

Thank You for the Not-Art

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Although perhaps prophetic, I don't consider Wassily Kandinsky's paintings or *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* pioneering when compared to other contemporary efforts, such as the work of Hilma af Klint, Rudolph Steiner, George Gurdjieff, or quantum mechanics. Rather than being a one-of-a-kind groundbreaking effort, Kandinsky's contribution embodies a desire for mystical-scientific systems that was not rare in the transitional period between the 19th and 20th centuries.

However, more intelligible and perhaps also more influential than most art theories of that time, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* is remarkable in its concreteness and in Kandinsky's trust that truth is somehow in or a consequence of his theories. It is hard to read, for instance, his descriptions of the psychology and language of color and not be moved by his insights into the experience of confronting a painting, or be convinced by the certainty of his tone. But what lingers for me after several readings is his audacity in writing a manual concerning the spiritual in art knowing, as Kandinsky must have known, that such an attempt is futile.

For me, the merit of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* is the negation of Kandinsky's claims which the book carries as a stowaway within it. His diagrams, for instance, rather than reveal something about the structure of great paintings, show what great paintings are not, precisely because the best work of the best artists can't be diagrammed but occur in the interstices of systems such as the one Kandinsky suggests. Although artists need systems (I say this without defense, for now), even if not necessarily voiced or even consciously understood, art, as supposed to artistic activities, depends on and happens at the edges where the system breaks down. Where chaos begins. Where the system no longer works.

The actions of art against systems is what maintains its possibility (and its life) and to the extent that the man or woman of theory lets it happen—always at the cost of tidiness—is that he or she becomes an artist. So Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* presents what art is not. However, to present this as well as he did is not a small contribution.