

DONALD KUSPIT

Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art

Part 1

Thank you. It's a great pleasure to be here in sunny Virginia. I appreciate the welcoming weather. It's a great pleasure to be at Virginia Commonwealth once again. I've been here before, in fact several times. It's always a pleasure to see Howard Risatti again, an old friend, and someone whose work I very much admire. I want to thank Adam Welch for the particular invitation, and the Graduate Student Association as well.

Now, let me say what I'm doing here. Obviously the title—and you see this from the poster as well—is a reference to Kandinsky's very famous and influential essay, in German it was "Geistige in der Kunst." I use the German word deliberately because the word "Geist" in German has a whole different resonance in history than the word "spiritual" in English. Spiritual sounds a little sappy in English. When we say somebody is spiritual, we're not certain if we're giving them a compliment or being ironical, in English. But in German if you say somebody's a "Geistiger Mensch" that's a true compliment, somebody deep, reflective, and serious.

Now, this paper is coming from a number of different points of view, or trying to address a number of different issues. First, I think it's high time to re-evaluate twentieth-century art in a serious way. It's been scholarly done to death, so to say, everything's been analyzed. There are lots of books on Kandinsky, and people associated with him; his influence has been widely acknowledged. He's a truly famous, major figure. In my humble opinion, ultimately more of a revolutionary than Picasso. André Breton, who was not known for kindness, praised Kandinsky, I'm quoting Breton, "as one of the most exceptional, greatest revolutionaries of vision," which I think is quite an extraordinary statement. I'm not sure that people have fully gotten the whole of why he's so exceptional.

Now, one of the things that I think is going on in Kandinsky's art, and in *On the Spiritual in Art*, is an effort to deal with an issue that was raised in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, which was published just about a century earlier. *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, it's sometimes called, phenomenology of mind, sometimes spirit, there are various translations in English, phenomenology of consciousness. And Hegel, if you read it very carefully, reaches a curious point. He goes from sense experience, okay, very particular sense experience, to pure ideational spiritual experience, and he argues that the climax of spiritual activity—let's use that word—is the spirit knowing itself and coming and becoming itself. And then suddenly, having said that, he flips right back into sense experience, and he says the spirit knows itself most through sense experiences. So we have the idea of spiritualized sensing, so to say, implicit in Hegel, the whole thing starts over again, and I think Kandinsky is trying to address that moment.

Now, I think there's something else that's very important that's going on today. I'm very interested in maintaining what I call the spiritual impulse in art, and I frankly think it's disappearing. For me the debate in art is symbolized by the difference between say Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer. I found it a wonderful relief to see Kiefer's recent show at Gagosian Chelsea. I found it a wonderful antidote in relief from the show by Richter which is now at the Museum of Modern Art, which is now in San Francisco. You can buy a book [*Richter 858*] for one hundred and twenty five dollars, it has an aluminum sleeve on it, it's the ultimate hype of an artist. There are eight reproductions in it, two texts by prominent artists. It's a very slick production. I've written about both of these people. For me Richter is the ultimate in the spiritless, cynical artist. I have a piece at artnet.com where I wrote a lot, which is called "Gerhard Richter D.O.A." It didn't make me many friends, but I'm getting too old to worry about that. Then I have another piece on artnet.com called "The Spirit of Gray" which is on Kiefer. The subtext was the last ripple of the German Wave, "Deutsche Velle," as it was called when it happened. Anyway, Richter is spiritless, Kiefer is spiritual, and one of the last holdouts. The last show was dealing with the Kabala, with an interesting text on it by Harold Bloom. It was sensationally well received.

You may be aware—if you're not, I'll make you—that Richter has sharply attacked Kiefer as too pretentious, too much into the sublime, among other things, okay. I think that's a mistake, so that's one thing I want to address. The other thing I think that's happening, and that Kandinsky stands right in the middle of, is that we're at a moment of a paradigm change, as it's called, it's been going on for a while in the history of art. I believe that the idea of fine art is dead or dying. The idea of fine art which emerged in the eighteenth century, symbolized by Kant's aesthetics—and there was no concept of aesthetics in traditional philosophy—and then by the discourses by Reynolds, that that's on the way out, it's going. I think art is becoming very ideological, and it's less interested in mediating this special experience called the "aesthetic," which you can get outside of art but which is intensified and more concentrated within the, so to say, closed circle of discourse which is art.

So I think Kandinsky is bringing together the spiritual idea of art with the aesthetic idea of art, or let's say the spiritual impulse, and trying to unite them. Okay, so these are some of the things I'm going to do. And I'm going to show works which you're probably familiar with, and I will talk a little bit about them and say things I'm sure you're familiar with from Kandinsky.

But then what I want to do is to shift it a bit, perhaps in terms that may be a little too general, but it's hard not to be general in the context of such a talk, is shift it a bit and try to talk about just exactly what is meant by the spiritual impulse keeping the spiritual alive.

I also have to say that there's a subjective motivation behind this talk. As one gets older, one becomes aware of sickness and death. One becomes aware of what Buddha was aware of when he left the closed garden of his pleasures and went out in the world and saw a sick person, a dead body, and he couldn't believe these things existed. That began his spiritual pursuit of enlightenment, and you might say the sub-question, as it were, of this talk is, Can art still offer spiritual

enlightenment as Kandinsky thought it once did, or was capable of doing? You may disagree with that, you may not do it. I remind you that Kandinsky, along with Malevich and Mondrian, were all spiritual artists by their own testimony. This has been forgotten. Nobody takes their writing seriously. A while back Hilton Kramer said, "Oh, it's all just about formal innovation, and impulse, and spontaneity." But it's more complicated. The issue is whether it is still possible to re-present, represent, spiritual impulse without the traditional iconography, that's what they were trying to address. So without further ado, I'll begin.

