

**BEYOND KANDINSKY:
REVISITING THE SPIRITUAL IN ART**

**An online symposium commemorating the centennial of the publication of Wassily
Kandinsky's classic text, *On the Spiritual in Art***

*The following is a transcript of the conference, which was a moderated blog that ran from March
30th through April 8th, 2011, at beyondkandinskyblog.net
Project website: www.beyondkandinsky.net*

Moderators:

*Taney Roniger
Eric Zechman*

Participating panelists:

*Laura Battle
Anney Bonney
Jeff Edwards
Max Gimblett
Atta Kim
Joseph Nechvatal
Daniel A. Siedell
Charlene Spretnak
Pawel Wojtasik*

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Session I: The Spiritual Then and Now

Welcome

Posted by Taney Roniger on Wednesday, March 30, 2011

As we open this forum to the public today I would like to welcome everyone to our online symposium, *Beyond Kandinsky: Revisiting the Spiritual in Art*, sponsored by the BFA Fine Arts Department at the School of Visual Arts. Before beginning, I want to extend my thanks to Suzanne Anker, Chair of BFA Fine Arts here at SVA, for her continued support of this project, and to each of the nineteen participants who have graciously accepted our invitation to gather here and share their thoughts about the spiritual in art over the next ten days. Thanks to this diverse group of accomplished artists, critics, and scholars, the forthcoming dialogue promises to be a dynamic and illuminating one indeed.

Each of our participants was asked to give a brief introduction outlining her or his background and relationship to our subject. Readers who would like to familiarize themselves with our panel before entering the dialogue are encouraged to visit the participants and statements pages on our website. Moderator essays introducing the project can also be found on the statements page. For further information about the project, see the homepage of our website: www.beyondkandinsky.net.

The live component of our project, which is the focus of this forum, begins today and will run continuously through the evening of Friday, April 8th. Over the course of the next ten days we will be exploring the subject of the spiritual in art, using Kandinsky's century-old classic both as a point of departure and as a framing device with which to gain a fresh perspective on our current situation. We will be addressing four interrelated topics, each roughly delineating one aspect of our subject and fleshed out by a set of questions at the start of each session. Both the topics and the questions are intended primarily to catalyze dialogue and to provide a structure for the discussion. Participants are welcome to respond in any way they see fit, whether from their personal and professional experience or from a theoretical perspective. Excursions, deviations, and musings of all kind are encouraged.

Throughout, we'll welcome moderated comments from our reading audience. Every effort will be made to place these in a relevant context within the flow of the real-time dialogue.

Without further ado, let me introduce our first topic: *The Spiritual Then and Now*. The last century was witness to so many enormous changes – changes that have no doubt been reflected in our shifting attitudes toward and ideas about the spiritual. Before we can begin to examine the place of the spiritual in art, then, it seems we would do well to examine the larger issue of the spiritual itself. The first problem that confronts us in this task is that there is today no real consensus about what the spiritual is. So, with a view toward defining the shape and scope of our subject, I pose the following questions and open the forum up to dialogue:

1. How have our ideas about the spiritual changed with the dissolution of the Modernist dream, in which Kandinsky's vision was so deeply embedded?

2. How has the notion of transcendence changed? Is transcendence still viable in a largely secular, postmodern culture?
3. What might account for the deep suspicion—or indeed denial—of the spiritual among many artists and intellectuals in our culture?
4. How have attitudes toward nature, the material world, and the body changed since Kandinsky?
5. In what ways has the rise of digital technology impacted our ideas about the spiritual? Does it present a new vision of transcendence or salvation?
6. Are the Enlightenment principles championed by Modernity (i.e., rationalism, positivism, materialism, etc.) being superseded by a new, more spiritually-inclined worldview—or is the spiritual being rendered obsolete by a wholly new orientation?
7. Does science have a role to play in exploring new approaches to or understandings of the transcendent?

Welcome 2

Posted by Eric Zechman on Wednesday, March 30, 2011

Welcome to the discussion, everyone. The "spiritual" as we are discussing it here is not necessarily connected with a specific religious tradition, but is an expression of (or recognition of) the existence of an inner life. It is a uniquely human capacity for perceiving the ineffable quality of existence, that which is hidden beneath the surface; it is an intelligence about or sensitivity to the relationships between the self and other, between the world that we perceive through our senses and the very personal nature of the senses themselves. The overarching subject of the conversation over the next 10 days is how artists working today relate with those experiences in their work and whether art and artists have a particular role to play in exploring that world and revealing it to others. I look forward to reading everyone's thoughts about this seemingly hidden aspect of contemporary art, which at its core, is an acknowledgment of an experience of the sacred or transcendent.

Reader (anonymous):

I'd like to thank all of you for creating this interactive online wonder. The subject matter is SO RELEVANT, now more than ever, and yet of a nature that might inhibit bodies in a room with voices too shy or ideas too convoluted to be expressed all at once. By removing the 'time-lag' of individual contemplation AND the cacophony of simultaneous collective expression, you've encouraged those of us with perhaps less academic credentials than yourselves to participate in a process that ought to matter to every practicing artist, if not every human living at this moment... Kudos to you ALL.

Current definitions of "spirituality"

Posted by Joseph Nechvatal on Wednesday, March 30, 2011

I wonder if we can agree on a current definition of "spirituality"—as it may have a somewhat different meaning to each of us.

Perhaps I will jump in here with some added focus on what some of the current thinking is on the meaning of “inner life” and “spirituality”, before contemplating how it relates to (and differs from) Kandinsky's older version.

A standard (inadequate) current definition of “spirituality” might be: "a sense of meaning and purpose; a sense of self and of a relationship with that which is greater than self." This puts the emphasis on subjective feeling. However, objective science has recently shown how human beings are subject to the exact same ephemeral forces of nature as everything else. (See: David Bohm, Wholeness and the Implicate Order Add on to that, the emergence of the virtual: a secondary ephemeral state of interconnected relationships, also grounded in science (computer science). So, the medium by which the current spiritual is expressed, is Science, for the Scientific Method has allowed us insight into natural and virtual processes. Thus we can better understand (and feel) how we fit (or don't) into the current system as a whole.

This arousing knowledge is what I think of when I think of the “spiritual”—a realization (proven by science) that humans are deeply tied up within the powers of nature. This is a realization of immanence, of course: we are entangled and immersed within the energetic, ephemeral and phantasmagorical. Here the dogmatic transcendent relationship once typical of spirit (to body) no longer functions.

This immanent understanding presents a somewhat different spiritual worldview than Kandinsky's, as it forces on us the idea of invisible, phantasmal, interdependent connection.

This mode of understanding may suggest new (saner) modes of art achievement and productive perception (the seeing of free unity and equality as spiritual) as it does not need to see and recognize the outdated distinctions of national borders, races, religions, creeds or class.

Follow-up to Joseph

Posted by Taney Roniger at Wednesday, March 30, 2011

I agree with Joseph's suggestion that we move away from the limiting emphasis on the subjective inner life in our thinking about the spiritual. And I agree that David Bohm's implicate order provides a beautiful model for a new approach, since it emphasizes our “enfoldment” within the greater whole (and, by extension, its enfoldment within each one of us). It seems clear to me that if we are to really move “beyond Kandinsky,” the latter's Manichean dualism is the glaring obstacle. I am a bit cautious about taking all our cues from science, however. I say this not because I'm suspicious of science itself (least of all the kind proposed by “new paradigm” thinkers such as Bohm), but because it seems that the over-emphasis on (some might say glorification of) science over the last century has too often led to a dangerous scientism... But more on this later. I'm eager to hear how others might propose we rethink our definition of the spiritual.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

The spiritual versus the actual →→→→ the spiritual intersects with but does not belong to the actual. The spiritual doesn't necessarily require actions. (to list all the properties of the spiritual is too challenging; [I just want to] exclude something here.)

I googled the following from the internet:

One of Taoism's most important concepts is wu wei, which is sometimes translated as “non-doing” or “non-action.” A better way to think of it, however, is as a paradoxical

“Action of non-action.” Wu wei refers to the cultivation of a state of being in which our actions are quite effortlessly in alignment with the ebb and flow of the elemental cycles of the natural world. It is a kind of “going with the flow” that is characterized by great ease and awake-ness, in which - without even trying - we’re able to respond perfectly to whatever situations arise.

Reader (anonymous):

Perhaps the most basic definition of spirituality as it relates to the artist’s objective lies in the subtler distinction between the presence or absence of an individual awareness of feeling that needs sharing: aesthetic vs. anesthetic (whether subjective or objective, we can’t get around “feeling” as a factor, even if we collectively agree it can’t be the sole focus). This, coupled with the one universal aspect of artistic motivation: an abhorrence of working in a void, must inevitably bear on our definition. Spirituality is perhaps the phenomenon of collective experience that is both subjective and objective, whether simultaneous or (con)sequential, that is both intimate and universal. The connector between finite and infinite?

A response to Session I questions

Posted by Max Gimblett on Wednesday, March 30, 2011

(1) How have our ideas about the spiritual changed with the dissolution of the Modernist dream, in which Kandinsky's vision was so deeply embedded?

What dissolution?! The Modernist dream has deepened and magnified.

(2) How has the notion of transcendence changed? Is transcendence still viable in a largely secular, postmodern culture?

Yes. We know much more about the world's cultures. For instance: the phenomenal growth of American Buddhism; our understanding and study of Indian Gurus; and the emergence of current Indian Art.

(3) What might account for the deep suspicion -- or indeed denial -- of the spiritual shared by many artists and intellectuals in our culture?

Postmodernism, cynicism, parody, materialism, suicide. These nihilistic tendencies choose academic study and ritual in an effort subvert our collective spiritual connectivity. Spirituality is perception and clear perception delivers the truth. Krishnamurti delivers the truth. My primary school model was "seek after truth."

(4) How have attitudes toward nature, the material world, and the body changed since Kandinsky?

As art history moves forward artists have branched off into ever more specialized investigations into all things. New and old ideas are explored and enriched. Beauty is found and lost.

(5) In what ways has the rise of digital technology impacted our ideas about the spiritual? Does it present a new vision of transcendence or salvation?

The rise of technology has furthered the methods by which we can explore the spiritual. New dimensions are opened up and new ideas for us to play with. The vision remains the same: truth. Everything else changes around it.

(6) Are the Enlightenment principles championed by Modernity (i.e., rationalism, positivism, materialism, etc.) being superseded by a new, more spiritually-inclined worldview—or is the spiritual being rendered obsolete by a wholly new orientation?

"The spiritual" as a concept is incredibly broad and open. It cannot be rendered obsolete as it is in all things in some language or form in every culture on the Earth.

(7) Does science have a role to play in exploring new approaches to or understandings of the spiritual?

Yes, science has a role to play, as does alchemy, in understanding aspects of the transcendent.

Immanence as well as Transcendence

Posted by Charlene Spretnak on Wednesday, March 30, 2011

As the focus of this symposium is "Going Beyond" the views Kandinsky presented about art and spirituality in one book, *On the Spiritual in Art*, it's important to realize that he was strongly influenced during the eight years or so of journal entries that became that book by the enthusiasm among young artists in Germany and elsewhere then for the spiritual orientation called Theosophy. (Before and after that period, Kandinsky's main spiritual orientation was Russian Orthodox Christianity.) When Mme. Blavatsky framed Theosophy in her two major books, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), her goal was to jump in front of the "parade" formed by the huge following that Darwin had. She trumped Darwin by announcing that the evolution he describes is merely material but that the evolution she describes is far larger, greater, more subtle, and encompasses "the merely material." This idealist, anti-material bias to the spirituality in Kandinsky's book is still available in many quarters (in fact, Theosophy itself still lives), but with our planet in extremely serious ecological peril, attention to transcendent levels of being without attention to the physicality of our existence and that of the entire Earth community is irresponsible and destructive. The idealist orientation is clearly something we need to "go beyond."

Perhaps the greatest distinction between the Theosophical questing of so many European artists in the early years of the 20th century and what is emerging now is the nondualistic understanding of "immanent" and "transcendent." Long seen as opposites in Western cultural history, transcendence is coming to be understood as "beyond" but not "above" the material plane we can see in every day life. What science calls "complex dynamical systems" has illuminated in recent decades the extraordinarily creative, complex, dynamic processes going on at every fraction of a second within, around, and through every entity in the universe. Our minds will never be able to map the endless networks of what I call "relational reality," so spirituality that seeks to commune with either immanence or transcendence now sees that they are not apart. This realization is not new to Eastern philosophy or indigenous cultures, of course; we were simply late coming to it in the modern West because of our dualistic and mechanistic worldview.

The artists of Kandinsky's time were, I feel, asking the right questions (Is there something going on in addition to the visible world?) but got caught up in answers that steered their spiritual path solely toward engagement with transcendence at the expense of engagement with immanence. On the other hand, it was apparently the right path at the time for Kandinsky since he arrived at those

stunning pre-WWI paintings (his numbered Composition series and others). Esoteric spirituality, regardless of our views of it today, was a bountiful source of inspiration for a range of prominent artists in several countries at that time. We, however, live in a different time.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

The second paragraph is particularly inspiring/challenging. So then, can we say that spirituality becomes the intensity between immanence and transcendence? Even though the mind won't be able to map the endless networks, it could still find a path (following the intensity) to connect immanence and transcendence?

Reader (anonymous):

Indeed, thank you for this succinct interpretation of Theosophy, Ms. Spretnak! I've read a little about Mme. Blavatsky (the sensation surrounding her ideas initially intrigued me as a college freshman) but could never get very far with them, and your synopsis deftly explains why.

Yuting Zou, I think I am in your camp; perhaps that elusive definition of 'spirituality' lies somewhere in a resonance between immanence and transcendence. In another post I suggested that perhaps it was the connector between finite and infinite, between intimate and universal. Perhaps we say the same thing? Either way, a call to stop swinging the pendulum to extremes sounds good to me.

I think most forward-thinking artists have long since outgrown the transcendentalist dogma that 'elsewhere supersedes here' right along with the fundamentalist dictum that 'god gave man dominion over all the earth.' A notion of stewardship should never be confused with absolute power, any more than a yearning for one's idea of heaven should take the place of awareness of the here and now.

Thanks again, Ms. Spretnak, for the context!

Reader (Alex Grey):

Perhaps Christopher Alexander's aesthetic metaphor (borrowed from physics) of a great artwork's "tunneling" between dimensions, connecting the realms of immanence and transcendence is relevant (see his "Luminous Ground" book). Holy objects or sacred sites resonate with presence—finite materials transformed by devotional labor and awareness to provide touchstones to the infinite.

It's easy to see the appeal to Kandinsky of the non-representational and abstract possibilities of painting, largely unexplored at his time, to portray the transcendent non-material world.

Today's sacred artist is challenged to find iconography that embraces all dimensions—matter, body, mind, soul, spirit—pointing to an evolutionary, creatively enlightened mind that is dedicated to a sustainable relationship with Nature.

The distinctions of immanence and transcendence are still important to note, lest we collapse the hierarchy of states of being. Non-duality honors and bridges both realms.

The mystic view would assert that everything is spiritual since God is One, and we are ultimately that. To see is to see God seeing God. Yet, mostly we miss this truth, but are reminded when we contemplate "living centers of beauty" that provide special tunnels to Godself.

Joseph Nechvatal:

This tunneling idea is appealing to me Alex, if it leads away from religion's and mysticism's monopoly on supernatural spirituality. In the post-modern age, we have the ability to look deep into our past and examine what our ancestors used to consider spiritual, and then compare those ideas to what we understand today. Much has changed.

Reader (anonymous):

Perhaps it will be shown by science, at some later date, that the tunnel doesn't lead away from religious or mystical thought but to it and vice versa. I think art will precede this revelation via intuition and we probably won't see it until after the fact. (BTW, I don't know how to post with my name so I'm just choosing Anonymous. My name is Jennifer W. Reeves.)

