *Encyclopedia Persona A–Z* (Los Angeles: Fellows of Contemporary Art, 1993), 86.
12. Owen Thomas, "Some Problems in Contemporary Christian Spirituality," *Anglican Theological Review* LXXXII 2: 267–81.
13. Russell Page, from *The Education of the Gardener*, quoted in Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (New York: Delta, 1991).
14. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Edward S. Casey, *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Mary Anne Warren, *Moral Status: Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); and Michael Zimmerman, *The Concept of Moral Obligation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
15. M. C. Richards, *The Crossing Point: Selected Talks and Writings* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), ix.
16. Margaret Coel, *Chief Left Hand, Southern Arapaho* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981).
17. M. C. Richards, *Opening Our Moral Eye: Essays, Talks, and Poems Embracing Creativity and Community*, ed. Deborah J. Haynes (Hudson, N.Y.: Lindisfarne Press, 1996), 134–39.

18. Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996), 97.
19. Pollan, in *Second Nature*.
20. Barbara Gates, *Already Home: A Topography of Spirit and Place* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003), 222.
21. Tuan, *Space and Place*, 183–84.
22. Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, xv.