It is almost a century since Kandinsky, Wassily Kandinsky wrote *On the Spiritual in Art*. Why reconsider it now? It was written, published in 1912 by Piper-Verlag, and there are a number of essays related to it done in 1910, 1911. Not simply because of historical reasons—not simply because it was time to take a fresh look at a text that had profound influence on twentieth-century art—and some people regard it as the climax of symbolist thinking in art—but because art faces the same problem now, at least in my opinion, that it did then: namely, how to generate and articulate what Kandinsky called ". . . the all-important spark of inner life," or, as he also called it, ". . . of inner necessity." As he said, "It is the core of spiritual experience." The problem is even greater today, in my opinion, than it was in Kandinsky's day: what he meant by the spiritual was self-evident to his audience. Today it is not so self evident. For Kandinsky's audience, and for Kandinsky, its meaning was anchored in religious tradition. Today there is no religious tradition to sustain it. Thus, when Kandinsky described how he came to the idea of the spiritual in art—when he said he realized that "the sensations of colors on the palette" could be "spiritual experiences," and that's right out of Hegel, as Kandinsky said—he described how he felt as though he was taking a "stroll within a picture, that he was surrounded on all sides by painting, whenever he entered a church. He was a very smart man, very, very, introspective and knowledgeable about himself, and he said how he wanted to recapitulate, in part, the experience of walking through a Russian Orthodox Church, which is full of pastel colors, and anybody who's been in Russia, has gone to some of these churches, there's a wonderful group of them outside, right outside of Moscow, you'll know what he was talking about.

It didn't matter whether it was a Russian Orthodox church or a Catholic church, as he said. The experience was the same whether it was in the Moscow churches or the Bavarian and Tyrolean chapels: it was an artistic experience of religion and a religious experience of art—a sense of the easy and seamless merger of religious and artistic experience, their inevitable reciprocity. The interiors of the churches and chapels that Kandinsky visited are brightly and intricately colored, as he was quick to appreciate, so that the excitement of color and of inner life converged. Color and feeling were inextricable: sense experience was spiritual experience and spiritual experience took sensuous form. That is, the external, visible phenomenon of color seemed to be a spontaneous manifestation of the internal, invisible phenomenon of feeling. Feeling needed color to become consummate—and if you think of Matisse's remarks in his 1908 essay, same kind of thing, he talks about the fascination of color, the instant effect of it—feeling needed color to become consummate and color needed feeling to have inner meaning—to be more than a

chemical matter of fact. Kandinsky insisted, as we know, that certain colors and certain emotions necessarily went together. They were not simply arbitrarily or culturally associated but essentially connected, as he argued in the chapter on the "psychological working" or emotional "Effects of Color" in *On the Spiritual in Art*.

Now the public who read *On the Spiritual in Art* when it first appeared in 1911, and also the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*, the *Blue Rider Almanac*, when it appeared a year later—the second edition appeared in 1914, and that was the last edition, which he and Franz Marc, who was a close friend, edited together—thus understood what Kandinsky meant when he declared that "their principal aim [was] to awaken [the] capacity for experiencing the spiritual in material and in abstract phenomena." It was, to repeat, a religious experience—an experience of inner life. Church-going induced it, that is it forced one back on one's inner life, in forgetfulness of the outer world—the world outside the sacred space of the church—and the picture is a kind of sacred space for Kandinsky, and Kandinsky thought that abstract painting induced it, as well, if only because in entering an abstract painting one turned away from "the external aspect of phenomena," as he said, toward what he called "feelings of a finer nature." And he makes quite clear he's not speaking about ordinary feelings, for example the kind of feelings that Munch talked about, anger, anxiety, and so forth. He's talking of a different kind of feeling altogether that you . . . he did not associate with what you might call natural existence. What mattered for Kandinsky was what he called the mood, *Stimmung*, or spiritual atmosphere, his terms of the work, and he has a very interesting footnote deploring the fact that the word mood or *Stimmung* has become so banal and conventionalized, not its material or outward aspect. The work had to be seen with what he called "spiritual eyes"—eyes that could intuit inner necessity—not eyes that could see only physical material or outer necessity. When Kandinsky spoke of "my tendency toward the hidden, the concealed," he was talking about his ability to see the spiritual concealed in the material—the unfamiliar emotional reality behind familiar material appearances. As he famously wrote in a letter to Will Grohman, the great German scholar, in 1925, "I want people to see finally what lies *behind*"—that's Kandinsky's emphasis—"my painting."

On the Spiritual in Art begins with a long diatribe against what he called "the long reign of materialism, the whole nightmare of the materialistic attitude, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, purposeless game." Another reason for reconsidering, and, as I hope to show, the necessity of re-affirming the spiritual in art, or the spiritual possibilities of art, if you want to put it more modestly, is that we have not only not awakened from the nightmare of the materialistic attitude in art as well as society, but materialism has become a plague, indeed, the reigning ideology in both. Kandinsky thought that Impressionism was materialism's climactic statement in art, but then he never saw Pop art, which began the ascendancy, not to say dominance, of media-derived art, which is the situation we're in today. The attitude of Pop art is so materialistic, however ironical its materialism is supposed to be, and I have my doubts about that, that it is virtually impossible to find any spark of inner life in it. One can make the same criticism of Warhol's "Marilyn Monroe," and maybe the reality of Marilyn Monroe as well, who

Billy Wilder said he was not sure if she was a human being or a synthetic creation, synthetic plastic, he said, as Redon made of Manet. Redon, who wrote some rather brilliant criticism, said Manet's figures lacked "soul"—inner life is what he meant. There is certainly none in Andy Warhol's media mannequins, which is what he paints and what our celebrity society is saturated in.