Response to Max and Charlene

Posted by Taney Roniger on Wednesday, March 30, 2011

I'm grateful to Max for introducing the Asian dimension into our conversation and to Charlene for bringing up the legacy of Theosophy. Both are so important to an understanding of "the spiritual then and now." I wonder, Charlene, if you can tell us if the movement you describe away from *either* immanence or transcendence alone in favor of something else—some more viable and healthy alternative to the dualism—is now the prevalent thinking in religious studies departments within academia. I would suspect that it is, but from my vantage point at least, the art world has not entirely caught on to this. This may be one reason for the current suspicion of the spiritual within the art world—i.e., that to many people the spiritual is still manifestly tied to the realm of elsewhere and otherwise and thus wholly unrelated to matters of "real life."

Answer to Taney's Question

Posted by Charlene Spretnak on Wednesday, March 30, 2011

Actually, Taney, academic departments of religion are not the place to find the cutting edge. I would say that the dissolution of the dualistic worldview, though, is a phenomenon that informs the contemporary interest in the West in Buddhism and other Asian spiritual orientations, as well as the spreading influence of ecological thought, or the realization of the interrelated nature of reality, which is gradually transforming our institutions and systems of knowledge. Nonduality in the modern West has received a boost, as well, from the new physics, complexity studies in science, and recent discoveries in relational physiology. In the past few decades many people situated in organized religion have sought out neglected teachings in their tradition about the perspective of nonduality (such as the medieval mystics in Christianity or the Sufi poets).

As for your surmising about the cool, or concerned, reception in the art world you received to the idea of this symposium, as you wrote in your initial essay, that reaction is probably partially related to the canonical narrative in art history: with the first exhibition of the Impressionists in 1874, art took a courageous leap into the modern project, away from all that was rejected (religion, tradition, community ties, extended family obligations, the "tyranny of nature"). With

nearly everyone in the art world schooled in that perspective, any talk of "the spiritual" seems to be a step backwards into superstition, cowering before priests or rabbis, and sinking into muddled thought. In addition, of course, there is the horrendous record of many religious institutions. Some people today find it easy to separate a spiritual practice, or quest, from all that; others hold that any such separation is an illusion and that any interest in spirituality is dangerous or, at the very least, unsophisticated and not serious.

Reader (anonymous):

I would hold that too rigid a position against spirituality in art is unsophisticated and not serious. The impulse is obviously there and many artists contemplate spiritual issues even if they have to submerge their interest for the sake of being accepted among their non-believing (and for the time being more prevalent) peers. I think there's a change in the winds however. Still, there's always a danger that spirituality can be hijacked by dogma. It happens all the time, so the distrust is valid. (What a great symposium. Thank you to everyone here and your words on the subject)

Response to Charlene

Posted by Taney Roniger at Wednesday, March 30, 2011

I find your words about the dissolution of the mechanistic/dualistic worldview very encouraging, Charlene, and it's good to hear a sanguine view from your quarters (i.e., from the disciplines of philosophy and religion). The emergence of so-called new paradigm science is something I've been following with great interest for years (the writings of David Bohm, Fritjof Capra, Ilya Prigogine, and Gregory Bateson, in particular, have given me great hope for a new systemic/holistic/ecological worldview). But I must say that I've also been a bit dismayed by how little the broader culture seems to have absorbed the new thinking – and, sadly, even more dismayed by how far art has strayed from any serious engagement with it. The “new” paradigm is getting on in years, and meanwhile our fate as a species is looking grimmer with each passing year.

The issue of the art world's chilly reception to anything related to the spiritual is perplexing, but I think you've put your finger on the core problem: the persistence of the modernist project of “liberation from nature” and salvation through science and technology *at nature's expense*, which carries with it certain refusals (of the body, of the environment, of, as you said, tradition). I might also add that there seems to be an element of misogyny inherent in the modernist project (someone somewhere has linked modern art with the “rhetoric of virility”), which associates anything spiritual with weakness, passivity, etc. And then there is the current disdain for metaphysics so endemic to academic postmodernism. But all this said, I do see signs of hope – particularly in the younger generation's concern for the environment. I'm not sure the ecological crisis is broadly considered a spiritual problem, but I could be wrong.

Reader (Alex Grey):

Look at some of the artists that are generally considered spiritual, Joseph Beuys being one of the most important recent examples. His body of work relates to Shamanism, the real "old time religion." Beuys helped start the Green Party in Germany. Beuys's creative engagement with Nature, such as the planting of 7,000 Oak Trees, was a spiritual as well as sculptural performance/action. To cite a more recent example, Julia Butterfly Hill is an artist that spent over 2 years in a tree to prevent it from being cut down. Although her

work is not well known in the art marketplace, the vigil was widely reported. For her it was spiritual activism.

To dust off the "new paradigm," check out recent advances by Clare Graves and Don Beck's work in Spiral Dynamics, and the integral vision of Ken Wilber. Ken has brought together many "orienting generalities" that point beyond post-modernism and integrate the world's wisdom traditions. Any artist can benefit from studying his multi-perspectival view.

A curious anomaly in today's "chilly reception" to spiritual art is the prevalence and popularity of psychedelic imagery in many artists works. Think of Murakami's mushrooms, or Rist's video swirls or Fred Tomaselli's embedded leaves. Not that the majority of psychedelic art is spiritual, but there is a connection. See Johns Hopkins study on psilocybin. http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/press_releases/2006/07_11_06.html Perhaps the neo-psychedelic wave, now fueled by ayahuasca instead of LSD will lead courageous artists to explore an earth honoring non-dual spirituality, bursting with visionary sacred archetypes enough to kick the psycho-evolutionary cultural pedal to the metal. I've always felt that the redemptive mission of Art is the uplifting of humanity beyond its self-destruction. That is a spiritual mission.

Taney, thanks for furthering these great conversations.

Taney Roniger:

Thanks, Alex, for this illuminating comment. I'm glad you've brought figures like Joseph Beuys and the contemporary "spiritual activists" into the fold. I'll have much more to say on these later, when we take the official turn into artistic practice. But until then, your observations about the prevalence of psychedelic imagery in some contemporary art and the "newer new paradigm" are much appreciated.

Joseph Nechvatal:

@Taney. Don't be too dismayed by how little the broader culture seems to have absorbed spirituality. I see (well, hear) strong spiritual trends in Trance Music culture for over 10 years now.

Response to Max's Response

Posted by Taney Roniger on Thursday, March 31, 2011

I'm wondering if Max might say a bit more about his sense that the modernist dream "has deepened and magnified," since my initial question took its dissolution – perhaps mistakenly – as a given. What I mean by the modernist dream is the project of utopianism generally – the belief in the perfectibility of humankind – and the view that history is a progressive movement toward that inevitable end. Whether from the perspective of the Marxist dream, the whole enterprise of science and technology, or Madame Blavatsky's Theosophy (she who famously said "The earth will be a heaven in the twenty-first century in comparison with what it is now [in the twentieth]"), the general sense today, as I see it, is one of disappointment, disillusionment, and bewilderment. I'm also thinking of the pervasive ethos of "dismantling" that deconstructive postmodernism has left us with.

I imagine your involvement with Buddhism and Eastern philosophy in general has informed your perspective on these matters. I wonder how the Eastern view of time as cyclical rather than linear squares (if it does) with the modernist project.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

It's a lot of fun following these threads. The discussions yesterday offered many good insights. Your interpretation of "the modernist dream" is very much appreciated. I share a similar opinion on this. I think modernism is the third major attempt to go back to order (?) -- that is to say, from the Classical era to the Renaissance and to the Modern. As time goes on, when we come to the end of postmodernism, I don't know if people would make another attempt back to order, but it won't be the same. The utopianism had been prevalent in China until 20 years ago (roughly). But now people take it as a funny dream.

It's strange to me that Einstein's work was done in the modern period, however; his spacetime (in a relative sense) didn't affect modern aesthetics very much (or maybe it's just my ignorance). Until later, [when] it was wrapped up with quantum mechanics, that became a significant impact. By the way: to me, Christian Marclay's *The Clock* is an example of that nonlinear time.

Taney Roniger:

"But now people take it as a funny dream" -- yes, I think that would apply to our situation as well, Yuting. So much of the postmodernist position is about deriding the aspirations of modernists like Kandinsky, and it seems to me that beneath all the arrogant and contemptuous posturing there lurks a profound sense of disappointment, of loss, of failure. There really is no going back, in my opinion; we can only go forward. The question is what "forward" might mean. I myself am hopeful that we might establish a "third way" (as in Buddhism) -- a middle way in between the lofty but ultimately untenable goals of perfection, of "purity", of metaphysical transcendence, etc., and our current position of despair, disbelief, and literal bewilderment. If the tone of my posts seems pessimistic, it's only because I'm playing devil's advocate a bit! I'm actually profoundly optimistic.

As for your speculation about Einstein, I do think his work was influential to modern aesthetics. In cubism, for example, we saw the exploration of multiple simultaneous perspectives in space and time -- of their "compression" within a single instantiation. Many of the Russian modernists also explored "the fourth dimension," though this was only indirectly related, I think, to Einstein's work.

And yes -- Christian Marclay's piece is an excellent example of an exploration of nonlinear time in contemporary art. I don't know him; I wonder if "the spiritual" is something he thinks about. Do you know?

Reader (Yuting Zou):

You are absolutely right; there really is no going back. I completely agree with that. I'm very interested in the "third way," and I believe some people here will contribute a lot to discussions on that. :-)

Cubism, after you framed it this way, now seems richer to me than before. I only paid attention to the compression of the space and didn't notice the time. Indeed, the reconceptualization of "simultaneity" is the starting point of Einstein's breakthrough. Thank you very much for the clue. The fourth dimension (Henri Poincare, a French mathematician/philosopher, was a notable figure) came before Einstein. It had influenced many artists, including Duchamp. I guess it's not hard to find good examples of it.

I don't know Marclay in person. I did a quick search on his wiki page, and it says "Marclay ... was notably interested in Joseph Beuys and the Fluxus movement of the 1960s and '70s." Yesterday, we happened to mention Joseph Beuys as a spiritual artist, and the whole Fluxus movement, to me, was heavily influenced by Zen. So I think "the spiritual" is something Marclay thinks about. In *The Clock*, I sense a strong protest against a modern/haste/non-meditative lifestyle.

Taney Roniger:

Beuys is interesting, and I'm sure he'll come up again in the conversation. I have problems with his approach, frankly, although I have enormous respect for him as an artist. I guess there's just something about his "everyone is an artist" dictum that strikes me now as naive and untenable, however well-intentioned it was. Also, his idea about a "spiritual economy," where "if I care for you, others will care for me," seems too simplistic, and indeed idealistic, for our complicated world. I hope the panel will take on some of these issues when we get to the session on the role of the artist in society.

Joseph Nechvatal:

I agree that Beuys's "everyone is an artist" answer to spiritual dread is a dead end, but it is being creatively re-constructed by different practices outside our official gallery world - whose origin lies in the myths proposed by cultural capitalism.

Max Gimblett:

One master and one artist may carry the insight and the philosophy. There is no need to compare numbers. It's not a group activity. Many of the Japanese masters -- Gibbon Sengai, Tessa, the No Sword Warrior, Nantenbo, Hakuin -- carry the fourth and fifth dimension.

In the non-linear Eastern time there is a circling. Nothing is lost. There is the mystical sense of the Transcendental Fifth, a new spirituality for a new world. Something along the lines of Sri Aurobindo's Supramental Being.

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj states "I am that": pure being. Painting and visual art are surely but a part of spirituality, a manifestation of it. Without a vision, what is there to paint?

The dismantled and deconstructed postmodernism is entirely negative. I ignore it. Parody and cynicism lead to suicide.

A first crack at internal necessity

Posted by Jeff Edwards on Thursday, March 31, 2011

Hi, everyone. The conversation is off to a great start. I'm particularly glad to see that Charlene brought up Theosophy, and dealt with it so thoroughly. I have some additional thoughts about Theosophy and Kandinsky that I'll present later. I also want to address Taney's initial questions about transcendence and digital technology. However, looking at my first draft of this post, I see that it's already pretty long, so I'll save those things for later.

I'm probably a little unqualified to comment too deeply on the discussion that's growing here about new paradigm thinking, mainly because although I love the sort of integrative approach it proposes, I've soured on a lot of the expressions it's taken. Though I've read David Bohm and Fritjof Capra, it's been years, and in the intervening time I've come across a lot of solid criticism from within the scientific community.

Capra in particular often gets a lot of heat for constructing grand but shaky theories out of material derived from diverse disciplines, both scientific and religious. Though some people seem to feel that different disciplines shouldn't be mixed at all (shades of Stephen Jay Gould's argument that science and religion are "non-overlapping magisteria"), many point out that Capra's conflation of things like Eastern religion and quantum physics (in his classic *The Tao of Physics*) or Gaia theory with thermodynamics and chaos theory (in the more recent *The Web of Life*) does disservice to all of these fields by flattening them out into half-digested Cliff's Notes versions in order to emphasize their supposed similarities. I've seen similar criticisms leveled at Ken Wilber's integral theories; several years ago there was a devastating critique of his use (and radical misunderstanding) of current evolutionary theory within his larger arguments on the evolution of spirit into material form.

After seeing way too many well-argued criticisms of this sort, the skeptic within me eventually won out over the interdisciplinarian, at least in this case. However, that's not to say that I think different realms of knowledge should stay in their own compartments. I guess my perspective is that as exciting as new paradigm thinking is, it needs to be handled with a lot more care and precision.

If I were a complete naysayer, I wouldn't be a participant in this symposium. Some of Kandinsky's best ideas arose from the drive to reach across different systems of knowledge in the quest for new tools for artistic and spiritual self-expression. (I'll come back to this in a later post, in which I plan to talk about Kandinsky and Rudolf Steiner.)

Before that, though, I'd like to set out some of my own thoughts on the relevance of Kandinsky's writings (or perhaps his attitude) to artmaking today.

Over the years, I've fallen into the habit of considering *On the Spiritual in Art* in light of the nonobjective abstraction that barely existed while Kandinsky was writing it, but which was just around the corner (and which he was trying to write into being). It's hard to look at Mondrian's rectilinear compositions or Robert Delaunay's swirling arrangements of color and not think of the book as an interpretive gloss to their painting. Just yesterday, though, I had that approach knocked out of me, at least a little.

I took one of my classes on a field trip to MoMA to see the new "German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse" show, and while looking at the paintings and prints on display (including a 1909 painting by Kandinsky that falls right in the middle of his shift from folk painting to pure abstraction), I was floored by the palpable sense of boundary-pushing that seemed to emanate from so many of them. It wasn't just a matter of creating a new way of portraying figures, or using color, or making a statement about society; all of the above seemed to reflect the impulse to

carry art in a direction so new that no one was quite sure of what it would look like. I was struck by the thought that these artists were the real audience for Kandinsky's book. Writing for his peers, he created something that was as much an incantation to evoke the future or art into being as it was a manifesto aimed at the outer world of critics or other artists.

After seeing the show, I flipped through *On the Spiritual in Art* one more time, and suddenly found myself able to grasp something that had been elusive before. During my recent reread of the book, I was a lot less interested in Kandinsky's specific assertions on the effects of color in the latter half than in his comments on how various painters (Matisse, Picasso), poets (Maeterlinck), and composers (Wagner, Schoenberg) were all working in their own ways not only to drastically expand the vocabularies of their respective art forms, but also to push them into completely uncharted territory, free not only of tradition and material limitation, but of anything that gets in the way of pure expression. Under Kandinsky's lens, even matter becomes a hindrance to expression, at the exact same moment that it's absolutely essential for it.

I was reminded of something that jazz musician/poet/pop gesamtkunstwerk technician Sun Ra once said. He repeated it several times throughout his life, and this is my best-attempt paraphrase: "The possible has been tried and it's failed. It's time to do the impossible." Whenever I revisit *On the Spiritual in Art*, I always sense a similar urgency to push us beyond what we know, because it hasn't taken us where we need to be. Although I feel like a lot of people either turn their noses up at such utopianism or tuck it away as a guilty secret, it may be the single most important element in Kandinsky's book. Artists are still striving to create something beyond the known, and the existence of a book like this—no matter how outdated it is in many ways—seems important, if only as a source of reassurance that the quest for something more in art is neither completely crazy nor depressingly futile. A handful of students I've had who have cited the book as an influence in their own artmaking seems to support this.

