

Beyond Kandinsky

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February 2011

In December of 1911 in Munich, Germany, a small manuscript of just over fifty pages that had for several years lain untouched in its author's drawer was published under the title *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. Much to its publisher's surprise, the book was an immediate success and would be seen through two more editions within the first year of its public life. Thus began the legacy of Wassily Kandinsky's classic—but also quirky, complex, and by most accounts problematic—*On the Spiritual in Art*, whose centennial is the inspiration for this project.

Aside from its historical importance as one of the foremost documents in the history of modern art heralding as it did the arrival of abstraction, of what relevance is this book to us today? Do the words preserved in its pages hold interest for anyone outside a handful of Kandinsky scholars, historians specializing in first generation abstraction, or modern manifesto enthusiasts? Is the arduous process of wending one's way through the text's labyrinthine arguments sufficiently outweighed by the book's rewards? And, perhaps most significantly, do today's young artists have anything to gain from braving what must seem to them its endless litany of anachronisms?

Whatever they may be, answers to these questions will no doubt involve—if not entirely depend upon—one's attitude toward the book's subject. For the subject of the spiritual and Kandinsky's impassioned plea on its behalf are surely the reason the book has survived outside of academia at all. Kandinsky's work certainly doesn't need a manual to accompany it (indeed, many of his admirers have probably never even heard of the book), and for most contemporary critics Kandinsky's metaphysical speculations and Theosophical leanings are simply a nuisance they would rather ignore.

In commemorating the centennial of this strange little book, it is on this larger subject of the spiritual and its ever-shifting relationship with art that our sights are set, with one eye squarely on the future. One could hardly ask for a more fraught, problematic, and, in many circles, taboo topic in today's art world. Why this is so is a matter of debate—and one whose facets I look forward to seeing unfold during our conversation—but that the spiritual has suffered a radical demotion within the art world over the last century can hardly be denied. If this was not clear to me before setting out on this project, it has certainly been rendered so along the way. It is no exaggeration to say that in describing the project to friends and colleagues over the course of the last year, ninety percent of the responses, even when sympathetic, have been inflected with an unmistakable tone of uneasiness, mixed with varying degrees of what I can only describe as pity, and frequently expressed by some variation of "That's a *tricky* subject, you know..." It seems we are indeed, as George Steiner has suggested, in "the age of embarrassment about God, about the numinous, the collective unconscious; embarrassment about owing to our inner world, transcendental experiences, mysteries and magnanimities."

My own feelings about the spiritual, though certainly sympathetic, are no less complex and conflicted than those of my colleagues. Although I have never made explicitly spiritual work during the course of my career as an artist, I have always recognized that there is a spiritual aspect to my work and practice without which the work would utterly fail to interest me. Being a visual artist whose work is emphatically embodied and material, my sense of the

spiritual begins with what Mircea Eliade has called the “hierophanization of matter”—the disclosing of the sacred in matter—and the pursuit of this elusive presence has formed a core around which the more manifest content of my work has revolved over the years. In recent years this more explicit content has moved increasingly toward an address of nature’s invisible codes, whose hiddenness evokes a sense of reverence for the unknown that, to me, is the essence of the spiritual.

If I have remained largely silent on the spiritual dimension of my work, it has been because of my deep-seated distrust of much of the language surrounding the spiritual and of the various contingents on all sides that have rendered it suspect. Between the religious fundamentalists on the one hand, the perpetrators of New Age vapidities on the other, and the endless line of celebrities parading their latest spiritual exotica in between, the word “spiritual” has become laden with toxic associations. To utter it in unfamiliar company is to unleash a host of misunderstandings from which one has to painstakingly extract oneself if one wishes to be understood.

But as wary as I am of the more disingenuous and intellectually offensive elements with which the spiritual is too often associated, I am even more troubled by the pervasive cynicism, or what I understand as the total capitulation to meaninglessness, that has become the burden of our time. Amid the free-floating signifiers of deconstructive postmodernism and the wave of entertainment that has washed over the larger culture, the absence of meaning has become a haunting presence.

But of course meaning itself hasn’t gone anywhere; it is rather our collective belief in its possibility that has suffered a blow. With the waning of belief in the various institutions (both religious and otherwise) that have been the object of much postmodern critique, art has become more self-conscious and critical—and concomitantly, it often seems, strangely diminished and denuded of soul. Surely art *can* be meaningful in a way that is independent of any system of belief, any grand “meta-narrative,” but does this necessarily entail a renunciation of meaning in any but the most local and superficial sense? My own experience belies this necessity. To me, the greatest art is meaningful in a way that wholly transcends logic and language, that engages one’s whole being, and that addresses itself to what Donald Kuspit has called the deepest interiority. When art does this, it is transformative; some unnameable shift occurs in some conceptually inaccessible place in your being, and although it defies either description or proof, you are certain of its import. This, to me, is art’s spiritual dimension—and its necessity.