One of the reasons that Kandinsky was concerned with inner life is that it registers the pernicious emotional effects of outer materialistic life, affording a kind of critical perspective on materialism that becomes the springboard for emotional transcendence of it. The inability of Pop art to convey inner life, which is a consequence of its materialistic disbelief in interiority, and especially spirituality, which is the deepest interiority, indicates that Pop art's irony is at best nominally critical. Irony in fact mocks belief, even as it spices up materialism, making it seem less banal, that is, populist, thus giving Pop art the look of deviance characteristic of avant-garde art. I dwell on irony because it is opposed to spirituality, not to say incommensurate with it, and also its supposedly more knowing alternative—spiritual people are supposed to be naïve—and because irony has become the ruling desideratum of contemporary art, if you're not ironical, you're not in, apparently redeeming its materialism. This itself is ironical, for contemporary materialistic society and its media have discovered the advantage of being ironical about themselves, namely, it spares them the serious trouble of having to change. This suggests that irony has become a form of frivolity. It is no longer the revolutionary debunking understanding it once claimed to be, for example, in Jasper Johns' American flag paintings, but an expression of frustration, of stalemate, I would say.

For Kandinsky modern materialism was evident in "the turbulent flood of technological inventions that has poured forth," as he noted in "Whither the 'New' Art?" which was published the same year as *On the Spiritual in Art* and also the obsession with "the accumulation of material blessings." We live in America and know what that's all about. But he never experienced, Kandinsky never experienced, the blind faith in technology as the solution to all human problems nor the wealth, however unequally distributed, of our business society (which as we clearly have realized from the recent corporate events is a swindle). It is possible to argue that in art, which is what we are concerned with, materialism has completely swept the field. People think of art in completely materialistic terms, what does it cost, what is it going to bring on the market, and the joke is that the real galleries are the auction houses. So that searching for the inner life of a work of art or expecting any art to have spiritual significance is like searching for the proverbial rare needle in a haystack. There is usually no concealed, to think of Kandinsky's idea, spiritual point in most contemporary art, nothing unexpected that would sting the spectator's spirit into self-awareness. To put this another way, there is little that is sublime—which was an idea that Kandinsky also used—about contemporary materialistic art, that is, little that would awaken the capacity for experiencing the spiritual.

Materialism has increased exponentially in art and society since Kandinsky's day, as the business ideology of today makes clear. I think Warhol's idea that business art was the most important art and making money was business puts it on the line

quite explicitly. As he said, he passed through this thing called art, whatever that was. Business materialism is evident in the eagerness for corporate sponsorship of art. One may say corporate legitimation of art's significance—without a corporate sponsor, without commercial value, no historical and cultural value. Business materialism is also evident in the implicit belief that the work of art is a commodity before it is anything else, part of the consumer society, normal enough. That is, its commodity identity is its primary identity, or to put this another way, its marketplace value is its primary value. It seems more and more foolish and farcical to speak of a work of art's internal necessity when it seems designed to cater to, even ingratiate itself with external necessity. It is harder and harder to know what one is talking about when one does so. It is harder and harder to claim that a work of art can be a spiritual experience, however much such artists as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, I'm sure you know the difference here, insisted that one was missing the point of their abstract art if one viewed it materially. They were not mere technicians of color, to use a term that has been applied to Rothko, but spiritual provocateurs.

Ironically, marketing materialism has given art more visibility and prestige than it had when it served religion and the aristocracy. It is a two way street: business's enthusiastic endorsement of avant-garde art's professed autonomy is business's covert way of asserting its own autonomy, that is, its belief that, like art, it is answerable and responsible only to itself. By supporting art, business appropriates art's supposedly intrinsic value and claims to advanced consciousness. Ours is a business culture not a religious culture, and it is impossible to find spiritual significance in what Warhol called business art. I submit to you that Warhol's art is a celebration of business, which is in part why it sells. It is certainly a long way from the color mysticism of the interiors of the churches that Kandinsky visited and that his early abstract works struggled to emulate. Corporate headquarters are not churches, even though their decoration with works of art are attempts to give them spiritual significance. Warhol's *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, which I showed you before, 1962, is also irreconcilable with Kasimir Malevich's abstract icons, which he compared to spiritual experiences in a desert, the proverbial place to have them. In contrast, Warhol's work epitomizes the business materialism of the crowd, it's what I call crowd art. Ironically, Warhol's cynical attempt to turn the dead actress into a sacred presence—and she was very good business, like Elvis—reinforces her profaneness and spiritual insignificance. Gold is either filthy lucre, or, alchemically speaking, *ultima materia*, that is, the ultimate sacred substance, and Warhol's perverse fusion—and perversion is another major strategy in art, and irony is part of it in contemporary art—perverse fusion of its opposed meanings in the socio-cosmetic construction of Marilyn Monroe is the ultimate materialistic nihilism. It is the exemplary case of the confusion of values that occurs in a business society, and that Kandinsky fought against.

What I am arguing is that the spiritual crisis of the contemporary artist is greater than Kandinsky's. Kandinsky knew art was in spiritual crisis, whereas today's materialistic artist doesn't see any spiritual crisis. All that matters is materialistic success. I want to just call attention to something, interrupt myself. Earlier this week I received an announcement of new books from Prestel-Verlag, which is a

German firm located in Munich, with offices also in New York, and one of the books is called *The Eclipse of Art: Tackling the Crisis in Art Today*. It's written by Julian Spalding, who is the former director of the Glasgow Museum and also the man who founded the Ruskin Gallery, the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Art, [of] Religious Life and Art, and the Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art. I have to say this struck a resonance with me because my next book, which will be out, Cambridge University Press, early next year, is called *The End of Art*, and I'm taking this in a different way than he is. I'm arguing that we now are in a situation of "post art," as I call it. That's a term that Alan Capro introduced earlier on, and I sort of run with it and do a variety of other things. So there are a number of people, Spalding is one, I am another, and there are other people I can mention, who feel that something is "wrong in the state of art today" as there was in Denmark way back when.

