

BEYOND KANDINSKY: REVISITING THE SPIRITUAL IN ART
A Project for the Year 2011

www.beyondkandinsky.net

Synopsis

This year we will come upon the hundred-year anniversary of the publication of Wassily Kandinsky's classic book *On the Spiritual in Art* (originally released in 1911). The following proposal outlines the relevance of this book to us today and proposes a commemoration of the centennial of its publication in the form of an online symposium to run in conjunction with a film screening. The commemorative events will be hosted by the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

Introduction: Looking Backward

In one sense, an anniversary is just an arbitrary marker; the fact that something significant happened exactly one year or one decade ago today has no actual bearing on today's events. The real significance of an anniversary, of course, is that it presents an opportunity for reflection and the structure of a framing device through which to view, assess, and examine our lives.

It is in this spirit of reflection and examination that we propose to revisit Kandinsky's classic essay. The book's subject, which to many might seem an anachronism, affords us a curiously well-suited and timely vehicle for such an undertaking. The recent collapse of our economy has thrust us into a kind of cultural moratorium in which, finding ourselves uncomfortably suspended between crisis and transformation, we are being forced to turn inward, to look at ourselves. Suddenly, it seems, the inner life—the home province of the spiritual—has acquired a special urgency it has not been granted in the American cultural landscape for some time. A second factor making Kandinsky's book so relevant now has to do with its specific address to art and artists. For although the book has implications that extend far beyond the domain of art proper, it was written primarily for those of us who have committed our lives to art in some form or other, and who are striving to participate meaningfully in the larger culture. “Meaningfully” is the operative word here; for above all else *On the Spiritual in Art* is an address to *serious artists*. In our view, the art world has not been particularly hospitable to serious art and artists of late, entertainment having, it seems, superseded all other values. While there are countless artists at work today grappling with meaningful issues in their studios, all too often their work remains in the shadows of the spectacle. If art is to contribute anything of real value to our culture's transformation, it is these serious artists whose voices need to be heard.

The Book

The import of *On the Spiritual in Art* is belied by its appearance: it is a slim volume of barely over fifty pages. In the first part, Kandinsky offers an impassioned plea for a spiritual revolution in art whose achievement would liberate artists from the “bonds” of the material world (representation in art was then just beginning to give way to abstraction). In the second part, the author lays out his theories of the psychology of color and the language of form, and concludes with an address to the moral responsibility of the artist.

Kandinsky's text is far from perfect; indeed, the contemporary reader will find in its pages every order of difficulty with which to take issue. But if one can accept some of the more overt anachronisms (the pervasive overtones of the Christian worldview, the exalted language, the unqualified use of words such as soul and spirit), one will be rewarded with observations and insights that are as profound as they are pertinent to our times. Of these, Kandinsky's struggle with materialism is perhaps the most interesting, as his nemesis was the very same overvaluation of things and appearances that has, in its more advanced

form, brought us to our current situation. This crucial reminder in a time of cultural transformation is grounds alone for revisiting Kandinsky.

The Current Situation

“Every work of art is the child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions.” The book opens with this portentous sentence. From it emerge two overarching questions that are as urgent today as they were in 1911: First, what is the intrinsic character of the work that our epoch’s artists have begotten? And second, how does its existence in the cultural environment not merely reflect but *give shape* to our inner lives?

In a world in which *being entertained* has acquired the status of a primary value—one which we seek to realize in even our news—how has art positioned itself in relation to this overwhelming force? Does its character present a challenge or counterpoint to it, or has it been swept up by the ethos and capitulated to our need for constant titillation and amusement? The second question arising from Kandinsky’s opening line cuts to the heart of what is perhaps the most pressing “spiritual” issue of our times: How is the inner life—its structures, cadences, range, and complexity—changing as a result of our current environment?

General Questions

Many of the major and minor issues addressed in Kandinsky’s book can serve as discussion points with great generative potential. The following list represents some of the more general questions arising from the text that might be used as a framework for the commemoration.

- How have our conceptions of—and attitudes toward—the spiritual in art changed with the wane of Modernism? Is the notion of transcendence still viable in contemporary art? What possible meanings can transcendence have in a largely secular culture?
- What is the current role of experience both in the making and beholding of art? Has experience in beholding been displaced by contemporary practices of interpretation, decoding, identifying references, etc.?
- What is the current relationship between abstraction and the spiritual? In our postmodern era, does abstraction retain the proprietary claim on the spiritual it once held?
- What is the future of the object in spiritually-inclined art? Given our materialistic culture, will art that aspires toward the spiritual need to rid itself of physical embodiment?
- What is the current role of the artist in society? What kinds of alternative roles can we conceive for the artist, and how can we work toward their implementation?
- How have recent changes in artistic practice (e.g., “post studio” practice, ritual-as-practice, transdisciplinary practice, etc.) impacted the spiritual content of works of art? Is art-as-social-work one new paradigm for spiritual art?
- How has the increase in environmental consciousness changed artistic practice and the art being produced? Are the shifting attitudes toward nature and the environment central to current thinking about and new models for the spiritual?
- What role, if any, is there for digital technology in a new model for the spiritual in art?
- What might time-based media such as film and video contribute to artistic expressions of the spiritual or transcendent?

- Are there artists working today whose work exemplifies a contemporary approach to the spiritual that might serve as inspiration toward future possibilities?
- What is the role of art criticism in offering interpretive frameworks that include room for the recognition of the spiritual in art?

Conclusion: Looking Forward

Although the point of departure for this project is a text written over a century ago, it is of course toward the future that our work will be directed. By reconsidering this hundred-year-old classic and using it as a lens through which to view and assess our shared cultural history, we will be afforded a unique opportunity to critically examine our current situation. Whatever emerges from the dialogue initiated by this commemoration, it is hoped that Kandinsky's enthusiasm will infuse our endeavors with renewed vision and inspire us to imagine the shape of our future in new and exciting ways.