

**James Elkins**

**March 2011**

I am glad to be in this very interesting company. I've read all the statements on the site, and we're a very diverse group. A couple of us didn't particularly enjoy re-reading the book, and some of us don't believe in the book's claims about art, empathy, or history. Others are concerned to bring the book forward, elaborate on it, bring it into the present.

I think part of my role here may be as skeptic. I am never entirely happy when an art student tells me she reads Kandinsky, because that passion often goes along with a sense of art's power and efficacy which is grounded in a pre-War sense of international abstraction, and especially in the "Spiritual in Abstraction" exhibition that foregrounded those values for the generation reading in the 1980s and 1990s. In my experience young artists who are immersed in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* tend to be somewhat disconnected from the driving themes of art since WWI, and especially since the millennium.

There's also the question, for me, of what it means to re-read Kandinsky now. At the moment, the art world is buzzing with talk about affect theory. Artists and critics get their affect theory from several dozen very disparate sources, and the "movement," if it is one, has hardly settled on a single purpose or direction. But it does seem to gather around the idea that what matters in art is presence, presentation, phenomenological encounter, mood, non-verbal sense, and combinations of senses other than sight, rather than, for example, an intellectual or theory-driven encounter with the work in which a written text or discourse dominates the work's meaning. In the context of this forum, I wonder if the revival or reconsideration of Kandinsky now might not have a lot to do with this larger phenomenon of affect theory. To put this hunch in its most pessimistic form: is it possible that Kandinsky is an inappropriate example, a misplaced metaphor, for something that might better be called affect, and connected directly to contemporary interests?