The spiritual crisis in art today is more comprehensive than it was in Kandinsky's time, all the more so because what Jacques Barzun called the modern religion of art—his Crest lectures many years ago, an absolutely brilliant book of lectures on art, written in the seventies, as I say, his lectures that he gave in Washington. However private religion it was, and thus more of a cult, is defunct today, however much its vestige lives on in the pseudo-sacred space of the modern museum. I was recently reading about the new Dallas Museum, and apparently you have huge walls with a single work on it, like a sacred experience. I hope it works.

Kandinsky could fall back on the religion of art, and contributed to its growth, but today it seems quaint and simplistic, which is why many contemporary scholars and interpreters ignore the spiritual writings, as I said, of Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, regarding them as so much claptrap beside the point of the actual works they produced. The last religious works of art—the so-called purist works, and this is my interpretation of them and one possible interpretation—that Clement Greenberg advocated and analyzed, have become history, marketplace as well as art history. Even more crucially, Kandinsky's assumption that color—these are his terms—transmitted and "translated" emotion, that inner life had a necessary material medium, universally accessible and instantly expressive, has fallen by the wayside. The relentless materialization and mediafication—if I can invent a word—of art, which are accessories to its commodification, has stripped it of the sense of subjective presence so basic to Kandinsky's belief in spiritual experience, leaving us with what from Kandinsky's point of view is the shell of art rather than its spiritual significance. The point I am trying to make is that there is no longer anything hidden or concealed or behind art, as Kandinsky expected there to be. It is all up front: what you see is what you get, as has been famously said by Frank Stella as well as Andy Warhol. Stella, I think strips, along with Ellsworth Kelley, strips abstraction of its spiritual import, reduces it to what I call empirical abstraction, spectrum, or think of the "Spectrum Works" of Kelley, for example. If what you see is what you get, then art has lost its internal necessity, that is, its subjective reason for being, and becomes completely objective or external. One no longer experiences it, but *theorizes*, theorizes about its material structure and social meaning. Think how much theory props up art today. I am in complete agreement with the famous art historian and museum director, Friedlander, who

said that when theory rises up, creativity is on the way down, at least for the artists, if not for the theorists. In other words, belief in the spiritual has been completely uprooted and destroyed in most contemporary art. The idea of the spiritual as such has become meaningless in the art world, thus completing the process of the despiritualization or demystification of art that began with Cubism and climaxed in post-painterly abstraction, as Greenberg thinks.

In a sense—and I'm going to contradict myself, what I said before about Greenberg—Greenberg's theory of modernist painting is in fact the final intellectual stage of the modern process of despiritualizing art, which in the last analysis is reduced entirely to the terms of its material medium. Such materialistic reductionism, involving the complete objectification of art—it is a case of what Whitehead called "misplaced concreteness"—is evident in Greenberg's assertion that "the great masters of the past achieved their art by virtue of combinations of pigment whose real effectiveness was abstract," and their greatness is not owed to the spirituality with which they conceived the things they illustrated so much as it is to the success with which they ennobled raw matter to the point where it could function as art." Greenberg, Stella, and Warhol have more in common than one might imagine: they are all radical materialists. For them the spiritualist effect of art—the sense of spiritual *intimacy* it can achieve—is a case of misplaced materialism, that is, a naive misreading of art's physicality. For them the spiritual is an epiphenomenon of art's manipulation of matter, and as such a misapprehension of art. They ultimately want to eliminate the idea that there is something spiritual about art as dishonesty. Honest art involves the attempt to master matter, including, for many artists, social matter. At best, to say that an art is "spiritual" is simply a way of saying that its mastery of matter is successful, or at least convincing to the viewer. This makes the artist a kind of chef who knows how to cook the material medium so that it is tasty and looks appealing, which gives it all the presence it will ever have and need to be credible—simply as art. The idea that the artist might invest his or her subjectivity in the material medium, which is what brings it alive—indeed, the idea that the artist might *have* a profound subjectivity, and to be an artist you have to be a certain kind of person, that is, experience the inner necessity of spiritual aspiration, and that the only person who can legitimately call himself or herself an artist is the person who experiences art as part of a personal spiritual process—this idea is discarded as absurd and beside the artistic point. Thus the apparently revolutionary materialistic conception of art is emotionally reactionary.

There is another factor that makes art's situation today more difficult and desperate than it was in Kandinsky's day: the avant-garde has been conventionalized, not to say banalized. This is more than a matter of institutionalization: it is a matter of its bankruptcy. It has run out of creative steam—the age of artistic revolution and innovation is over—and become redundant, feeding on itself, and not always to refine its principles and methods. A good part of what motivated Kandinsky was defiance of convention, as is evident in his pursuit of what he called "unrestrained freedom"—you recall he spoke of this in the essay "On the Question of Form," which appeared in the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*. This begins, as he wrote, "in the effort toward liberation from forms that have

already reached their fulfillment, that is, liberation from old forms in the effort to create new and infinitely varied forms." It climaxes in a sense of what he called "unbridled freedom" fraught with "active spirit"—that is, feeling. "The feeling that speaks aloud will sooner or later correctly guide the artist as well as the viewer." I'll read that again: "The feeling that speaks aloud will sooner or later correctly guide the artist as well as the viewer." Well, what do you do if there's no feeling there? The problem is that what was once unripe new form has become overripe old form and no longer seems so infinitely varied, and what once seemed like emotional liberation—fresh and unique and revolutionary feeling—has now become stale and pro forma. The avant-garde has reached its fulfillment, to use Kandinsky's language, and become decadent. And I think we are in a time of decadence in art. The moment of unpredictability and improvisation that was so important to Kandinsky, and that he struggles to achieve in the abstract works produced under the auspices of *On the Spiritual in Art*—and I want to point out that the scholar Richard Stratton has noted that this has a unique place, this essay, in the history of avant-garde thinking, for Kandinsky's ideas were developed *before* the art that exemplifies them was made, that is, *On the Spiritual in Art* is prospective and prophetic rather than retrospective and rationalizing, as many artists' statements are—that this moment of unpredictability and improvisation has passed and vanished, never to return. It is incidentally worth noting that the root word of "improvisation" is, it means, "not to foresee," which is not the same as accidental or spontaneous—which is the way Kandinsky's work is usually understood—by chance or by impulse, and why improvisation is more enlivening than either—and Kandinsky's whole point is that art has to be inwardly alive, or it is not worth the creative trouble—since the results of chance and impulse can be foreseen, however not precisely predicted.