Theory and criticism and occasional pronouncements on "the end of art" aside, art still gets made, and a lot of it comes from the same impulse to create the uncreated that drove Kandinsky. After decades of pronouncements that painting is dead, painting is as vital as ever, and it coexists with art in an almost dizzying array of other mediums. Part of the proliferation has to do with the gallery system and the art market, of course, but overemphasizing that obscures the tremendous range of techniques and approaches that artists are conjuring up to set their visions before the world. I can't think of a better living image of Kandinsky's idea of internal necessity.

Response to a first crack

Posted by Taney Roniger at Thursday, March 31, 2011

Jeff, you touch on so many interesting points. On the issue of "new paradigm thinking," I can certainly understand the wariness on your part. Although I think Bohm has *not* been discredited in the way others may have been, I can appreciate the skepticism with which people greet the science-meets-spirituality issue. There's been a lot of watered-down literature in that arena, but the same can be said of any genre. For me, Gregory Bateson is about as rigorous as they come, so I'll remain sympathetic to the effort until the day he's discredited (which I suspect we will not see!). (Few people other than Bateson could get away with a book with the subtitle "Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred.")

I really appreciate that you brought up "the urgency to push us beyond what we know" in reference to Kandinsky's enterprise, because that, to me, is his most lasting legacy. Save for those who believe that the universe is ultimately knowable – and that we'll one day arrive at that summit of knowledge – I don't see how the impulse to push beyond the known and marvel at the

unknown will ever be obsolete. I like what Huston Smith has to say about this: "The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder."

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on Theosophy and Anthroposophy, about which I know little.

Joseph Nechvatal:

On the mash-up of Eastern philosophy and Western physics: it seems to me that there is sufficient meta-materiality in Western science alone (e.g. dark matter, dark energy, dark flow) from which to draw the inspiration to create something beyond the known. In that sense, nonobjective abstraction is the least interesting aspect of Kandinsky's work and writing for me (as we know well what that is). I prefer thinking about his theory in terms of the "concrete" (I believe he preferred this term over the term "abstract") when he wrote about the abstract as an energy that is "deeper down, ... subject to the common laws of the cosmic world." That might sound like something to do with dark matter and/or dark energy, to me. Anyway, I don't think we can avoid the question of novelty that you raise. I might even have to ask, just how has the tourniquet of modernist anti-spirituality allowed us to tolerate things that are intolerable in art, such as the current situation of market value superseding artistic value? One might go even further and say that the world we have today - full of war, corruption, elitism, pollution, poverty, epidemic disease, human rights abuses, inequality and crime - is the result of anti-spirituality (if we discount the corrosive aspects of organized religions). I wonder what artistic strategies and techniques have power today in a confrontation with anti-spirituality? What art today produces the joy of connectedness?

Reader (Yuting Zou):

I love those questions. Let me just take this one: "I wonder what artistic strategies and techniques have power today in a confrontation with anti-spirituality?"

I found these historical chains of "mirror":

The Venus symbol (♀) is depicted as Venus's hand mirror (a circle with a small cross below it). Its meaning in western Astrological terms is Divine spirit (circle) over matter (cross);

Paintings with mirrors tend to be very attractive: for example, The Arnolfini Wedding Portrait and Las Meninas;

Some abstract expressionist paintings are called "the mirrors of the soul";

Given the mirror's reflective property, a feedback loop or an iteration of a function/map is analogous to a mirror. A mirror becomes a metaphor of a means to constantly/repeatedly look into oneself, and improving oneself.

Taney Roniger:

We have indeed been tolerating the intolerable, Joseph—in art and elsewhere. In thinking about all this, I keep coming up against a seeming contradiction, which is this: There seems to be both a decidedly anti-spiritual aspect to the modernist project (i.e., the

mechanistic, materialistic, positivist, secular strain) *and* an emphatically transcendent, idealist, or metaphysical strain (embodied in the notion of the "march of progress," the various Utopian visions, ideas about salvation through technology, etc.). So it's not that the modernist project was anti-spiritual per se, but that it was (is) anti-spiritual in the particular sense that we're trying to get at here (i.e., "embodied" spirituality). This seems important, in the sense that to many of our contemporaries, "the spiritual" still connotes an obsession with the netherworld—some fictive realm beyond the here and now—to which our earthly problems are utterly unrelated. So...to take a stab at answering your question, I would say that any art that grounds us in *this* world, the world of our bodies, in such a way that we become extraordinarily aware of our inextricable connectedness with nature, other people, inanimate matter, and the larger whole (however that may be conceived) would do it. To me, much contemporary art is decidedly anti-spiritual in that it addresses itself primarily to *thought* -- to the exclusion of the body -- even if it thinks it's addressing "spiritual ideas." "Spiritual ideas" seems a bit oxymoronic anyway; to me, there is only "spiritual experience."

Reader (Yuting Zou):

@Taney: I'm just thinking that spiritual ideas and experience can hardly be separated. Maybe I'm wrong. Yet I think it's partly what mind philosophers and neural scientists are doing now. Perhaps, spirituality can be "embodied" and disembodied at the same time?

Taney Roniger:

Interesting point, Yuting. Is there a difference between, say, swimming and the idea of swimming? It seems fairly clear there is, but I suppose on a neural level they may be one and the same? I'm dubious...

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Based on my very limited knowledge of this subject, I would take this example as saying: we have the idea of swimming because we sense our movements, skin contact with water, etc. When we swim, we can't do it without any idea of swimming; otherwise, we will sink or float (until suffocated). This is just my thinking...

Joseph Nechvatal:

Kandinsky was motivated by moving art away from idea - the Symbolist movement - and into "concrete" spiritualist values. Perhaps this is like swimming while remembering that you are swimming.

Jeff Edwards:

@ Response to a first crack

Hi, Taney. Thanks for the response. I tend to agree with you on Bohm. His work always seemed a lot more grounded than that of a lot of other people working along the same lines. Unfortunately, I don't know Bateson's work very well at all, but it sounds like it's worth looking into.

I'm working on something about Kandinsky, Steiner, and related topics; I'll probably have it ready for posting sometime early tomorrow.

Taney Roniger:

@ Joseph & Yuting -- It seems to me that one has to have an idea of swimming in order to swim, but that one doesn't have to swim to entertain the idea of it. Analogously, you always have certain ideas about the spiritual when you're having the experience, but the ideas alone don't constitute or induce the experience. That said, there are those studies that report that the same biochemical changes occur in subjects who "merely think" about experiences as in those who actually experience them. I'm sure things are a lot more interesting on the neuro-physiological level than we now realize. In any case, I like the idea of swimming while remembering that you are swimming. That seems to speak to the strange gift we have of experiencing things while watching ourselves experience them, of being both "inside" and "outside" at the same time by virtue of self-consciousness.

Reader (Alex Grey):

Before an artist can make authentically spiritual art [he or she] must have a mystical experience. This would explain why we see so little spiritual art; the mystical experience is a rare phenomenon. Same with critics, dealers, curators, historians - how can they identify or comprehend and "re-evaluate" the spiritual in art without a profound encounter with the Numinous? Once a person has such an experience, it changes [his or her] perspective on everything.

The qualities or categories of a mystical experience are:

Unity. There is a dissolving of ego boundaries and a feeling of oneness with the Cosmos. Self is experienced as pure vast network of awareness.

Transcendence of Time and Space. There is a loss of usual references of time and space. Time seems eternal or even that one is "outside of time". The infinite becomes visible, palpable.

Deeply Felt Positive Mood. There are feelings of blessedness, joy, and peace, and a sense of unconditional love. The uniqueness of these emotions is in the level to which they are elevated, the intensity of the experience.

Sense of Sacredness. There is an intuitive sense of wonder and peace, a sense of special value, and a feeling of the holy and divine.

Subjective Nature of the Experience. The knowledge seems conveyed not through words, but through the experience itself, and there is a certainty that this knowledge is authentic and direct.

Paradoxicality. When attempting to explain the experience to others, there are frequently logical contradictions in explanations, such as emptiness in which one simultaneously feels full and complete, or a dissolution of self in which something of the individual remains to experience the phenomenon. There is both separateness from and unity with the surroundings.

Alleged Ineffability. The experience seems to be beyond what words can define. Logical descriptions or interpretations are incapable of accurately describing the experience, partially due to the paradoxical nature of the phenomena. This is why art and music have been the language of mysticism for all religious traditions.

Transiency. The actual time spent in the mystical state is temporary. A return to the everyday surroundings occurs after a short period, whether through sudden awakening or a gradual shift of awareness to the immediate environment.

Persisting Positive Changes in Mood and Behavior.

There are now scientifically proven, repeatable means to accessing the Mystic Experience, but not until we have significant numbers of people in the artworld visiting those realms will things change much.

Taney Roniger:

Alex, I appreciate your input on the mystical experience. I wonder: You mentioned in a previous comment something about the capacity of certain hallucinogens to induce the experience ("entheogens," as Huston Smith calls them). I wonder if you could say a bit more about this. I ask because it appears to be the consensus that the entheogenic experience is as "real" and as transformative as the one achieved "naturally" (aren't chemicals natural, I always ask?). This, to me, suggests a possible neurophysiological basis for the spiritual experience, which in turn suggests a rather materialist take on the phenomenon. Perhaps this issue has been laid to rest in certain quarters, but I do find it interesting and relevant.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

@Taney. I think the effort made by neural scientists is to correct the notion that "one doesn't have to swim to entertain the idea of it". If one is born blind, he would never know how a tree looks like. He needs to sense it through his visual sensor to have an idea of a tree. An idea does not make sense without a nervous system. From this perspective, I think there is no separation between the inside and outside.

Taney Roniger:

@ Yuting -- Ah yes, let me correct myself: I meant that one doesn't need to *be swimming* to entertain the idea of it. But I see your point. Indeed, ideas do not just "come down" to us from some other realm, nor can they be generated without embodiment. I believe we're on the same page here -- indivisibility of the bodymind! So, sticking to our analogy, ideas about the spiritual are impossible without prior experiential (i.e., bodymind) knowledge of it. But can they occur in the absence of the immediate experience of it? That's the point where we might be in disagreement.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Yes, indivisibility of bodymind is exactly what I tried to say. About that question, I think Alex just told us some ideas of the mystical spiritual without the immediate experience of it. Maybe I've trivialized it; I think the answer should be yes.

Taney Roniger:

I don't think you've trivialized anything, Yuting!

Joseph Nechvatal:

I do not disagree with (or discount) Alex's definition and approach to the spiritual in art, but it puts the emphasis firmly on subjective feeling. That is severely limiting, as, he points out correctly, "mystical experience is a rare phenomenon." And it is unverifiable to others.

I think that if we are attempting to think out how ideas about the spiritual have changed (or may change) with the dissolution of the Modernist project in which Kandinsky's vision was so deeply embedded, then we must also look at objective and scientific approaches to it. This is the way of the New Atheism, specifically that of Sam Harris (the author of *The End of Faith*) based on his personal mystical/ecstatic experiences of the numinous.

If the spiritual in art is only set in purely subjective feeling, then it is hard to see how it becomes strengthened. I think that the approach to spirit (vital energy) needs an objective and empirical approach also that is dependent upon the shared and repeatable. For me, the spiritual in art should not be THAT rare - as the spiritual eye recognizes that the human species is fluid, unified and connected in the way natural phenomenon is. And how we as humans fit into/are a part of the mysterious cosmological universe. From within a cosmological omnijjective perspective, I think that Kandinsky's vision might expand, and so, new scenarios of spirituality might emerge that address questions that are asked of all those who think/create - especially artists - in the attempt to delineate the real phantasmagorical present.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

I agree with Joseph that the mystical spiritual is an extreme experience. The idea that the general spiritual can be put into scientific study is very alluring. So that we could have a continuum between the objective and subject...

Taney Roniger:

It's interesting that you mention the word numinous in connection with a more "rational" mysticism, Joseph, because I think it was Rudolf Otto (the one who coined the term "numinous") who defined mysticism as the over-stressing of the non-rational aspects of religion. I'm not familiar with Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*, but I'll be quite interested to read it.

I tend to agree that the overemphasis on subjectivity is limiting and limited, but on the other hand I wonder how a spiritual experience (or any experience, for that matter) could fulfill the criteria of science (i.e., as you said, verifiability, repeatability, etc.). How can *experience* be rendered objective and empirical?

It seems to me that, in spite of the fact that we're looking to transcend the dualisms inherent in the Modernist project, some things remain impervious to science. How can values and *meaning* -- so crucial not just to the spiritual but to art in general -- be

objectified, measured, quantified, etc.? Or...am I clinging to an old and outmoded definition of science? Perhaps it is that science itself is changing, that it itself has gone beyond the Modernist vision.

I do agree with you that the spiritual experience should not be altogether exceptional. In fact, it would seem to me that it's a capacity that lies dormant in all of us but that merely needs to be awakened and exercised. For help here I look to the historical Buddha, who was nothing if not a rigorously analytical empiricist. Was he not also profoundly spiritual? I doubt anybody would make such a claim!

But Joseph, do say more about the "phantasmagorical present." That phrase comes up a lot in your work, and I'd love to hear you flesh that out a bit.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

@Taney: I haven't watched this documentary(The Spirit Molecule) yet, but I guess it's something people are searching :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQEqM3Ixa44&feature=related>

Joseph Nechvatal:

OK. I will post a new thread on the topic of the phantasmal character of electronic proliferation.

Reader (Alex Grey):

Taney, you state: "This, to me, suggests a possible neurophysiological basis for the spiritual experience, which in turn suggests a rather materialist take on the phenomenon." I found an interesting quote from a neurophysiologist that speaks to this:

"It is a fact of neuroscience that everything we experience is actually a figment of our imagination."

—Susana Martinez-Conde
Director of Laboratory of Visual NeuroScience
Barrow Neurophysiological Institute

(quoted from Scientific American, 2010)

Taney, to quote Huston Smith again, "Reality is divinely ambiguous." That is, reality can be interpreted as a non-spirited material world or as fully saturated with spirit, or as the "imagination..." We make worldview choices based on our experiences. I guess God has always had compassion for agnostics and atheists. I was agnostic prior to my LSD experiences 36 years ago.

LSD turns on a flood of imagination that feels like it is always just under the surface of perception. One closes the eyes and witnesses entire worlds with beings never seen before. The ornamental pattern language of every former culture and a few new ones flow like liquid self-transforming tattoos over all surfaces, which alternate between jewels and plasma as substance. Amidst all the imaginal overload, one's identity is

redefined. The great Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi says that the imagination is where God meets God. This is our potential to realize. A spiritually inclined person who takes psilocybin in the correct set and setting has a 65% chance of having a full blown mystical experience. (statistics from both the Harvard Good Friday Experiment and a Johns Hopkins study).

The impact of entheogens on our culture is one of the most profound and historically significant events, and largely unappreciated in our time. The artists journeying to mystic realms and painting or sculpting or making animations of the experience are birthing a new kind of sacred art, undreamed of in Kandinsky's time.

I like the level of sophistication of the conversation in these threads that begin to grapple with the unfathomable complexities of consciousness.

This intermeshing of body/mind in Taney and Yuting's thread points out the best way to contemplate Matter/Spirit. The difference between these dimensions is obvious, the material body is visible and measurable, but the inner world of consciousness is only visible to the inner eye, the spiritual eye of the self.

The intersection of inner and outer worlds is where Ken Wilber's 4 quadrants come in handy...

Defining the Spiritual, further

Posted by Eric Zechman at Thursday, March 31, 2011

It seems that to have an experience of the spiritual requires presence and attentiveness (I'm thinking that one has to be conscious of the experience in order for one to categorize it as a "spiritual" experience). How is the increasing incursion of technology into our lives (in terms of the time spent attentively online and in communication with others, i.e., distracted by texting, emailing) affecting the likelihood of having such experiences? Or is it?

Joseph Nechvatal:

It depends, Eric. The distraction problem is real. However, the digital phantasmagorical, one may assume, might also create an opportunity for social image transgression - and for a vertiginous ecstasy of thought. Surely, such a hybrid electronica/phantasmal impetus can help release pent up ecstatic energies in that the more overwhelming and restrictive the social mechanism, the more exaggerated are the resulting effects - and hence excel the assumed determinism of the technological-based phenomenon inherent (supposedly) in our post-industrial information society.