For Kandinsky, of course, the spiritual meant something more grand, more cosmic, and more totalizing (although, curiously, nowhere in his text does he give the reader a clear definition of his subject). Kandinsky’s spiritual, thoroughly steeped in the Russian Orthodox Christianity that was his heritage, was essentially religious, and as such was replete with a host of dualisms, both explicit and implicit. Of these, that of Spirit and Matter figures most prominently, for Kandinsky’s sense of the spiritual was predicated on the transcendence of the material world, which he saw as debased and devoid of meaning, in favor of the inner, subjective world of the individual (what he called the “all-important spark of inner life”). It seems clear that Kandinsky saw matter as something to which the human spirit was unjustly bound and from which it had to be released in order to realize its immanent (and, for him, imminent) potential.

Whatever we may think of the teleological worldview implicit in Kandinsky’s sense of the spiritual, one can hardly deny the legitimacy—and the prescience—of his antipathy toward materialism. Is it not this same materialistic attitude, along with its attendant values and behaviors, that has delivered us into the environmental and economic crises in which we find ourselves today?

One of the most pressing questions posed by revisiting Kandinsky's enterprise is whether or not art has a role to play in the healing of humanity—a humanity that appears even more fallen and despairing than it did one hundred years ago. If it does, what kind of model can the artist adopt toward this end? In this, Kandinsky feels far from contemporary. Indeed, a good part of what makes his text feel so foreign to us today is the forceful, combative, and at times even agonistic tone of his rhetoric. The text is rife with military metaphors, implying that Kandinsky saw his role as that of “spiritual warrior,” out to vanquish, as he put it, “the long reign of materialism, the whole nightmare of the materialistic attitude, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game.” Contemporary religious fanaticism notwithstanding, today's spiritual is a kinder, gentler species—one that tends to emphasize unity rather than divisiveness, peace rather than war, and ecological and holistic values rather than exalted metaphysics. But one wonders if, amid all the breathy, feel-good rhetoric in which so much of today's spiritual is packaged, we might not have something to gain from an infusion of Kandinsky's passion.

It was exactly this fierceness, this intensity of vision, that made the strongest impression on me when I was first introduced to *On the Spiritual in Art* in college. As a young art student weighing the concerns of pursuing a career as an artist (and one on whose vulnerable mind “more sensible things” exerted considerable pressure), I found Kandinsky's passionate insistence on art as crucial to the health of the inner life—not just that of the artist but indeed that of the larger culture—enormously inspiring. The idea that art could be something more than mere personal expression was pivotal in my decision to become an artist. For above all else, the example of Kandinsky's artistic life is that of a ceaseless *moving beyond*: beyond the personal, the trivial, or the mundane in favor of a larger meaning; beyond the realm of appearances in search of the invisibles; beyond an art that had grown stale and decadent in pursuit of something more vital; beyond a worldview that had rendered the world meaningless toward of a renewal of meaning. Kandinsky was, in essence, a seeker.

Is there a role for the seeker in today's cynical art world? In the absence of any preferable alternatives, a renewal of seeking—in whatever new forms it may appear—may be the closest thing we have to an antidote to the prevailing cynicism. For what is the latter fundamentally if not the position of *having arrived*, of *having found*? To the seeker, it is not *finding* that is the purpose of his seeking but rather a life of participating in the mysteries—and of reveling in those moments when they pierce the veil and disclose themselves to him.

If Kandinsky's spiritual revolution ultimately failed, perhaps it is not so much a reflection on art's innate power, or that of the spiritual, or even on Kandinsky himself, as it is a case of historical contingency. For although the reign of materialism has not changed much in the last hundred years, our ideas about transcendence certainly have, as have our attitudes toward dualism and the various mythologies by which modernism defined itself. I find particular promise in the movement that has taken place over the last few decades envisioning a worldview beyond the Cartesian dualism—the baleful separation of self and world, mind and matter, inner and outer—on which Kandinsky's metaphysics was founded, and we have seen something of this in recent art that addresses our relationship to the environment, to nature. Whether or not a new, ecologically-minded spirituality will emerge as a significant counterforce to the current crises remains to be seen—and more provisional still is what art's role will be in its realization.

In the foreword to the first edition of *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky makes it clear that he considered his project unfinished. The foreword, in its entirety, reads:

The thoughts I develop here are the results of observations and emotional experiences that have accumulated gradually over the course of the last five or six years. I had intended to write a bigger book on the subject, which would have necessitated many experiments in the realm of the emotions. Occupied by other, equally important tasks, I was obliged for the moment to abandon my original plan. Perhaps I shall never accomplish it. Someone else will do it better and more exhaustively, for this matter is one of urgency. I am therefore compelled to remain within the bounds of a simple schema, and to content myself with pointing to the greater problem. I shall consider myself fortunate if this pointer is not lost in the void.

“For this matter is one of urgency”: As true as this was one hundred years ago, it is even more so today. Given the current cultural, economic, and environmental crises threatening the world at large, a resuscitation and reformation of the inner life of our culture is an urgent matter indeed. If art abandons this task in favor of more frivolous or fashionable pursuits, who—or what—will take it on? It is toward this reclaiming of art’s deepest dimension that my sights are set. I will consider myself fortunate if, through our collective efforts here, we will have done something to illuminate Kandinsky’s pointer, to render it more visible to those in our century, and, ultimately, to create a new opening onto whatever lies beyond it.