As Franz Marc, Kandinsky's close friend and colleague, wrote in the preface to the second edition of the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*, as he wrote: "With a divining rod we searched through the art of the past and the present. We showed only what was alive, and what was not touched by the tone of convention." The problem of feeling alive in a society you feel is inwardly dead is crucial for modern existence. "We gave our ardent devotion to everything in art that was born out of itself, lived in itself, did not walk on crutches of habit. We pointed to each crack in the crust of convention"—"it's marvelous, these sort of inspiring words—"only because we hoped to find there an underlying force that would one day come to light. . . . It has always been the great consolation of history that nature continuously thrusts up new forces through outlived rubbish." Well, nature itself seems like outlived rubbish in modernity, and especially post modernity. We are in a nature holocaust, as it's been called, an environmental holocaust, in the midst of it, and no new spiritual forces have come to light in art. Avant-garde art has become habitual, a dead letter with little spiritual consequence, however materially refined.

Part 2

Question, are there works of art that are made today that do not walk on the crutches of avant-garde habit, that do not have the tone of avant-garde convention, that one can return to again and again as a resource of inner life? How many works of art made today require a second glance? There are no doubt works that seem emotionally powerful, and even deep, but rarely does one find a work in which the emotion and the medium seem one and the same.

I am perhaps overstating my point, but the fact remains that the problem that motivated Kandinsky to write *On the Spiritual in Art* has grown greater and seems unsolvable, and that his art—his idea of an improvisational art seems naïve and inadequate in the current sophisticated situation of art. Kandinsky began "Whither the 'New' Art?" with a cynical statement from a famous scientist, Rudolf Virchow. Here's the statement: "I have opened up thousands of corpses, but I never managed to see a soul." Kandinsky attacked Virchow's remark as an example of scientific and materialistic philistinism—in a sense, one might say Greenberg is the Virchow of art criticism and theory, just as the works of Stella and Warhol tend to be Frankenstein monsters, that is, technologically animated corpses—but it raises the important question: if one opened up thousands of works of art made today, how many souls would one see? Behind this question lurks another one: what state would they be in, if they were there?

One might ask, incidentally, how Kandinsky's improvisations, in practice, avoid the fate of Stella's and Warhol's works, and what does the radical unconventionality of Kandinsky's improvisations consist? If the core of scientific and materialistic philistinism consists in the power to measure and quantify, as has been argued, then Kandinsky's improvisations resist measure and quantification, to the extent that they seem inherently unmeasurable and unquantifiable—altogether beyond scientific control and analysis. You can't nail down their forms, this I'll quote: "amorphousness." They come to suggest the immeasurable, that is, the spiritual in contrast to the material. The ancients were terrified of the immeasurable—the uncontrollable beyond, as it were, which was rationalized as sublime—and their art, which has been the model for so much subsequent art, is about measure and the sense of control and mastery measure brings. In contrast, one might say that Kandinsky's improvisations deliberately construct the unmeasurable in order to suggest the same sense of immeasurability that the churches and chapels he admired conveyed by way of color.

He too uses color, which is experienced as unmeasurable, and thus suggests the immeasurable—the inherently unmeasurable, as it were. Color seems to transcend the environment in which it appears. It is materially the case even as it seems ungraspable and thus peculiarly immaterial, it can be separated from the object. Color is constitutive of space but because its appeal is entirely to the optic sense, leaving the haptic sense unengaged, to use Bernard Berenson's terms, it seems boundless and intangible. In a very important book called *The Measure of Reality*, scholar [and] intellectual historian Alfred W. Crosby has shown that the segmentation of space and time into measurable, self-contained modular units is the basis of Western scientific materialism. Kandinsky's improvisations achieve their spiritual effect by presenting unsegmented color, going altogether against the quantification of color which we find in Seurat, and thus seemingly spaceless and

timeless color, that is, non-objective color. Such color is not firmly attached to or contained by objects, and in visual fact seems to float, that is in sense experience, seems to float free of them, to the extent of existing independently, becoming, as it were, an amorphous subjective gesture which can never be seen in perspective, that is, measured and fixed in its place, which is what perspective does.

Kandinsky's rebellion against measure, order, quantification, number may look psychotic—utterly unrealistic and irrational—from a scientific materialistic point of view, which in fact is epitomized by the rational perspective construction of the traditional picture—but it opens up the possibility of a new vision of vision. Indeed, his improvisations return to what I want to call a prelapsarian vision of reality—reality with which one is in spontaneous spiritual harmony, so to say, that is, with which one has an inner relationship rather than a measurable materialistic and thus contrived relationship. It is the difference between the way reality appears when it is freely engaged—when it seems abstractly and spontaneously expressive—and the clear and distinct way it begins to appear as one brings it under control by measuring it. I am suggesting that Kandinsky's improvisations, in overthrowing the quantified picture, are inherently more revolutionary than Cubism's quantifiable pictures, which still hold on to measure. Ironically, Kandinsky's improvisations show that one way of being modern is by rebelling against the modern vision of reality as measurable and quantifiable, that is, one way of making avant-garde progress is by regressing to a vision of reality that scientific materialism has discredited.