An artistic phantasmal thought might detach itself from the order and authority of the old sign and topple us down into the realm of imagination, of fantasy, and into non-knowledge - towards imagining questions rather than pat, assigned answers. Perhaps the digital-phantasmagorical in art might just help us to understand that the distractions of the virtual AND "real world" (like money) are made up of phantasmal non-materiality composed and recomposed via virtuality.

On the phantasmal character of electronic proliferation (and speed) as a form of an objective spiritual.

Posted by Joseph Nechvatal on Thursday, March 31, 2011

My understanding of reality is that we live today immersed in a swirling (essentially phantasmagorical) electronic-based society that is rhizomatic (a rhizome is continually dynamic and is ceaselessly actualized by the arousal its dynamism produces and thus it is never in accord with some pre-established strategy or imposed configuration). Needless to say, electronic signals and codes are positively phantasmagorical. Thus, electronics refocuses our attention on the phantasmagorical. Here vibratory energy is made manifest and so may offer us the opportunity for the creation of relevant, social, phantasmagorical signs (semi-abstract, ecstatic, anti-signs) which may continue to mentally move and multiply. So unlike Kandinsky's analog approach to art (one that has become an institutional and conventional approach) digital electronics opens art up to new spaces of malleable and combinatory creation with perpetual multiplications of significance and noisy inference that may decode and deterritorialize meaning. Meaning in art and in life then advances by seeing more clearly into its own underlying phantasmagorical assumptions of excess, by facing up to the radical implications of those assumptions, and by purging itself from conventional ways of thinking.

Virtual (or better, viractual) spiritual art may achieve an ultimate phantasmal integration by dissolving recorded information into its original vibrational/dynamic foundation. It is a form of understanding information. But one cannot declare in advance what the digital confines are or where it will or might operate - nor what may become connected and tangled up in the phantasmagorical rhizome's multiple dimensions, because the connections do not inevitably plait common types together.

Such a dynamic sense of aesthetic electronica (as contemplative vision) might suggest the potential for the spiritual in art as it subsumes our previous world of simulation/representation into a phantasmagorical nexus of over-lapping linked hybrid observations of the outer world with precise extractions of human sensibility

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Then, the "virtual spiritual" is objective as it mirrors the "reality...in a swirling (essentially phantasmagorical) electronic-based society", right?

Taney Roniger:

Joseph, the kind of immersive experience you describe (here and elsewhere) is tantalizing, and I see in it a number of rich possibilities for transcending the dualisms we've been discussing (i.e., mind/body, subject/object, self/world) that afflict aesthetic experience in particular and life experience in general. What is particularly appealing to me about it is its promise of a kind of unbounded, horizonless, totalizing experience in which the "viewer" moves beyond mere spectatorship and truly becomes a participant in the work. The word "ecstatic" seems to apply in its most literal sense: that of being (temporarily) displaced from the illusive center that we conventionally take to be ourselves (i.e., ego) and expanded outward into a living communion with all that is "other."

My persistent question, however, is this: You speak of this experience as being "non-alienating" – presumably in contrast to the alienating experience of most conventional (i.e., analog) art – but I wonder if there's not an element of alienation from the body implicit in what you describe. This occurs to me primarily in view of the larger movement toward disembodiment so prominent among technologists deeply interested in virtual reality and the like (the futurist Ray Kurzweil comes to mind), whose vision

seems to be one of a “post-nature” Utopia. Does the trans-humanism movement epitomized by the Extropians figure into your thinking at all, I wonder? My concern is rooted in my suspicion that the latter’s quest to transcend the body is motivated more by what it seeks to be rid of (i.e., the “messiness” of flesh and fluid and all that ties us to the earth) than what it seeks to attain. There is also, on a more modest scale, the issue of the increasing alienation from body and earth discernible among the younger generation (for example, their utter incomprehension of where food comes from).

Finally, on a related note: I was interested to learn last year at a Kandinsky symposium at the Guggenheim that Kandinsky was notoriously repulsed by the human body. In life drawing classes, for example, he was known to complain about the “stinky, smelly models” he was forced to draw from! Alas, it seems the desire to transcend the body haunts the spiritual from many quarters.

Joseph Nechvatal:

You will have to remind me where I used the phrase “non-alienating” Taney. I usually include a sense of critical distance when I discuss immersion. (See my text: Immersive Ideals / Critical Distances).

On the question of de-materialization: Of course it will never fully happen, so we can put away the Matrix fantasies of Ray Kurzweil, but yes information technology will become increasingly ubiquitous and knitted into the material world. But we will never dematerialize our body, the body will be joined into the information web in a viractual manner. If you think about it, our flesh is already viractual, dancing on a clock.

I did not know that Kandinsky was notoriously repulsed by the body, but I do know that Kandinsky's interest in de-materialization began in 1895 with his love for Manet's Haystack series. And that he went on to postulate that the state of painting should approach that of music, the most de-materialized of the arts, even while encouraging art to approach gesamtkunstwerk unity.

The issue you raise of spiritual transcending of the body is exactly why I insist on forgetting about the transcendental in connection with the spiritual and rather insist on spiritual immanence.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

So, the mystical experience is very much transcendental (here I'm thinking of the Catholic legends that are hard to swallow); and the spiritual immanence, by a new paradigm rethinking, is in favor of material or neutral monism?

(I'm thinking of your first post: “I think of the “spiritual” - a realization (proven by science) that humans are deeply tied up within the powers of nature. This is a realization of immanence, of course: we are entangled and immersed within the energetic, ephemeral and phantasmagorical.”)

”Transcendence” and ”immanence” are difficult for me to grasp, I haven't quite figured them out since the first day. But today is already the last day discussing those concepts...

Taney Roniger:

I'm glad you've clarified your position on de-materialization, Joseph. I agree that Kurzweil's vision is a pipe dream -- and not a very appealing one at that. It seems crucial here to make the distinction between the move toward de-materialization, which you and others are proposing, and the position of anti-materialism, which has been such a strong current underlying many of the last century's spiritual movements. I have always rather associated Kandinsky's enterprise with the latter, but maybe I'm wrong to do so. In any case, it's now clear to me that what you're working toward is a kind of "hyper-corporeality" (I think that's the word you use in your book, *Towards an Immersive Intelligence*, no?) that is not about moving "beyond" the body but rather about expanding our sense of self to encompass body + world, or to reveal the fundamental interconnectedness of the two. And yes, immanence should replace transcendence in our thinking about the spiritual. (Or, better yet, is there a third term that might imply the two poles in unison?) Now I'm on board!

Another issue that interests me about your enterprise is the challenge it presents to the general suspicion of totalities that pervades contemporary intellectual culture. The anti-metaphysical strain of deconstructive postmodernism is something with which I've long had a problem. While I'm sympathetic to the move away from God and teleology, I stop short of rejecting wholes altogether. I embrace any position that poses a challenge to this anti-metaphysical movement, which is what draws me so strongly to systems theory/cybernetics. The absolute rejection of absolutes is as absolutist as the positions deconstruction has sought to dismantle. I say it's time to move beyond deconstruction.

Taney Roniger:

My apologies, Joseph, for attributing the term "non-alienating" to you. I had it in my notes, but I cannot for the life of me find it in any of your texts. *Mea culpa!*

Joseph Nechvatal:

No problem. Yes, I see us (and art) moving towards a state of hyper-corporeality. The strategy of hyper-anything includes principles of networked connections and electronic links which give multiple choices of passages to follow and continually new branching possibilities.

My hyper-corporeal approach to noology places emphasis on self-re-programmable internal functions that explicitly offers a furtherance in envisioning internal, anti-hierarchical patterns of thought.

Untitled

Posted by Laura Battle on Friday, April 01, 2011

Alex – I like very much your description of the qualities of mystical experience. I, for one, experienced ‘numinosum’ for the first time while engaged in the process of making art, focused in a particular way in the studio. This was not prior to making; rather [it] occurred as a result of my engagement. I do question the phrase “authentic spiritual art” because it may be for one person (artist or viewer) and not another. I can in earnest say that my lifelong commitment to being an artist is in large part the result of the transformation that I experience as I wholly connect materials, eyes, mind with the moment. Nothing else has even come close. (You can use your imagination as to what ‘nothing’ refers to.)

I experienced such transformation one night spent atop the great pyramid of Cheops in my late 20's, and now in front of a great deal of art (by others), but by-in-large my relationship to spirituality has everything to do with the artistic process.

I would be very interested in hearing from the other artists here about their own experience as makers in this regard.

Taney Roniger:

Laura, I'm really glad you brought up the artistic process and its relation to the numinous. In my experience, there is indeed something wholly distinct and incomparably intense about being in that mode of artistic concentration. I'm continually struck by the way the experience seems to have a mind of its own, for lack of a better way to put it; it repeatedly occurs to me while I'm "there" that I'm not in the driver's seat -- that in fact I'm not even in the passenger's seat, but somewhere way in the back. It's as though "I" leave and something wholly other seeps in (quietly, in my case -- there's never anything dramatic or exultant, but more like a subtle shift that occurs "backstage").

Last week in my class I showed the William Kentridge documentary called Drawing the Passing. There's a moment in it when he talks about the activity of drawing -- the physical act of moving the charcoal across the page while being fully engaged in the process -- and how it opens him up to a way of thinking and knowing that would be otherwise impossible. That really resonates with me; I find that I arrive at all my artistic solutions while in the act of moving hand and eye. I'm always reminded of a little phrase I remember reading of Freud's: "Thought not born of locomotion isn't worth thinking." I don't know if I entirely agree with it, or if it's in any way related to the numinous, but it does present an interesting question about what happens in the bodymind when all parts are seriously engaged.

Reader (anonymous):

On the late great painter, poet, composer, philosopher Dane Rudhyar:

Rudhyar and the Transcendental Painting Group

The Transcendental Painting Group was founded by several non-objective artists struggling to establish abstract and non-objective art in America. The group included Raymond Jonson, Emil Bisttram, Lawren Harris, Alfred Morang, Agnes Pelton, Ed Garman, Horace Pierce, Dane Rudhyar and others. While many members shared an interest in theosophy and mysticism, and were inspired by the work of Wassily Kandinsky, mundane factors, such as needs for work space, exhibitions and publicity, actually brought the group together.

The Santa Fe Transcendental Painting Group is featured in the recent book Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde: 1912-1950. The volume includes an essay on the Transcendental Painting Group by Marianne Lorenz and color plates depicting the work of its members.

Regarding Rudhyar's work and its place, Lorenz writes, "Rudhyar is unique among the artists being studied here because he emerged fully as a painter in the style of Kandinsky almost immediately. Philosophically and intellectually seasoned in the theories that

underlay Kandinsky's art, his artistic development was not subject to the long search or evolutionary process that was the case of Harris and Jonson. Rudhyar discovered Kandinsky's vocabulary at the same time he discovered painting. As such, much of his oeuvre of the period, while often imbued with an almost heroic energy, quotes Kandinsky's formal language and reinterprets it in overtly theosophical or mystical terms. "Interestingly, Alfred Morang minimizes the influence of Kandinsky on Rudhyar, stating that 'the work of Rudhyar is built upon a non-objective pattern, but is not at all like the work of any other non-objective painter . . . His placing of shapes upon an oblong is not dictated by the rules of, let us say, Kandinsky or Picasso. Rather the motive force that actuates Rudhyar is a desire to the intangible something that he has learned to recognize through his music and his writing.'"

It is fundamental to realize that none of Rudhyar's creative expressions emphasizes the technical, specialized approach which mark artists who work as "professionals." Indeed, Rudhyar fought against the attitude of professionalism in any art; for such an attitude binds the creation to ideological as well as esthetic standards, and very often to fashion. "Any art," he states, "should evoke an inner reality behind the outer forms, sounds or colors. The work of art of whatever kind, plastic or musical, should raise the feelings and the consciousness of whoever is faced with it to a higher level. To call this a 'mystical' concept is quite senseless. This has been the foundation of all great art in all cultures, except perhaps during their formalistic and 'classical' period during which virtuosity and 'art for art's sake' was considered the ideal for an often empty and bored aristocracy at some kingly or princely court."

Reader (anonymous):

More from Rudhyar:

"Strictly representational painting (landscape, portraits and still-lives) reduces to two-dimensional space the physical reality of objects and persons our senses and mind interpret as three-dimensional, using the principle of perspective and the direction of light and shadows to produce the appearance of concreteness. But as Kandinsky, the great Russian painter of the early 20th century, well understood, this appearance is only an "illusion." Thus, he said, representative paintings are in fact "abstractions." This is why he spoke of his non-representative painting as "concrete art." Such an art does not try to mirror on a flat surface what we experience normally in depth; concrete art simply produces concrete objects — paintings — which do not pretend to exist in anything other than two-dimensional space. They are truly creations, not merely interpretations.

I soon became aware that the proper term to characterize my paintings was transcrete art, because they were not objects having meaning in themselves as much as forms translucent to the light of meaning. The word "transcrete" is made of the Latin roots trans (through) and crescere (to grow). Meaning grows out of the transcrete form as a plant grows out of a seed. The term, diaphanous, could also be used, because the forms in my paintings are (or at least purport to be) revelations of a transcendent quality or archetype of being.

Immanence and Transcendence

Posted by Taney Roniger at Friday, April 01, 2011

As our first session draws to a close later today I thought we might do well to summarize a few of the key points we've been over. There's been a good deal of talk about transcendence and immanence, and several participants have posed very strong cases for the dismissal of transcendence as the *sole* model for (or approach to) the spiritual for our times. It seems clear that our first step in moving beyond Kandinsky is one in the direction of immanence rather than transcendence, but since we're also challenging the dualism inherent in Kandinsky's metaphysics and the Modernist project in general, I'm wondering if there is a third term that might signify both immanence and transcendence together (i.e., not either/or but both/and)?

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Wow, it's a great idea to have a clear summary here. At least, it will be very helpful for me.

I just found the following from John Searle's *Philosophy of Mind*. I've found that our posts/discussions have touched some of these points here and there:

Descartes' Dualism (I assume it was shared by Kandinsky) asserts that there are two kinds of substances in the world: mental and physical. 1. The essence of the mental is "thinking" (=consciousness); 2. The essence of the physical is extension (= having spatial dimension).

I agree that we have moved beyond that, so we have the following alternatives and even more (not listed):

A. Property Dualism: 1. Descartes was wrong to think that there are two kinds of substances. But there are indeed two kinds of properties, mental and physical properties; 2. one and the same body can have both mental and physical properties.

B. Varieties of Monism: 1. Idealists: everything is mental; 2. materialists: everything is material.

C. Behaviorism: Logical and Methodological.

To me, not only the study of each category above is complicated, but also the relation between dualism/non-dualism and immanence/transcendence is not clear. Sorry for my stubbornness---I think Charlene's "fractal" explanation of the nondualistic understanding of "immanent" and "transcendent" helps. But when I come to this:

"Our minds will never be able to map the endless networks of what I call "relational reality," so spirituality that seeks to commune with either immanence or transcendence now sees that they are not apart." I'm again confused. My question remains: dualism/non-dualism and immanence/transcendence are two oppositional pairs, I don't clearly see (though intuitively feel) that the understanding of dualism/non-dualism can be used to understand immanence/transcendence. I must have missed something, [because] I failed to make a connection. Sorry for so many words.

Taney Roniger:

Let's see if I can take a stab at what is meant by immanence and transcendence. A very basic understanding of the two might look something like this: Transcendence refers to a realm somehow "above and beyond" the natural or mundane world, to a "higher" dimension that is ostensibly purer, more perfect, and more "ultimately real" than the natural (sensible) world, and against which this world is placed in contrast. Plato's realm of Ideas is an example, as is Heaven. (We have to proceed with caution here, because I'm

sure there are much more nuanced and sophisticated ways of conceiving of these terms. I'm just laying out some basic assumptions, regardless of their veracity.) Immanence, on the other hand, points to the inherence of these "higher" qualities or dimensions within the things of this world (i.e., within matter), and suggests that there is no "other world." A crude schematization might link transcendence with supernaturalism and immanence with materialism.

Since we're thinking about a view of the spiritual that will deny neither aspect, some words from Gregory Bateson reflecting on his life's work seem relevant:

"...I find myself still between the Scylla of established materialism, with its quantitative thinking, applied science, and 'controlled' experiments on the one side, and the Charybdis of romantic supernaturalism on the other. My task is to explore whether there is a sane and valid place for religion somewhere between these two nightmares of nonsense. Whether, if neither muddleheadedness nor hypocrisy is necessary to religion, there might be found in knowledge and in art the basis to support an affirmation of the sacred that would celebrate natural unity." Hear, hear!