The basic question that haunts *On the Spiritual in Art* is what Kandinsky means by spiritual experience. He keeps using this term. He never exactly defines it, beyond associating it with religion, and declaring it to be at the center of inner life. The German scholar Klaus Lankheit, who edited the *Blaue Reiter* edition, thinks that for Kandinsky, spirituality refers to "the subjective 'freedom' of creative man," and another German expert scholar, Wieland Schmied, thinks that Kandinsky wanted to raise the "problem of the purpose of art," which is indeed a big problem today, by introducing the possibility of its spirituality. I think they are both correct, if incomplete, in their understanding of what Kandinsky meant by the spiritual. As I hope to show, they miss what is fundamental to spirituality for him, and in general. Nonetheless, Lankheit and Schmied make it clear that the crisis that led Kandinsky to attempt to create a modern spiritual art—an art that would unequivocally express a spiritual attitude—had two aspects. It was a crisis of creativity, that is, it involved the question as to just how much subjective freedom there is in creativity, how much it escapes from social codes, implying that if creativity is not completely free subjectively—if it is in any way bound by objective necessity—it is not really creativity. It was also a crisis that involved the question of the purpose of art, particularly in a scientific, technological world, more particularly, in what art can contribute to human existence in contrast to what we know technology and science contribute. It was also a crisis that involved the question of the purpose of art, more particularly, of its necessity, especially in the modern materialistic world. In other words, Kandinsky's spiritual crisis involved self-doubt, and I've written another paper arguing that he had a kind of breakdown based on evidence in his letters and other sources and internal evidence in *On The*

Spiritual in Art and other writings. That is, doubts about his creativity, and, implicitly, originality, which correlated with his doubts about his subjective or inner freedom, and also uncertainty about art's *raison d'être*, its reason for existing. The latter is in part an extension of Kandinsky's uncertainty about the purpose of his own art. Broadly speaking, Kandinsky's spiritual crisis was haunted by the unresolvable question of the relationship of freedom and necessity in the creation and significance of art.

Perhaps the immediate issue for Kandinsky was whether artistic creativity could hold its own against scientific and technological creativity—that is, materialistic creativity. They contributed a great deal to human welfare. What did art contribute? Science understood the workings of nature, technological inventions facilitated human life. What did art understand? How facilitative of life are art's inventions? We know how life serves art, that is, how life finds its way into art. The desperate modern question is how art serves life, that is, what place art has in modern life. These questions forced Kandinsky to rethink the basis of creativity and the purpose of art. The problem for him was to give art a sense of creative purpose that would confirm that it was humanly transformative not simply socially routine, and, equally important, that it would make it convincing and compelling in a materialistic world that was, as he repeatedly stated, indifferent to it except to the extent that it mimicked the materialism of its times.

His desperate answer to all these questions was to conceive of art as the repository and refuge of the spirituality the material world repudiated and shunned. What both Lankheit and Schmieid miss in their important interpretation of Kandinsky's insistence on the spirituality of art is the combative, polemical way in which Kandinsky presents his views. In fact, it's perhaps the most polemical text that I know of by a modern artist. I have always been struck by the sheer force of will animating *On the Spiritual in Art*. The spiritual is a force to be reckoned with. For Kandinsky, the spiritual attitude exists in and through its opposition to the materialistic attitude—that is, exists dialectically—with which it is at war, just as the internal necessity that informs, indeed, drives the spiritual attitude exists in and through its opposition to the external necessity that motivates the materialistic attitude. Spirituality comes into its own—becomes deeply meaningful and transformative of art and life—only as resistance to and transcendence of materialism. Such resistance and transcendence are clearly "religious" in character.

The ultimate religious ambition—the ambition realized by the saints, and I believe that Kandinsky thought he was a kind of saint, the holy man of modern art, or at least a prophet announcing his potential holiness—involves transcendental resistance to the everyday world in order to enter a more extraordinary, "higher" world of experience—and I'll talk more about what that means in a moment—it is a world that seems fresher and more alive than the everyday world—a world that seems to have been just created—just come into being. Kandinsky's abstract improvisations are meant to be as otherworldly as traditional religious renderings of otherworldly beings and experience. They are meant to show the creative forces—the creative conflict between spirit and matter, light and darkness, as Kandinsky himself says, using the language of gnosticism—that brought the world

into being, and remain alive and active in the inner world. It as though Kandinsky has projected himself into the moment of origination, as Schmied says, and witnessed the creation of the world from the inside. What Schmied calls his "cosmic landscapes" are microcosms of primordial process—of the creative process, which inevitably involves the processing of emotions, indeed, one's deepest emotions about existence.

For Kandinsky, the basic formal elements of art are otherworldly in import, however this-worldly their properties. Non-objectivity, then, means otherworldliness for him, and otherworldliness in the midst of this worldliness means recovering a sense of the freshness of being, which is embodied in the formal dynamics of the work of art. For Kandinsky, non-objective art is the only means of transcendence—the *only* means of transcendence—of the objective, practical modern world. In other words, it has, and this is why art has a special place for him, it has a higher purpose than art that objectively reflects that world, or that takes objectivity and practicality for granted. He's made a special place for art. One might say that where modernity involves extending the sway of the scientific objectivity that discovers and conveys material necessity, non-objective art affirms subjective freedom in defiance of it. The tone of lyric defiance in Kandinsky's writing—it is happily a long way from the pseudo-epic theories of conceptual artists—in and of itself suggests the transcendence inherent in subjective freedom.

Thus, ironically, Kandinsky's non-objective art, which has been understood as a revolutionary modern art, is anti-modern in spirit. Clement Greenberg once said that abstract art reflected the materialistic positivism of modernity, but Kandinsky's abstract art refuses to do so, which is no doubt why Greenberg did not care for it. He did not believe in the possibility of transcending the basic attitude of one's times. Greenberg accepted what Kandinsky called "the harsh tyranny of the materialistic philosophy," even in art. For Greenberg, "spirituality," as I said, was simply an effect of the manipulation of the material medium, the result of complete submission to it rather than transcendental use of it. I am suggesting that the spiritual crisis motivating *On the Spiritual in Art* is at bottom a crisis of transcendence and ultimately of religious faith—faith in the self's ability to transcend the objectively material world through its own subjective creativity.

Kandinsky had in effect come to doubt that art was a vehicle for creative transcendence—that it could transmit a sense of transcendence of what it represented in the act of representing it, indicating the artist's spiritual superiority to it, that is, implying that the artist's creative subjectivity is more to the human point than materially given objective reality. The artist's fundamental act of creativity consists in projecting his or her subjectivity, with all its problems, into objective reality—creating into it, to use D. W. Winnicott's eloquent phrase—making it seem humanly meaningful as distinct from merely materially the case. The appropriation of some aspect of objective reality as the temporary sensuous form for the artist's subjectivity imbues objective reality with a spiritual consequence it otherwise lacks. It was Kandinsky's spiritual crisis, involving doubt of his own creativity, as noted, generalized into the disturbing feeling that art had no purpose—this art that he had given up a promising career as a lawyer and

professor to pursue, and that now seemed to be abandoning him—that led him to abandon the representation of objective reality for the direct presentation, as it were, of his subjectivity, which he had in effect lost contact with. In a sense, Kandinsky re-asserted art's divine right to creative transcendence in order to rediscover and renew his own subjectivity—to heal himself, as it were. To put this the other way round, he in effect subjectified art to regain faith in himself and his own creativity, giving art a sense of transcendental or spiritual purpose in the process. If "crisis" is understood in the sense in which Hippocratic medicine understands it, still used today, namely, as the critical moment when the outcome of an acute sickness is in suspense—when it is about to change dramatically for the better or the worse—then we can say that Kandinsky emerged from the sickness of his own subjectivity with a new sense of his personal significance and creative power, that is, the power to endure and transcend his objective situation in the material world.

I am suggesting that Kandinsky experienced what Viktor Frankl, great psychoanalyst, calls an existential neurosis, that is, "frustration of the will-to-meaning," indeed, a sense that human life, especially inner life, had become meaningless in the modern scientific-technological materialistic world—meaninglessness is associated with deep depression—and with it art, the keeper of inner life, as it were. As Frankl says, such a crisis is spiritual—this is his own word—because it involves loss of belief in the possibility and even reality of spiritual experience, a kind of paradox here. According to Frankl—and let's get down to what spirituality means now—spirituality means "freedom in the face of three things: the instincts; inherited disposition"—or your constitution, your genes, as we would say today—"and the environment." Spiritual experience declares "the freedom of the spirit in spite of nature," a distinction that William James also makes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. To use Ernest Becker's words, the psychiatrist, spirituality involves "the problem of personal freedom versus species determinism," or, as Silvano Arieti, a very great psychiatrist who wrote on schizophrenia, writes, spirituality means the attempt to "increase [the] capacity for choice and to decrease determinism in every possible way, to move away from physical necessity and toward free will," which is a basic definition of health. In other words, spiritual or subjective freedom involves the transcendence of natural and social determinism, in whatever form they take.

More broadly, spirituality involves the general experience of transcendence, that is, what Erich Fromm calls the X or mystical experience that is, as he says, the "substratum" of the "religious attitude," as distinct from any particular religion. It involves the negation of the world and history and the self that is their expression, and, at the same time, the liberation of the all-embracing love latent in the selfless self that survives the negation. The X experience, he says, "is expressible only in poetic and visual symbols," and underlies or stands behind "the most widely differing systems of [religious] orientation." He argues that they are "various conceptualizations" of the way to realize the X experience. However, transcendence, as he says—and I want to emphasize this—does not mean "a movement toward a transcendent God—it has nothing to do with God—but refers rather to the transcendence of a narcissistic ego"—which is an early determinism also—"that is,

to a goal within man himself." That is, transcendence means inner liberation from authority, divine or human. Spirituality separates human beings from animals, who find transcendence incomprehensible, indeed, unthinkable, for it is beyond the ken of their existence, which submits to the authority of instinct—it's deterministic. The less instinct rules one's existence, the more one feels able to transcend it, and enjoy the experience of transcendence in general.

At its core, the feeling of transcendence involves the experience of inseparability from the cosmos at large, and that's what Kandinsky is trying to give us, and with that a renewal of integrity. David Bohm, an important physicist/philosopher you may know of, describes it in terms that seem especially appropriate to Kandinsky's art. They resemble those I have tried to use to understand it. He regards mystical experience as "an attempt to reach the immeasurable"—think back to what I said earlier—that is, it's "a state of mind in which [one] ceases to sense a separation between [oneself] and the whole of reality." It is a state of mind in which one no longer feels determined and measured by ordinary reality. Freud regards this "oceanic experience," as it's been called, regressive and narcissistic, which is accurate but misses the reason—indeed, necessity—for such narcissistic regression in a society that seems alien and indifferent, that is, lacking in empathy. In such an emotionally unfacilitative world, which brings with it the threat of psychic disintegration and annihilation, oceanic experience, which is the moment of transcendence or cosmic merger implicit in what I want to call *healthy* narcissistic regression, affords a sense of insular union with the whole of reality beyond one's immediate reality, one's everyday reality. One is ordinarily forced to comply to it in order to materially survive. Oceanic experience also transports one beyond the socially ugly world at large, and the world is profoundly ugly. One tends, as a society, one tends to submit to it because one realizes that every attempt to revolutionize it is likely to end in failure, that is, the construction of what calls itself a new world order but that demands old-fashioned compliance. Thus mystical experience, which is what Kandinsky's art wants to mediate, becomes an important way of remaining emotionally healthy in an emotionally unhealthy world. More particularly, it becomes the major means of preserving, securing, and protecting the core self in defiance of an intimidating and debilitating social reality. It becomes a way of sustaining a sense of authenticity, to use an old fashioned word, or true selfhood, or at least keep from becoming inwardly contaminated by one's compliant dealings with society. It is also a way to avoid becoming one of society's scapegoats. The creativity of mysticism is a weapon and protest against society's destructive scapegoating—insidious sacrifice—of any creative individual it cannot find a collective use for, that is, misappropriate for its own glory, be it social or commercial, or both.