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Good quote from Bateson! Now that makes a lot more sense. So Cartesian Dualism already bisects transcendence & immanence. In order not to bisect them, the current versions of monism seem to have one eat the other, either all supernatural/mental or all material. In fact, people are debating over all the alternative models to dualism. It will be very interesting if we will come up with something new through this event.

Taney Roniger:

There's a notion in philosophy called dual-aspect monism, for which the example of a coin works well: The coin has two sides which are polar opposites, but they're clearly connected and together form the unified, indivisible thing we call coin.

Joseph Nechvatal:

In Gilles Deleuze's book *The Logic of Sense* he postulates that the ontological realization of the eternal truth of the "One" is the concentration of the continuity of life via its intensification. The "event" is that which donates the One to the concatenation of multiplicities.

So we could advance the following formula: in becomings, the event is the proof of the One of which these becomings are the expression. This is why there is no contradiction between the limitless of becoming and the singularity of the event.

The event reveals in an immanent way the One of becomings, it makes becoming this One.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

@Taney, yes, that reminds me of some saying: the Mobius strip ontology. Not the same metaphor, but they may target at the same thing.

@Joseph... I'll do my homework on that argument. I need to think about it slowly later. So that is about immanence. What's his opinion on transcendence? I guess they are one. What is the argument?

Joseph Nechvatal:

Deleuze stresses Immanence, meaning "existing or remaining within" generally offering a relative opposition to transcendence, a divine or metaphysical beyond or outside. Deleuze, however, employs the term plane of immanence as a pure immanence, an unqualified immersion or embeddedness, an immanence which denies transcendence as a real distinction, Cartesian or otherwise. Pure immanence is thus often referred to as a pure plane, an infinite field or smooth space without substantial or constitutive division. In his final essay entitled "Immanence: A Life", Deleuze writes: "It is only when immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself that we can speak of a plane of immanence."

Deleuze's plane of immanence is metaphysically consistent with Spinoza's single substance (God or Nature) in the sense that immanence is not immanent to substance but rather that immanence is substance, that is, immanent to itself. Pure immanence therefore will have consequences not only for the validity of a philosophical reliance on transcendence, but simultaneously for dualism and idealism. Mind may no longer be conceived as a self-contained field, substantially differentiated from body (dualism), nor as the primary condition of unilateral subjective mediation of external objects or events (idealism). Thus all real distinctions (mind and body, God and matter, interiority and exteriority, etc.) are collapsed or flattened into an even consistency or plane, namely immanence itself, that is, immanence without opposition.

The plane of immanence thus is often called a plane of consistency accordingly. As a geometric plane, it is in no way bound to a mental design but rather an abstract or virtual design; which for Deleuze, is the metaphysical or ontological itself: a formless, univocal, self-organizing process which always qualitatively differentiates from itself.

From Atta Kim, one of our participants
Posted by Taney Roniger on Friday, April 01, 2011

(Atta Kim sends his regrets about being unable to participate in the live conversation here due to his traveling to Africa for the installation of his work. In lieu of a live appearance, he has submitted the following essay, which was translated from Korean by Joyce Kim.)

Travels of the Point

In August 2010, NASA released a photograph. It was a picture of the Earth taken from 100,008,300 km away in space. Taken on May 6th, 2010 from the Messenger spacecraft, the earth looked like a bright, white dot in the pitch-black darkness of space. The moon looked like a small animal feeding in the arms of its mother. I laughed the moment I saw the picture.



Around 330 BC, Euclid defined a point as that which has no area; it simply indicates a position. Points connect to create a line. Those lines meet to create a plane and between that plane and another plane is space. This is the simple logic that defines dimensions in Western aesthetics. In 1926, Kandinsky, at age 60, published his book, *Point and Line to Plane*, and stated, "The geometric point is an invisible thing. Therefore, it must be defined as an incorporeal thing. Considered in terms of substance, it equals zero."

Instead of commenting on the topic of the Beyond Kandinsky Symposium, Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, the reason I am commenting on *Point and Line to Plane* is because *Point and Line to Plane* addresses the physical and spiritual elements of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Furthermore, Kandinsky's definition of a point is similar to an Eastern understanding of the world.

There is a logic to all phenomena on Earth. Water must freeze to become ice, ice melts to become water, water evaporates to become rain and snow, which cycles on Earth to become flowers and life. All phenomena are built from the point and breaks down to the point. This is the basic cycle of nature. The point builds to a line, plane, and space, and all events and history are produced in space. Space is structure and daily life. If this every day space is broken down, we return to the plane, and the lines that produce that plane, and the point that makes up the line. That is why the point is the beginning. The "boundary of difference" between big things and small things, this or that thing, is the role of the point and line. The Earth looks like a small point from space. However, if we looked at the Earth from the moon, we would not call the Earth a point. Nor is the Earth called a point from the Earth. It's difficult to define the boundary of a point and line, but we know for sure that the line is a point's connection. That is why the point is reborn as a line and the line is reborn as a plane. The plane cannot be built without the functional death of the point and line. The point and line's functional death becomes the line and plane, but the identity of the point or the line does not die. The location of the point and line's functional death becomes the boundary between the point and the line. The place of the line's functional death becomes the plane. However, the point and line and plane's identity never dies and is inherent within space. Space's inner energy is the life of the identities forming space, and it can be the action of the physical energy inherent to the space itself. Therefore, paradoxically, three-dimensional space's physical and spiritual requisite is the point. Furthermore, the identity of the point is not just a rule that governs the point, line, plane, and space, but it is applicable to all phenomena and existence and events in the world.

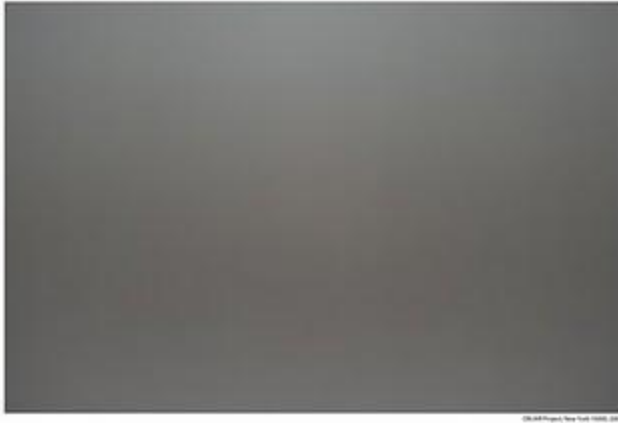
The problem is that when the size of the point is not visible to the human eye or when the point shrinks to such a small nano/micro scale that we are unable to measure it, the point's function and definition is unclear. In other words, the point's function dies to become the line, but there is no physical boundary limiting understanding and analog measurement. Euclid and Kandinsky both do not talk about the boundaries of the point's smallest unit. When Kandinsky says, "it is not visible to the eye, but it is an essence, incorporeal and zero," he means transforming a physical analog into an immaterial thought. This is the true value of Kandinsky's idea. Identities and ideas have no mass or volume and have no limit on size.

All objects have a mass and volume, and volume is another word for space. Broadly speaking, space is another word for time. [1] That is, what is between time is what is between space. What is between emptiness is time. Time clearly exists, but we cannot hold it in our hand. The past has already passed; the future has not yet come. But it's not as if we can hold the present either. If we multiply 1 second by 10 to the negative 43 , we arrive at the most basic unit of time called Planck time. We cannot conceive of exactly how long this unit of time is because it is so small, but it is not true that time does not have volume. It is only that we are unable to measure it. That is why we are unable to live even one day ahead of time or one day behind time. We cannot separate space and time, and if we transcend space and time, we do not exist. However, time clearly has its own face. Sadly, although the foundation of life as we know it is based on time, time cannot reveal its face by itself. Through the existence of others, time is able to show its face. That is why all objects in existence are a face of time. It is true for rocks, trees, you, and me. Time is the space (or the volume) of a moment. Thus, time as a concept has physical substance with mass and volume.

Now I'll come back to Euclid and Kandinsky's definition of a point. "...It must be defined as an incorporeal thing. Considered in terms of substance, it equals zero," means that just because we are unable to measure on the nano/micro scale, the essence of the point does not disappear. The essence contains the substance and the identity together. This is similar to the 21st century's digital awareness and mode of thinking. The digital's most basic unit of the byte has no mass or volume. Only in the output does it become a physical object. Kandinsky's definition of the incorporeal essence ultimately refers to things that have been transformed into an identity and ideology that has no mass and volume. Kandinsky transformed the physical energy that is the point into inner energy. Identity and ideology have no volume or mass but in the output, it is able to finally have shape and form. That is art's alpha and omega. For example, a sculptor can take a rock in its natural state, exactly as it is, and create a statue of Buddha or a cross. Then the rock's form becomes completely different. Nature's rock becomes an icon according to the identity of the artist. When we encounter an icon in life that matches the concept of an icon in our minds, we start to pray and say our hopes and desires. But we do not direct prayers toward a rock in nature. But the rock already had all shapes and forms. That is why the rock in nature is concrete and becomes abstract when it has an intangible ideology. At last absolute concreteness becomes absolute abstraction. Abstraction is inherent in absolute concreteness and concreteness is inherent in absolute abstraction. This is the same process by which a point builds into a space and a space breaks down into a point.

In Buddhism, all objects, or in other words, color and matter are another word for space and space is another word for color. All objects can become one according to the concept of "all matter is emptiness" and the process of breaking down is called "emptiness is form." In particular, Hua-yen Buddhism's teachings of "one is all, all is one" is a physical analysis of how points build to space and space breaks down to a point. Buddhism's "all matter is emptiness" does not mean a lack. I will use my work as an example.

My ON-AIR Project's Indala Series (Indala is another word for Indra's net, which refers to the concept of the interconnectedness of all things in the universe. New York, Washington, Moscow, Tokyo, Paris, London, Venice, Berlin, Athens, Seoul, Delhi, and others, comprise the 14 cities that are a part of this project). For the project, I took 10,000 photographs of New York and superimposed them to create one final picture.



The completed picture appears to be nothing but a blurry, gray image, but there are physically 10,000 photographs within it. Those 10,000 photographs of New York streets, buildings, people, and events were vividly captured over the course of several years, lovingly, with proper photographic technique. I'm not Buddhist and I didn't do this project with the intention of explaining the concept of "all is emptiness," but this is similar to that concept of emptiness. If one penetrates into the gray image (as in Heidegger's concept of *entwurf*, or the mental process of absorption in something), one is able to meet again the countless events and identities melted into the 10,000 cuts. This process of disassembly is "emptiness is everything." If one physically dismantles an analog picture, one is left with the particles that make up analog film; in a digital process, only the pixels are left. In the final gray image of the Indala project, those 10,000 photographs have become one and each has lost its function but their identity is not gone. Just like how my DNA contains all of humanity's genes, identity does not disappear. This is similar to how the point's identity is inherent in space. Ironically though, the final gray picture of one city composed of 10,000 different superimposed photographs is digitized and has no mass or volume; it only has form when it comes out.

I have practiced Zen for about 20 years. Through meditation and Zen, I sought the true nature of existence and trained myself to experience life. This process has allowed me to live life and become enlightened. One ordinary day in 1998, I was deep in training when I saw a small rock perched on top of a big rock twice my height. This is a common sight that one can easily see anywhere. I spent a long time training myself to look for the logic of the universe in everyday life, and the key point of that image training was "dialogue." Through dialogue with objects, I can contemplate, devote, and disassemble life into new experiences. So naturally, I started a dialogue about the connection between the big rock and the small rock. On that windy winter day, I sat in front of the big rock all day and started a dialogue about the connection between that big rock, the small rock, and me. I wrote down the things they told me in a notebook. The rock's connection showed me the world beyond what I had known before—it was like looking at a panoramic picture. Toward the end of the afternoon, as I was about to fill the entire notebook with all I had written about the connection between the little rock and the big rock, I picked up the small rock with my hand. I was startled the moment I lifted the small pebble. There had been a leaf under the pebble. The whole day I had sat in front of them, and it had never occurred to me that there might

have been a leaf underneath that small rock. Again, I started to record the connection between the big rock, the small rock, and the leaf. I set out to search for the connection between the heavy rock and relatively light leaf, and to search for the leaf's story. The sun had already set behind the western mountain and as a shallow darkness started to fall, I picked up the leaf that had been underneath the small rock. I was shocked again the moment I picked up the leaf. On the underside of the leaf, there was a white spore attached to the leaf. I couldn't have imagined such an event. That moment, the spore that was about 1 cm small felt to me like a great ball of life. I was touched. The big rock and the forest and the trees, the flowing river and the rocks on the riverside and all things surrounding me felt like a ball of life. The darkening valley transformed into a festival for the life of living things. That small, single spore led me to the place of DNA—life's smallest unit. This all happened in an instant. It's natural that from the mineral rock to the spore, it all unfolds from DNA. All things that exist are connected, like the double helix of DNA. Ultimately, life's smallest unit of DNA is also an identity of the point. And although human eyes cannot see DNA, it has a mass and volume. This was the starting point for my "ON-AIR Project." Euclid's definition of a point and Kandinsky's "immaterial essence" are only possible when they have a position, a location and this is when the point necessarily has a mass and volume. However, the point's physical energy is free from mass and volume when it transforms into an identity or ideology. Kandinsky liberated the point from matter.

Earth looks like a small dot when seen from 100,008,300 km away. No other words of description come to mind. In this place, humans advance history and evolve. Euclid and Kandinsky lived here, and 21st century humans continue to live in this place.

I have deep respect for Kandinsky, who discerned the logic of art and the logic of the world through the identity of the point, line, and plane 100 years ago.

My explorations about the point are an Eastern philosophical analysis of the world that sees the earth and people in terms of the microcosm. I ask the understanding of the point in my subjective analysis.

[1] Note: The Korean Chinese character for "space" is made by combining the character for "empty" and the character for "between." The Korean Chinese character for "time" (as a general concept) is made by combining the character for "time" (as a single point in time) and "between."

Alex Grey on mysticism and entheogens
Posted by Taney Roniger at Friday, April 01, 2011

One of our readers, Alex Grey, has made a significant contribution to this session with his comments. Because he brings up a number of issues not yet addressed by the rest of us, and because his views have sparked some interesting dialogue/debate, I'm reposting some of his comments below followed by some of the comments on his comments.

Alex says:

Before an artist can make authentically spiritual art they must have a mystical experience. This would explain why we see so little spiritual art, the mystical experience is a rare phenomenon. Same with critics, dealers, curators, historians - how can they identify or comprehend and "re-evaluate" the spiritual in art without a profound encounter with the Numinous? Once a person has such an experience, it changes their perspective on everything.

The qualities or categories of a mystical experience are:

Unity. There is a dissolving of ego boundaries and a feeling of oneness with the Cosmos. Self is experienced as pure vast network of awareness

Transcendence of Time and Space. There is a loss of usual references of time and space. Time seems eternal or even that one is "outside of time". The infinite becomes visible, palpable.

Deeply Felt Positive Mood. There are feelings of blessedness, joy, and peace, and a sense of unconditional love. The uniqueness of these emotions is in the level to which they are elevated, the intensity of the experience.

Sense of Sacredness. There is an intuitive sense of wonder and peace, a sense of special value, and a feeling of the holy and divine.

Subjective Nature of the Experience. The knowledge seems conveyed not through words, but through the experience itself, and there is a certainty that this knowledge is authentic and direct.

Paradoxicality. When attempting to explain the experience to others, there are frequently logical contradictions in explanations, such as emptiness in which one simultaneously feels full and complete, or a dissolution of self in which something of the individual remains to experience the phenomenon. There is both separateness from and unity with the surroundings.

Alleged Ineffability. The experience seems to be beyond what words can define. Logical descriptions or interpretations are incapable of accurately describing the experience, partially due to the paradoxical nature of the phenomena. This is why art and music have been the language of mysticism for all religious traditions.

Transiency. The actual time spent in the mystical state is temporary. A return to the everyday surroundings occurs after a short period, whether through sudden awakening or a gradual shift of awareness to the immediate environment.