Kandinsky's early abstractions are attempts to convey the X or mystical experience, that is, to realize it through transcendence of the social determinism implicit in representation of the world. Initially he found suggestions of transcendence in nature. It is a familiar romantic discovery, involving the transformation of the inevitability implicit in nature—that inevitability we call instinct—into the sense of freedom called transcendence, ultimately freedom from, or transcendence of nature itself. In a sense, Kandinsky's early abstractions

improvise spirituality out of instinctively felt sensations of nature, more particularly, out of primordial sensations of naturally given colors—and he talks about this to some extent. For Kandinsky, vivid color is not only a sign of natural vitality, but also evidence of eternal life, if you please, even a trace of it, for color is the earthly catalyst and carrier of the X experience, that is, it is the transcendence immanent in nature. Thus Kandinsky's improvisations are mystical experiences—more familiarly, perceptual epiphanies—of color. They pay homage to its transcendental power. Transcendental experience is there for the asking in even the most familiar color, if one knows how to ask. Kandinsky conveys this inherent transcendence by liberating color from confining line. In his improvisations color is uncontainable and infinitely expansive, indeed, an expanding, boundless cosmos of mystical experience.

The basic question for Kandinsky is whether art is inherently transcendental—whether it conveys freedom from objectively given nature and society—or whether it is determined by and as such a reiteration and reification of various aspects of them. His final conviction that art expresses the will to transcendence that differentiates human beings from animals has to do with his discovery of his own personal power of transcendence. Internal necessity means the discovery that there is something in inner life that resists and transcends the external necessities of existence. Marc called these things conventions, and his and Kandinsky's deliberate pursuit of unconventionality signals their defiant assertion of freedom from external necessities or determinisms. Thus, Kandinsky's improvisations are in effect spiritual exercises, and I mean this in the sense in which Loyola used that term, that is, artistic exercises meant to generate a sense of personal freedom and transcendence.

The issue today is that spiritual freedom seems more and more improvised, and as such uncertain and even untenable. This is no doubt because it is no longer anchored in religion, which has been discredited, bringing the idea of spiritual freedom into intellectual disrepute. But it is an emotional matter, not an intellectual matter, and the question is whether contemporary artists have the emotional capacity that Kandinsky had—whether they are willing to go through the emotional struggle he went through. Like Kandinsky, the contemporary artist stands at the beginning of a new century, but it is a different century. Kandinsky's century is over, and the artist today no longer knows what it means to "make it new," as Ezra Pound famously said the twentieth-century artist should do. It is not even clear that he or she realizes, as Kandinsky did, that sometimes one can only make art new by returning to old ideas. Kandinsky's belief that the artist must live for the spirit the way, as he said, "the divine martyrs and servants of humanity did," and through his art re-awaken "spiritual life," seems absurd. The third chapter of *On the Spiritual in Art* is called "Spiritual Revolution," but the spiritual revolution of art that Kandinsky started—and I think, as I've said, he is much more of a revolutionary than Picasso ever thought of being—seems to have failed. It is doubtful that modern art ever made anyone spiritual—changed his or her lifestyle and attitude to a spiritual lifestyle and attitude—however much one may continue to believe, as Kandinsky did, "that art is one of the mightiest elements of the spiritual life, and as such is a major weapon against the modern sense of

insecurity," that is, a source of spiritual security. Nor is it clear that art is the best way of discovering what Kandinsky called the internal truth about oneself, which is what so called self-expression in art is about. Perhaps the biggest problem facing artists today is that they no longer believe that art is an element of the spiritual life, let alone a mighty element—no longer believe that to make art is a spiritual activity, however much some may still believe that it can be a vehicle of the internal truth—that is, of the truth of the self. But one wonders how much their inner life involves the internal necessity that drove Kandinsky to make his art.

I am suggesting that the future for a spiritual art looks bleak—although there are spiritual artists working today, I believe, truly spiritual work. But then again, as Kandinsky and Marc demonstrate, only a few artists are needed to affirm its possibility, and it was never meant for more than the happy few, despite Kandinsky's utopian, not to say delusional, belief that it would lead everybody out of the materialistic wilderness. The question today is where are the few artists who are ready and willing to reaffirm the spiritual, and, more crucially, who can convince us that their art does so—that it is a beacon of transcendence in dark materialistic times. How is an artist to keep alive the idea of transcendence in a world in which it has become trivial, passé, incomprehensible? Kandinsky had a messianic complex, behind which lurked a martyr complex—and this is quite demonstrable—but neither is any guarantee of transcendence today. It is a difficult task to think of transcendence, let alone assume the reality of mystical experience, in a world that seems to have usurped and manipulated our subjectivity and whose deterministic hold on our lives seems more complete than ever. It is a world in which it is hard to gain a critical distance from the determinisms which shape our existence—to take a critical stand against the external forces that seem to determine even our inner lives. Every critical analysis of some determinism, personal or social—every effort to transcend it by analyzing its structure and effect, for such analysis affords transcendence when it is made out of internal necessity not simply out of intellectual curiosity, as Spinoza argued—quickly becomes another deterministic theory. I think it is more difficult than ever to be a spiritual artist, but in my opinion, it is the only kind of heroic artist that makes sense in threatening modern times, as Kandinsky makes clear.

Thank you.