Persisting Positive Changes in Mood and Behavior.

There are now scientifically proven, repeatable means to accessing the [the mystical experience], but not until we have significant numbers of people in the artworld visiting those realms will things change much.

Taney Roniger:

Alex, I appreciate your input on the mystical experience. I wonder: You mentioned in a previous comment something about the capacity of certain hallucinogens to induce the experience ("entheogens," as Huston Smith calls them). I wonder if you could say a bit more about this. I ask because it appears to be the consensus that the entheogenic experience is as "real" and as transformative as the one achieved "naturally" (aren't chemicals natural, I always ask?). This, to me, suggests a possible neurophysiological basis for the spiritual experience, which in turn suggests a rather materialist take on the phenomenon. Perhaps this issue has been laid to rest in certain quarters, but I do find it interesting and relevant.

Reader (Alex Grey):

Taney, you state, "This, to me, suggests a possible neurophysiological basis for the spiritual experience, which in turn suggests a rather materialist take on the phenomenon." I found an interesting quote from a neurophysiologist that speaks to this:

"It is a fact of neuroscience that everything we experience is actually a figment of our imagination."

—Susana Martinez-Conde
Director of Laboratory of Visual Neuroscience
Barrow Neurophysiological Institute

(quoted from Scientific American, 2010)

Taney, to quote Huston Smith again, "Reality is divinely ambiguous." That is, reality can be interpreted as a non-spirited material world or as fully saturated with spirit, or as the "imagination..." We make worldview choices based on our experiences. I guess God has always had compassion for agnostics and atheists. I was agnostic prior to my LSD experiences 36 years ago.

LSD turns on a flood of imagination that feels like it is always just under the surface of perception. One closes the eyes and witnesses entire worlds with beings never seen before. The ornamental pattern language of every former culture and a few new ones flow like liquid self-transforming tattoos over all surfaces, which alternate between jewels and plasma as substance. Amidst all the imaginal overload, one's identity is redefined. The great Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi says that the imagination is where God meets God. This is our potential to realize. A spiritually inclined person who takes psilocybin in correct set and setting has a 65% chance of having a full blown mystical experience. (Statistics from both the Harvard Good Friday Experiment and a Johns Hopkins study)

The impact of entheogens on our culture is one of the most profound and historically significant events, and largely unappreciated in our time. The artists journeying to mystic realms and painting or sculpting or making animations of the experience are birthing a new kind of sacred art, undreamed of in Kandinsky's time.

I like the level of sophistication of the conversation in these threads that begin to grapple with the unfathomable complexities of consciousness.

This intermeshing of body/mind in Taney and Yuting's thread points out the best way to contemplate Matter/Spirit. The difference between these dimensions is obvious, the material body is visible and measurable, but the inner world of consciousness is only visible to the inner eye, the spiritual eye of the self.

The intersection of inner and outer worlds is where Ken Wilber's 4 quadrants come in handy...

Joseph Nechvatal:

I do not disagree with (or discount) Alex's definition and approach to the spiritual in art, but it puts the emphasis firmly on subjective feeling. That is severely limiting, as, he points out correctly, "mystical experience is a rare phenomenon." And it is unverifiable to others.

I think that if we are attempting to think out how ideas about the spiritual have changed (or may change) with the dissolution of the Modernist project in which Kandinsky's vision was so deeply embedded, then we must also look at objective and scientific approaches to it. This is the way of the New Atheism, specifically that of Sam Harris (the author of *The End of Faith*) based on his personal mystical/ecstatic experiences of the numinous.

If the spiritual in art is only set in purely subjective feeling, then it is hard to see how it becomes strengthened. I think that the approach to spirit (vital energy) needs an objective and empirical approach also that is dependent upon the shared and repeatable. For me, the spiritual in art should not be THAT rare - as the spiritual eye recognizes that the human species is fluid, unified and connected in the way natural phenomenon is. And how we as humans fit into/are a part of the mysterious cosmological universe. From within a cosmological omnijjective perspective, I think that Kandinsky's vision might expand, and so, new scenarios of spirituality might emerge that address questions that are asked of all those who think/create - especially artists - in the attempt to delineate the real phantasmagorical present.

Taney Roniger:

The question of the relationship between science and the spiritual is something I'm keenly interested in, and it seems to be coming up repeatedly in these threads in one guise or another. However divergent Joseph's and Alex's views may be, they seem to have one thing in common, and this is their persistent appeal to science for either reconciliation, verification, or validation. I'm wondering if the spiritual *needs* to be reconciled with or verified/validated by science in order to be considered real or taken seriously. While I realize that recent science has revealed a world far more complex, paradoxical, nonlinear, and interesting than we had ever imagined, I wonder about the inherent limitations of scientific knowing and whether this epistemology is appropriate for the apprehension of things like value, meaning, quality, etc. (i.e., all the things that make up *experience*).

Transcendence and new technologies

Posted by Jeff Edwards on Friday, April 01, 2011

Some of the talk about digital media, virtual reality, and transcendence that's woven though the threads in this symposium has led me back to a question that I've wanted to consider ever since the symposium started. (In particular, I've been thinking a lot about Taney's post on immanence and transcendence, Joseph's post on electronic proliferation, and Eric's "Defining the Spiritual, further" post.) What comes below is an imperfect and very incomplete riff on an incredibly complex topic, but it's one that interests me a lot.

Transcendence is another one of those terms that's hard to pin down, not only because it means different things to different people, but also because it changes meaning according to context. It means something very different in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (where it refers to the basic, everyday relationship of the individual for-itself to the objects of the surrounding world) than it does in the context of nondualist meditative traditions such as Advaita Vedanta (where it represents almost the opposite, in that the final goal is to surrender one's identification with the ego in favor of a merger with all-that-is).

Rather than look for an overarching definition, I prefer to deal with transcendence on a case-by-case basis, not only because it's a more practical approach, but also because I think there's a lot of value in keeping the differences visible and considering what they mean.

Since the symposium started, I've been thinking a lot about Taney's questions on transcendence, digital technology, and our changing view of nature. It seems to me like the three are very closely related, particularly in light of what's happened with cutting-edge developments in electronic media since the 1990s.

Between the late 80s and late 90s, there was a lot of very utopian discourse going on about the potential for new technologies to change the way we relate to one another, and to radically change the world itself. A lot of that had to do with virtual reality and the freshly minted idea of cyberspace, but there were other buzzwords too, many of which are still floating around: technoshamanism, technopaganism, transhumanism, extropianism, cyborg theories, and so on. I remember a lot of optimism in the early 90s about the potential of these rapidly developing technologies to transform the world and our place in it. If you were an avid reader of *Mondo 2000* (an edgier cyberpunk precursor to *Wired*), it was hard not to get caught up in gushing, gee-whiz accounts of how different the world would look in the 21st century. We were all headed for a 24/7 world of virtual reality, direct-neural-implant access to the information superhighway, and the opportunity to either replace our faulty and imperfect bodies with superior prosthetics, or chuck the whole thing entirely and upload our minds into an electronic cosmos where we would be assured of virtual immortality.

It took me a few years after the turn of the millennium to notice that all of that had disappeared, and a lot of the people behind the manifesto-speak had become pretty quiet. There were good reasons for that. Slow development of some of the technologies I've mentioned put a damper on things, forcing people to put down their pens and get to work on actually figuring out how to actually make them work. A lot of that work is still underway, and will probably take a while to bear fruit.

As for virtual reality: early heavy users of VR environments started reporting that they were coming back to the real world radically disoriented for long periods (a situation now called VR sickness). As a result, a lot of researchers and engineers shifted their focus from the virtual toward the areas of pervasive computing (adding information processing capability to physical objects scattered throughout the everyday world), and augmented reality (adding virtual features to the physical world, as in Terminator-style visual displays that seamlessly graft an overlay of information into one's field of vision).

More recently, pervasive computing and augmented reality seem to be converging within handheld devices (like the iPhone) that make the whole data processing and information overlay package portable and extremely flexible.

(For a brief but good overview of the history I've just related, I recommend the essay "Augmenting Reality: Pervasive Computing, Spatial Practice, Interface Politics" by Luke Skrebowski, in the book *Did Someone Say Participate? An Atlas of Spatial Practice*, edited by Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar [MIT Press].)

The history (and failure) of VR interests me a lot, particularly because of the way that VR has sometimes been used to argue for a new kind of transcendence. A great example of this was two pieces of virtual reality art by Char Davies called *Osmose* (1995) and *Ephémère* (1998), each of which allowed a participant to experience a nature-like virtual world as a sort of disembodied

presence, using only body tilt and breathing to navigate the different spaces. As of now, tens of thousands of people have experienced these two works, and Davies has reported that many have come out of them with a radically altered sense of self-identity, consciousness, and their own relationship to physical reality. The data are fascinating, but I've also wondered if/how things like novelty, sensory disorientation, and VR sickness come into play, and also whether the irony of using a computer-generated "natural" VR environment to give people an immersive experience of nature muddles things too much.

We've always existed with images and language as interpretive overlays that stand between us and external reality, but I'm wondering if things like pervasive computing and augmented reality are going to change the way we conceive of and relate to the physical world. When I first began to look into augmented reality and learned about things people were doing with it, I had brief visions of matter haunted with quasi-personified virtual presences, and of a shattering of the barriers between the physical and the virtual. Even something as simple as a mirror in a Toys R Us that reads the bar code of a Lego box and places an animated 3d model of the assembled toy on top of its reflection can be a little spooky the first time you see it, if it's done convincingly. It seems like the ideas of consciousness uploads and fully immersive virtual reality are on the back burner for the time being for some very good reasons, but I wonder if these other, newer technologies are opening the door to some other type of radically transformed world.

I don't really have an answer to this, but I'm wondering what some of you think, and also whether/how this relates to other things that now stand between us and the people around us, including online quasi-virtual worlds like Second Life or more pedestrian things like Facebook.

Taney Roniger:

Jeff, it *is* fascinating how all that hype we were inundated with ten years ago has dissolved. I remember being incredibly enthusiastic (and as a spiritually-oriented person, I take the word literally) at one point; it really seemed that we were entering a new age that would usher in a whole new epistemology and ontology. But I was young then. (Frank Gillette, for whom I worked as a studio assistant in my twenties, once asked me: "Do you know why the Young Hegelians were called the Young Hegelians?", with which I very much got the message.) Alas, it seems the vision of techno-salvation or tech-gnosis was rather pathetically utopian. I'm eager to hear what others have to say about this.

Joseph Nechvatal:

An excellent overview of what we have experienced, Jeff. All rings familiar and true to me (save for I never took Mondo 2000 that seriously). I was able to experience Char Davies's Osmose when it was in New York and wrote about it some in my book "Immersive Ideals / Critical Distances A Study of the Affinity Between Artistic Ideologies Based in Virtual Reality and Previous Immersive Idioms".

Concerning transcendence at large, for me that continues to be a fantasy bigger than that of total-immersion in virtual reality. I might make an exception on the scale of the mini-specific, but I'm not even sure of that because I do not see an outside to transcend to, only multiple dimensions that instigate cross-overs between both the highest synthetic level and the slightest, most minute, discrete distinctions.

I admit I formed this opinion after being immersed in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work on a new epistemology based on the model of the rhizome. For anyone that may be unfamiliar with their rhizomatic epistemology: the rhizome is a snarl of vicissitudes so

intertwined that it must give birth to different connected scopes of thought and perception (and art).

Almost universally, spirituality has to do with a connected relationship - on one level or another - so I still find the rhizomatic a functional model.

"What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes."

-Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus

Jeff Edwards:

Hi, Taney. I was in exactly the same boat, very excited that all of the amazing transformative stuff I'd been reading about in science fiction books since I was a kid was right around the corner. As I remember, that was also the time when a lot of people in the life extension crowd were predicting that we'd be able to live 500 years by now. In retrospect, it's funny how quiet things got by 2000 or so.

Taney Roniger:

Re: the life extension crowd: How funny that does seem now! But the yearning for immortality is a very deep-seated emotion, and probably not one that can be eradicated easily with reason (if at all). I don't think anyone has mentioned immortality yet here; I wonder how it figures in current approaches to the spiritual. I like to think that my knowledge of being intimately connected with the universe on every level (I *am* it, in some sense) is enough, but then I'm not in a fox hole, either.

Jeff Edwards:

Hi, Joseph. I like what you've said here a lot. It's been a while since I read A Thousand Plateaus by Deleuze and Guattari, and I never consciously thought of it in terms of transcendence at the time. In looking back at it, though, I think thought of the book as a vision of a plethora of individual transcendences that were open to people (possibly something like the mini-specific transcendences you hint at above).

I agree that the idea of mass transcendence is a lot more tricky. I think I've always framed my own understanding of it in terms of Marshall McLuhan's old arguments on the changes to mass consciousness that (supposedly) occur when new media come down the pike. I think that idea needs to be taken with caution, though, because of the fear it seems to have generated in some people that image-based technologies are destroying the written word (a belief I don't hold, the rise of radically abbreviated chat speak notwithstanding).

Reader (Yuting Zou):

All the above posts and comments are very much appreciated, I don't even have a chance to experience those VR works, but now they are about to retire. I definitely embrace D&G, hoping it will be pushed forward unceasingly. I need such a guiding philosophy ahead to look beyond current technologies, like S.L, f/b, or holograms...

Joseph Nechvatal:

We cannot be too dismayed by our disillusioned techno fantasies - as fantasy and speculation helps us produce imaginatively. Even today. Perhaps spirituality also does.

Jeff Edwards:

@ Taney again, re: the life extension crowd:

That's a really good question. I don't really know how ideas of physical immortality fit into contemporary spirituality. There are plenty of traditions of physical immortality in older religions and spiritual movements. The most notable is probably the belief from Daoist inner alchemy that physical immortality is an inevitable result of successful practice.

Western religion never really allowed for physical immortality (at least not before the general resurrection at the end of time), but there have been legends on the fringes, such as the stories of the mysterious Comte de Saint-Germain, who supposedly claimed to be something like 500 years old.

In the 20th century there was a lot of talk in some corners of the U.S. about immortal Ascended Masters, but that seems a little different to me. Guy Ballard (a.k.a. Godfre Ray King) of the I AM movement (a proto-New Age group that took off in the 1930s) got in a lot of posthumous trouble with some of his followers for leaving his body behind at death and not taking on something like the rainbow body that's discussed in a lot of Tibetan Buddhist texts.

I know that Ascended Master teachings survive in some post-New Age circles, but I'm not sure about how (or if) physical immortality fits into contemporary spirituality.

Taney Roniger:

True, Joseph. Such is the beauty of science fiction too, I suppose. I'll take overwrought visions of the future over melancholic longing for the past any day.

Taney Roniger:

Re: Immortality in contemporary spirituality: I wonder if the increasing knowledge of how DNA works has relieved some of the urgency of the quest for physical immortality. If people now conceive of their own DNA imagistically (i.e., being able to visualize the double helix reifies it, makes it a "thing") and know that its replicants get passed into the bodies of their children, who in turn pass it on to their children... Maybe in some sense this satisfies the need for physical "preservation."

Jeff Edwards:

Re: DNA: That's possible. It fits well with the older and more widespread notion that having children is a kind of immortality, but it adds a tangible specificity that the folk version of the idea lacks.

I've always considered the idea that passing DNA on is a form of immortality to be kind of bogus, because it ignores the survival of the ego, which seems to me like the basic

point behind the quest for immortality. It makes rearing kids look kind of like Shelley's Ozymandias.

Taney Roniger:

Ah, but the degree of ego-investment in child rearing is not to be underestimated. But we digress!

Jeff Edwards:

Good point, and well said.

Joseph Nechvatal:

The topic of the child has reminded me of a book I read in 1972 on non-transcendental spirituality (correct me if I am wrong here): *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki. And this reminded me of Suzuki's impact on John Cage and Cage's huge impact on American art in the 60s and 70s via Fluxus. So perhaps there has been a bigger hidden spirituality embedded in American art than we may have assumed. Hmmmmmm. What do you think?

Taney Roniger:

Yes, the influence of Zen specifically and Buddhism in general on American art has been enormous. The show at the Guggenheim a few years back called *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia* (curated by Alexandra Munroe) revealed many of these hidden undercurrents. (The exhibition catalogue, by the way, is gorgeous and full of insightful essays by a number of scholars, and Max Gimblett, who is on our panel here, was in the show.) I was surprised to learn that artists such as Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Sam Francis, Lee Mullican, and Gordon Onslow-Ford (not to mention the more obvious ones such as Robert Irwin, James Turrell, and Richard Tuttle) studied Buddhist thought and were influenced by its concept of *sunyata*, or emptiness. I'm glad you brought this up, Joseph, because indeed Buddhism does offer a powerful model for a non-transcendental, non-theistic, here-and-now rather than there-and-then based spirituality. Perhaps Max will say something more about this. I believe we also have a number of other practicing Buddhists on the panel (Pawel Wojtasik, Atta Kim, and Max are the ones that come directly to mind.)

Reader (Yuting Zou):

I remembered, from somewhere, Yoko Ono pointed out that the NY avant-garde movement was basically influenced by oriental philosophy, Japanese Zen in particular. I guess I read it from her book *Grapefruit* or some remarks on this book. Duchamp had been a good friend of Cage; they had common interest in the oriental, and had a performance of playing chess one night. They had two groups of people playing together, with electronic devices under the chess board. According to the movement of the chess [game], different electronic sounds were made. They said the concept was that intellectual people can play very chance music... I think chess-related events are spiritual, as it was a standard spirit-nourishing practice in ancient China, though it's dead now.

Pawel Wojtasik:

Joseph, it was another Suzuki, the scholar Daisetz Teisaro (D.T.) Suzuki who influenced Cage. D.T. Suzuki's lectures at Columbia were famous among artists in the 40's and 50's. Agnes Martin, Rauschenberg, Philip Guston, Allen Ginsberg were influenced and inspired by them. And I agree with you, there is a hidden undercurrent of spirituality embedded in a lot of American art in places where we normally would not look for it, for example in the work of Bruce Nauman.

Joseph Nechvatal:

Thank you, Pawel.

Might we consider Jungian psychology's influence on Jackson Pollock (and other AE and Surrealist artists?) as another buried spiritual influence on American art? Is Carl Gustav Jung considered a spiritualist? Do his interests in alchemy and astrology qualify him as such?

Taney Roniger:

I'd say Jung is very much considered a spiritualist, which is why he's fallen out of favor among "right-thinking" intellectuals (I mean right as in correct). The archetypes alone put him in that category -- i.e., their transcendent, universalist nature.

Reader (Barbara Braathen):

Re immortality: Reincarnation is basic to Theosophic teachings, and they have an intriguing version of how we retain information from life to life. When the body dies, and each sheath slowly disintegrates (physical, emotional, mental), a single atom remains containing all of the data an individual has acquired in all past lives.... and this atom becomes part of the soul in its next reincarnation. At rebirth, memory is usually obscured, but obvious in, say, a child prodigy who plays the piano.

Joseph Nechvatal:

I saw the show "Malevich and the American Legacy" today and the above logic of suppressed spiritual intentions embedded in American art again came to mind based on Malevich's spiritual goals. I know that the spiritual ideas that Malevich attempted to embody in Suprematism are difficult to summarize, for his writing is often vague and mystical. Can anyone help me here with them?

Clarification re: Kandinsky's spiritual experiences

Posted by Charlene Spretnak at Saturday, April 02, 2011

Before we leave Session I, I'd like to add that Kandinsky did have, from a very early age, the type of spiritual, or mystical, experiences described by Alex Grey in his post. It was clear to him from about age four that every entity has its inner reality as well as its outer form. When he became an artist in Munich in his 30s, he struggled to figure out what could replace the objective subject in painting. At some point in 1908 he realized that his childhood insight was the answer: he would try to depict the dynamics of inner reality. This decision was, of course, in sync with the fascination among his peers with the invisible world -- but Kandinsky brought a life-long depth of engagement to the project. This resulted in what Jeff Edwards called in his first post Kandinsky's

"palpable sense of boundary-pushing" from 1909 on. However, when Kandinsky turned his attention to "inner necessity," his previous heightened sense perceptions of the world faded. He no longer walked through Bavarian streets with an almost electric sense of the bright yellow mailboxes and the blue ceramic house numbers, he noted. Instead, he increasingly dwelt in the realm of the subtle processes and dynamic relationships that infuse the physical world.

Session II: The Changing Shape of Art

Session II: The Changing Shape of Art

Posted by Taney Roniger at Saturday, April 02, 2011

Having explored some of the ways in which approaches to the spiritual have changed in the century since Kandinsky, the session that begins today will shift the focus of our discussion away from the spiritual in general and toward its embodiment (or disembodiment) in art specifically. Over the next two days, we'll be exploring the changing shape of art, for which I pose the following questions as points of departure:

1. How has the once-privileged relationship between abstraction and the spiritual fared since Kandinsky? Does this connection still hold a century on?
2. Does music remain the paragon of spiritual art, as Kandinsky so fervently believed?
3. What is the current status of "the object" (i.e., art's material embodiment) in contemporary spiritually-inclined art?
4. Is there currently a renewed emphasis on place or site in contemporary art that might reflect a new (or newly recovered) awareness of the spiritual?
5. Is there a unique role for time-based media such as film and video in contemporary art that aspires toward the spiritual?
6. What role might there be for digital technology in expressions of the spiritual in art?
7. How do recent developments in artistic practice (e.g., "post-studio" practice, art-as-ritual, and trans-disciplinary work) relate to the spiritual in art?

Reader (Nettrice):

I've been interested in the trend in modern graffiti towards abstraction and performance as evidenced in work by contemporary artists such as Augustine Kofie, Futura and Doze Green, as well as social networks like Graffitiurism. Creators of and participants in real and virtual spaces, are challenged to interpret various forms of representation by virtue of various relationships to other elements internal to our shared sign systems. Artists in this knowledge context are tasked to liberate the body in real time and space... Doze Green's current body of work consists of paintings that translate complex metaphysical concepts that resonate with Afrofuturism, such as the "possible manipulation of energy and matter to create a timeless space."

Roy Ascott argues (Drain mag) that virtual syncretism which is historically linked to religion and culture can also "contribute to our understanding of the multi-layered worldviews - material and metaphysical - that are emerging with our engagement in, amongst other things, ubiquitous computing and post-biological technology." We can see this manifested in modern graffiti around the world as well as in new media forms. The rituals and procedures of sacred ceremonies from other cultures find their equivalent in Western codes and protocols of computer technology.

This syncretic liminality is a parallel process of the bringing together of disparate technologies (interactive and digital, reactive and mechanical, psychoactive and chemical), and new rituals of communication (mobile, online), and forms of community (the Net), is seen in our society, and indeed remains open to the incorporation of the older arcana.

Ecstatic-electronic art against the controlling world's sedate blandness Re: The Changing Shape of Art

Posted by Joseph Nechvatal at Saturday, April 02, 2011

For me, the purely abstract associated with Kandinsky is a played out trope, more materialistic than spiritual. What seems to stand a slight change for a new spiritual art today is an impure electronic-based semi-abstraction; that is, abstraction mixed with infected representation.

Such a post-abstract approach to spiritual art suggests to me an inventing of an electronic-based art in which what matters is no longer pure identities, or logos, or distinctive characters but rather ecstatically dense phantasmagorical forces developed on the basis of inclusion—where from now on things will be represented only from the depths of an infected and inclusive energetic density withdrawn into itself (perhaps adumbrated and darkened by its obscurity) but bound tightly together and inescapably grouped by the vigorous connections that are hidden below in its digital depth (code).

Such noisy, semi-abstract capricious forms of ecstatic-electronic art (with their rhizomatizing connections) placed within a full ground that never isolates them but rather surrounds their outline with excess - all this might be presented to our spiritualizing gaze in a post-abstract art matrix. Such are the powers of a new spiritual art.

May I just say that this phantasmal flee from both pure abstraction and the play of popularity-based representation has the most urgent political/social ramifications in our media saturated society.

Taney Roniger:

I like the term "post-abstract" very much as a way of defining our current situation (and it seems to apply just as much to the analog arts it does to the digital). Truly Kandinskyan abstraction being today out of the question, it seems that many artists have settled for an endless recapitulation of Greenbergian formalism, without, I take it, too much concern for the Modernist agenda it continues to perpetuate (i.e., the supposed autonomy of art, notions of purity and disinterestedness -- the whole Kantian inheritance, in short). It's interesting that Charlene brought up Kandinsky's "crisis of the missing subject," as I'd call it -- the period during which he felt acutely anxious about what would replace the representation of real-world objects in the new art *as content.* I wonder if, now that "pure" abstraction has run its course, we've reached a similar crisis of content, of meaning. Once again we seem to be pointing beyond the dualism -- this time that of abstraction and representation, or form and content.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

I remembered you told me about Philip Guston. I guess he has something to do with the post-abstract (or he might even trigger that)? It seems like Kandinsky v.s.

Guston as abstraction v.s. concrete representation (in Taney's words). So we are interested in the middle ground between the "heaven" and "earth"?

Nothing has approached this dynamic semi-abstraction better than the digital at the present time. I absolutely love this new shape of art.

Taney Roniger:

I wonder if there's an important distinction to be made between the "middle ground between heaven and earth," as Yuting wonderfully puts it, and a third way that encompasses both poles at once. I say this only because I'm always a bit dubious when it comes to middle ways that seek to level extremes, as they often end up resembling the "sedate blandness" that Joseph cites.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Good point, Taney. You made think of one possible reconciliation between the two cases (in fact, it was pointed out in the first day). We can make that middle ground dynamic instead of static, so that one may be able to commute between the two poles while is always in the middle--the path connecting the two poles.

Joseph Nechvatal:

Yes on both/and fusion achieved by entering in and coupling where intense difference is confronted and addressed in both directions. My interest is not in denying differences between two modes, but in investigating how these two models may interact in new ways.

Comments from Barbara Braathen

Posted by Taney Roniger at Saturday, April 02, 2011

One of our readers, Barbara Braathen, has just submitted the following, which needs no introduction:

Checking the dictionary for "spiritual," it is defined as that which is incorporeal, etheric as opposed to physical, supernatural, sacred. To disassociate art from the spiritual is somewhat disingenuous, since the art-situation, however embodied, alludes to feelings, concepts, theories, possibilities, projections, or just memory itself, all non-physical. (I loved Atta Kim's discussion of the point in Kandinsky's writing.) For instance, while Donald Judd expressed an aversion to both illusion and allusion in art, his work nevertheless provides unique, valuable, and memorable experiences of simplicity, purity, and fineness itself. One of the panelists in this symposium, Suzanne Anker, bases her artwork on science and, by her statement here, eschews the spiritual; nevertheless, her work brings to our awareness science's incredible advances into the nature of nature, how we are composed, and confronts us, in aesthetic form, with the mystery of our own being. It appears that once one ponders the deeper issues of any work of art, one enters the realm of the ineffable, the spiritual.

In the 60s, when I was in school, and in a circle of young and ardent artists in Los Angeles, it was still acceptable to discuss the spiritual in art. This too was a period, perhaps like the early 20th century, when explorations into Mme. Blavatsky, Bishop Leadbeater, Annie Besant, Rudolf

Steiner, the eastern religions, and then for us, Gurdjieff, AA Bailey, and many other mystics, were of great interest. We dabbled in channeling through automatic handwriting, lifted tables in séances, amplified our studies with the occasional psychedelic (discovering how truly unreliable are appearances), and witnessed Swami Satchidananda, at close range in a living room, in meditation levitating about four feet off the floor. I became convinced of the substantiality of the incorporeal, to say the least.

At that time, each exhibition of new art and each issue of Artforum were like powerful jolts of lightning, shaping the exciting present and charging up the future. There was a term often used in referencing contemporary art, viz., "The Mission." Art's "Mission" was to open vision, to heal the heart, to feed the mind, to transcend all fetters into the freedom of the new and the creative, to perceive inventions from artists in order to be able to face challenges in a novel world with novel mental and emotional tools. Perhaps "The Mission" embodied the last dying gasp of the idealism which fueled modernism...but for us this was art's turf, and it was spiritual in nature, expansive into the unknown terrain of the soul, whether individual, collective, systemic, or cosmic. Bruce Nauman said it in 1967, in blazing neon, tongue-in-cheek or not: "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths."

Sometime early in the 80s, not only did the future stop looking so exciting, but it was clear that the word "spiritual" as applied to art was absolutely unacceptable...and "The Mission" had entirely disappeared from discourse. I winced when you mentioned, Taney, that you were often met with pity upon bringing up this topic. Pity!!! I have always pitied those not interested in the spiritual mysteries which are of such great fascination to me.... But you learn to not bring up the topic, and eventually to appreciate the other side of thought.

I still believe that art has the power to change the individual, the culture, and the future, and that it inhabits a highly honorable, sacred field. Whether the artist's concern is political, phenomenological, descriptive, symbolic, scientific, cynical, decorative, aleatory, comical, conceptual, illustrative, numerical, whether the art installation is an accumulation of detritus or one of Platonic solids, and no matter what the artist claims, all art is essentially spiritual.

Jeff Edwards:

Thanks for posting this on Barbara Braathen's behalf, Taney. It's beautiful, and surprisingly poignant.

I love the way she describes the experience of Judd's art; it's very close to the way I've often approached it.

As I've mentioned elsewhere in this symposium, I would push the decline of spiritual idealism among technophiles back another 15 or 20 years, but for the art world I think she's got the timing right.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

I would like to [challenge] the last sentence a little bit: "art is essentially spiritual"... I think "culture" is the place that technologies jump in. Art is for the living people (will be the discussion of the next section), and speak to living generations through evolving languages--technology. I can't deny the possibility/power of many kinds of mysticism. However, I don't accept Bruce Nauman's point: "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths" for many reasons -- for example, it's hard to swallow the meaning of mystic truths and he severely biased the responsibility of an artist (will be

discussed in the end section) in the mystical category that belongs to the spiritual at large. And yet, it says nothing about the culture...

Taney Roniger:

@ Jeff: Yes, I found it quite a beautiful statement.

@ Yuting: I'm fairly sure Nauman had his tongue firmly in his cheek with that statement, but it's certainly a view that others take very seriously. I'm looking forward to hearing what everyone has to say about the role of the artist in a few days, as this is an issue that haunts us all, whether we're aware of it or not.

Analogue versus digital

Posted by Taney Roniger on Saturday, April 02, 2011

In light of the recurrence of the subject of digital technology in our efforts to delineate a “new spiritual art,” I thought I’d pose more directly a question that was only implied in the initial set—namely, is there something inherently spiritual (i.e., conducive to a sense of connectedness to a larger whole) about digital representations that their analogue counterparts lack? I’m thinking about the increasingly pervasive computational model of the universe, wherein nature is understood as a vast digital computer (which to some is merely metaphorical but to others not at all so). Another way to put the question is: Is there something more *real* and accurate (because more accurately reflective of the inner workings of nature) about digital that analogue cannot attain? Or, alternatively, are analogue representations more real and accurate in their reflection of a continuous rather than a discrete world? Or, finally, is the question of digital versus analogue merely a passing trend that will be rendered irrelevant in years to come?

Taney Roniger:

On this topic the work of Nathaniel Dorsky, whose films we'll be showing next week in New York in conjunction with this project, seems relevant. Although Nathaniel's films are emphatically analogue (he doesn't allow digital copies to be made), he has written about intermittence being an essential quality in film. Analogue films are actually anything but seamless; what we see are discrete frames separated by split-second periods of blackness, and although we may think what we're seeing is continuous, the somatic effect of film is one of a subtle rhythm that “mirrors” the human metabolism. I hope he might say something about this himself in this forum.

Jeff Edwards:

One of the things that fascinates me about digital information technology is the way that it allows for mixing across mediums that was impossible before. I think I first came across this idea in some writings by Lev Manovich I discovered online a couple years ago, and it's fascinated me ever since.

For example, text, images, and sound can all coexist within a single web page or digital artwork, and can interact in ways that were inconceivable a couple decades ago. Similarly, hypertext allows documents to interact and cross-cut within a reader's mind, thereby opening up things a lot. Some people seem to think of this kind of lateral reading as a bad thing, because it seems to threaten the traditional experience of focused, close reading, but I think it can be very liberating and creative. It can help break apart the

hypnotic allure of traditional rhetoric that Plato was so scared of (see the Phaedrus), and also bring into being the kind of ergodic (or necessarily reader-completed) text that Espen Aarseth has written about. (The rhetoric argument also comes from Manovich.)

Taney Roniger:

Interesting, Jeff. I myself find that very thing -- the collision of text, image, and sound -- absolutely crazy-making, and as such directly antithetical to the spiritual (often it feels more like a collusion than a collision -- like a vicious assault on my senses -- but that's just my particular cognitive make-up). That said, I know others who find it liberating and are able to navigate multi-sensory environments with great deftness. On this note, I remember when hypertext first came out; did that ever really take off? I've not seen much of it since the early 2000s. In theory I find it fascinating -- I can imagine the possibilities for an altogether unprecedented reading experience -- but in actual practice I've found it clunky and awkward.

Jeff Edwards:

I think old-school hypertext has never been used to its full potential, but even in the much less extensive way that it's used across the web today (in the form of hyperlinks) it provides opportunities to open up texts and read them in parallel in ways that change the experience of reading significantly. I often find myself starting a news story or scholarly article and either pursuing existing links in a dizzying trip away from the home text, or creating my own on-the-fly hypertext by googling terms as they come up and then following the search until it's exhausted itself and I'm ready to return to where I started. I'm pretty comfortable with that, though I admit that it's probably done some strange things to the way I read more traditional printed texts.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Excuse my insufficient pool of terminologies, but I want to know what the analogue is. As I'm considering the digit in the sense that a number is represented by an ordered (implies the position) collection of digits, a digit is a basic element in the representation of a number. If I think in this relatively broad sense, the digital can be traced back to the ancient cultures. For example, the golden ratio has a unique and elegant representation by the continued fraction (all entries are 1's). It inspired the faith in the existence and uniqueness of God. And the modern digital was enriched indebted to the invention of computers and the binary representation system. If we talk about the "*real* and accurate," we have already assumed an ideal system in comparison -- so that [we know] how accurate our digital approximation is. From this perspective, I do accept that a transcendental view is inevitable. All physical realities (understood in a process), described by some models, are idealized. You have posed many good questions/insights that make me ponder the digital much [more richly] than before.

Taney Roniger:

Yuting, am I correct in inferring that you are a mathematician? It's great to have your perspective. When I say "digital versus analogue" I'm primarily referring to, of course, digital and analogue technologies (e.g., digital photography versus darkroom photography), but also, in a more general sense, to processes that occur by way of discrete jumps or units (as in binary code, where it's either 0 or 1, and never 0.5 or 0.6 on

its way to 1) versus those that occur by way of a continuous, seamless, "gapless" slide. The example usually cited is the discrepancy between how the world **appears** to us -- i.e., as more or less solid shapes that move continuously in space from point A to point B -- and how physics tells us the world **actually** works (i.e., on the subatomic level, where electrons "leap" between orbits without passing through the intermediate space). So that the world appears to be analogue, while we know that on the subatomic level it's digital. If we want our representations to be "real and accurate," in the sense of reflecting how the world is objectively, which approach do we choose?

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Ahh, it's embarrassing. I failed to hide that I'm still doing math. Yes, now I [have] a clue of the digital and analogue in this context. I go for the digital of course; that's what happens in this century. If we choose the analogue, we could use it in a counter/ironic way. So the intention is still the unification through the decomposition into the smallest unit of representation.

Taney Roniger:

Having given the matter a bit more thought, I'm going to retract my use of the words "real" and "accurate" in connection with artistic representations. In one sense, accuracy is for science and not art, but in a more interesting sense, representations, being representations, can **never** be accurate. Representations are illusions. They can be truthful, but they don't traffic in accuracy. I therefore think "truthful" is a better word.

**Re: Taney's latest questions and the changing shape of art
Posted by Jeff Edwards on Saturday, April 02, 2011**

Some of this session's questions are setting off a lot of different thoughts and associations in my head, as are the latest posts that Joseph and Charlene put up. I'll see if I can set out some of these thoughts without everything getting too jumbled.

I'm not sure how I feel about Taney's question on analogue versus digital. I'm fascinated with digital media, augmented reality, virtuality, and so on, but I still don't have an opinion on whether analogue trumps digital in terms of spirituality. To me, the answer to that resides in the complex relationship between sensory effects and a person's cognitive and emotional responses, both of which seem pretty variable (especially when memories enter the equation). Personally, I don't have a preference, and think that both have the potential to elicit a spiritual response or convey spiritual content. The question I'm avoiding here is which of the two are best able to embody the spiritual. I don't know, but I think a good way to crack that question open might be to consider whether the spiritual should be treated as something immanent, or transcendent (something that came up in the first session), and then try to decide if there is a way to map the analogue/digital split onto the immanent transcendent/split. I might be way off on the wrong track here, but it's a thought.

I don't agree with Joseph that pure abstraction is played out as a vehicle for the spiritual, though decades of Formalist emphasis on the painted surface at the expense of content did a lot to smother the spiritual, as did the rise of Minimalist sculpture, which was often directly focused on material surfaces and textures alone. That being said, I've always felt perfectly free to read Donald Judd's sculptures as visible Platonic forms, even though that might have sent him into a fit. I suppose I also shouldn't limit the conversation to painting. Brancusi's sculptures deserve at least passing mention, as do some of Jean Arp's, since many of them were as spiritually focused

in their own way as Kandinsky's painting was. I'm not sure if such a spiritual approach to sculpture exists anywhere right now, though my guess is that it has to, somewhere.

Abstraction is no longer privileged as a locus for spirituality, but I'm resistant to the idea of looking for a single medium or type of artmaking where it is privileged. Given how diverse art is right now in terms of both mediums and artists' intentions, I think that the spiritual can pop up almost anywhere. As a result, the object still has a place, but might not be absolutely necessary. As with so many of the topics that are coming up in this symposium, it seems to be a situation where each specific case needs to be considered individually.

As to actual artworks, I'm not interested in trying to set down an extensive list, but I will mention a few things that have caught my eye in recent years.

First, from the art-historical/art-critical side of things, I've noticed a growing interest in revisiting older art and reevaluating its relation to the spiritual. A few recent catalogs and monographs on Yves Klein seem to pay particular attention to the spiritual underpinnings of his work, as though we're now ready to look through the image of him as a proto-conceptualist and see what lies beneath. Issue 135 of *Frieze* (November–December 2010) was mostly devoted to articles on religion and spirituality in art; though the quality of the pieces was pretty uneven, it was interesting to see the topic make the cover of the magazine.

As to art itself, looking for the spiritual becomes something of a scavenger hunt, a quest to find specifically spiritual works within the huge mass of stuff that's out there. Whenever something pops up, the question then arises as to whether a specific piece or body of work is spiritual (in that it directly expresses some type of spiritual experience), or just about the spiritual (a sort of outside-looking-in situation). In the few pieces I'll mention here, I'm not going to make that distinction. My criterion for including them is the effect they had on me when I encountered them; if they struck a chord somewhere deep, they're on the list.

One time-based medium that Taney doesn't explicitly mention is performance art, a medium that also incorporates place, at least in a transient sense. I don't get to see much performance, but I spent a lot of time buzzing around Manhattan and catching what I could during the last (2009) Performa festival. At the time, I was struck by how much of the performances had something to do with the spiritual in one way or another. Some of them were very self-consciously art-critical and/or historically literate, as in a lecture-performance by Guillaume Desanges at X Initiative in which he set out a brilliant tongue-in-cheek theory rooting geometric abstraction in things like Kabbalah and sacred geometry. Others were much more direct, though still containing an element of whimsy. Ylva Ogland did a performance at The Swiss Institute called *Snöfrid Ruby Distillery*, in which she constructed a pretty exact replica of a Renaissance alchemist's rig and spent three days gently trying to distill her intangible mirror twin into manifestation; the fact that the side-product of the process was a very strong alcohol distilled from champagne and rubies added a nice edge to the piece. There were also several other performances with the same feel during Performa 09, but those are the two that I've thought about the most.

In the comments on my last post, a really good conversation on Buddhism in art came up, with a good list of artists who have been deeply influenced by Buddhist ideas or Buddhist practice. I would add a few more, including Mariko Mori, Rirkrit Tiravanija, James Lee Byars, Mingwei Lee, and more recently Marina Abramovic (for example, her 2008 projects *Eight Lessons on Emptiness with a Happy End* and *The Family* were both inspired by a growing personal engagement with Buddhism). Some of these artists are still making work under the same influences.

It's always been interesting to me that while Buddhism was so easily absorbed into the art scene, Hinduism has barely made a dent. The only artist that comes to my mind is Mati Klarwein, and the elements of Hinduism found in his works often get shouted down by the cacophony of pop-mystical imagery derived from so many other sources, including science fiction and centerfolds. Some of Alex Grey's paintings also owe a lot to ideas and imagery from Hinduism. Maybe there are others, but if there are I've missed them.

On the other hand, there's a thriving tradition of spirituality in contemporary art in India. Indian painting can look very conservative and behind the times to a Western eye; many artists are still working in the vein of late 19th and early 20th century abstraction. However, some of them are using art as a direct means of exploring transformative states and spiritual ideas derived directly from Hinduism and its offshoots. A few names I could throw out include Syed Haider Raza, J. Swaminathan, Sohan Qadri, Arpana Caur, Gaitonde, Ramkumar, G.R. Santosh, and Sujata Bajaj. Some of these artists come from a tantric background, and many of them consider painting to be an act of prayer or meditation. Most of these artists are a recent discovery for me, so I'm still learning about them. (I discovered them in an Indian edition of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* that I mentioned in my preliminary statement for this symposium.) I thought I'd throw them into the mix, with the idea that they might have a place to play in Western spiritual art in the future.

Daoism is in a similar situation. At best, its influence on modern and contemporary art has been very indirect, with the adoption of the Yiing by John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and some of the Fluxus artists (in art circles it's probably more well known under the old Wade-Giles transliteration I Ching, but I used the Pinyin system in one of my earlier comments, so I'll stick with the new spelling for the sake of consistency). However, that barely counts, since most of these artists primarily used the Yijing as a simple random number generator and completely disregarded its text (contemporary composer Elodie Lauten, who has also used the Yijing in her compositions, has criticized Cage for this). The one artist I can think of who used the Yijing and Daoist ideas more deeply was the Argentinian painter Xul Solar, who made several paintings that drew a lot from both, and who was also influenced by alchemy and Renaissance magic, among other things.

I was also going to put something in here about pop spirituality, but I think I'll save it for later, or possibly never. I'd have to touch on the history of fringe religions within the U.S., and I'm not sure how well that would fit here. For now, I'll pass over the topic lightly by saying that there seems to be something of a cycle in broader public interest about spiritual topics, with peaks every 20 years or so, and we may be heading toward another high point. If that happens, it will be interesting to see if/how the art world gets affected by it.

Beyond this vague and unruly collection of thoughts, I really don't have a well-formed idea of what the future of spiritual art might look like. I think new/digital media will have a role to play, but because the art scene is so multifaceted and multivocal right now, it's hard to predict just where the next great expression of the spiritual will occur, or what it will look like.

Taney Roniger:

So much to chew on there, Jeff -- thanks for all of it. I'm glad you pointed out my omission of performance art, which I myself am surprised by, given my strong and very ambivalent reaction to the Abramovic performance at MoMA last year. That piece was nothing if not spiritual **in intent**, though I'm still undecided as to the extent of its spiritual effect. With Abramovic, I simply cannot get away from the suspicion that the work is all about **her** -- her spiritual superiority, her aura of interior perfection, her

extraordinary ability to withstand feats of unimaginable concentration, etc. While I may be duly impressed, I certainly wouldn't call my being so a spiritual experience. In any case, I do appreciate her (and others') efforts to de-materialize art and underscore actions, relationships, processes, etc. It's an important move, and one I admire, but I myself remain committed to the object.

One of our panelists, Daniel Siedell, has written eloquently about the "economy of the icon" in religious art and about how objects can embody presence in a way that is profoundly spiritual and quite palpable. I may have more to say on this later, but I do hope Dan will share some of his thinking on this with the panel.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

@Taney: I like your comment of the Abramovic performance very much. I only managed to see some photos. My feeling is that she is very much a diva--dominant, self-expressive, even though she was almost motionless. There isn't much left to do in the "de-materialize art". Moving to the "object" is what I'm looking forward to.

@Jeff: there are many inspirations in your article. My superficial thinking is that maybe there is something common/shared among all these religions/spirituality. The diversity of different religions may grow exponentially in the future. Keeping track of each one of them is too much work. As you make some distinction between the ancient and contemporary spiritual, to me, the essence (the timeless element) would be the same.

My further question, or just curiosity, is has anybody any thought of the emerging works of art dealing with consciousness, and how to reframe consciousness (in the context of the spiritual)? A bad question as it is. I know I'm not good at dealing with these "soft"/open terms.

Taney Roniger:

Yuting, your comment about the shared essence -- or "timeless element" -- across the various religious and spiritual traditions brings to mind the perennial philosophy popularized by Aldous Huxley in his book by that name and a lesser-known book by Frithjof Schuon called *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. The premise there is that the essence of religion (and the spiritual) lies in the search for union with Oneness, however variously that is conceived. Huxley and so many others have insisted that we never lose sight of what the various traditions and approaches have in common despite their obvious differences, and I think it's good advice to heed. It's interesting that in this conversation we've been searching for that very thing -- a unity that transcends the various dualisms, including that of transcendence and immanence.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

@Taney: thank you for the clue. That makes a beautiful point. A unity is what we are looking for here, and I think it's not a coincidence that the contemporary physicists' dream is a grand unification of all physical laws.

Jeff Edwards:

@Yuting: I feel like I'm at a loss to come up with any new (or even relatively recent) artworks that deal with consciousness in such a broad and transformative manner. With the possible exception of Osmose and Ephemere by Char Davies (which I mentioned in an earlier post), I'm drawing a blank, though I know that a lot of new media artists are very concerned with consciousness. I'm probably forgetting a great example; maybe it will come to me later, or maybe someone else can help me out.

On the other hand, I feel like there are plenty of artworks that deal with specific instances of consciousness; any political art that tries to inform, influence, or change minds fits into that category, but maybe that's a clumsy and obvious example.

Maybe a better example is John Slepian, whose "virtual bodies" pieces (2000-2006) placed repulsive computer-generated creatures in carefully designed physical settings in order to make a point about how even patently artificial objects can elicit genuine emotional responses. For example, his piece *little_one* (2005) presented a deformed and almost featureless virtual baby on the screen of a large, pink, Tamagotchi-like object placed in a crib. The creature would start to make baby-like noises when approached, and would present a range of responses (from laughing to screaming) depending on how you handled it when you picked it up. People seemed to have very real responses to it, ranging from nervous laughter to empathy. The idea that something so obviously not alive can create a genuine emotional reaction is fascinating, and says a lot about our susceptibility to images. (You can see stills and video of *little_one* and Slepian's other works at johnslep.net)

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Thanks Jeff, I like your descriptions of these works. I'll check them out virtually.

Reader (Nettrice):

In a previous comment I mentioned Doze Green's current body of work consists of paintings that translate complex metaphysical concepts that resonate with Afrofuturism, such as the "possible manipulation of energy and matter to create a timeless space." Green speaks about performance as part of the process of creating abstract, graffiti-inspired painting, ie "The Left Hand Path." I had a conversation with my friend Pema Rinzin who recently exhibited with Doze about leaving the traditional Tibetan art form and embracing the kind of work Doze is doing (urban metaphysics). During this exchange I had an "Aha! moment" in that I realized that the nature of the art was intentionally liminal and syncretic. The syncretic reality that is emerging from the convergence of Mixed Reality technology and altered states of consciousness, and metaphors drawn from biology, quantum physics, field theory, language, combined with cultural, social and spiritual practices, in a hybrid space of potentiality.

Joseph Nechvatal:

@Nettrice

Thank you for pointing us to the work of Doze Green. I personally think that Afrofuturism is a very important movement. In short, I think that Afrofuturism asks us how can art reactivate the spirit in our times and the political potential inherent in artistic activity with its power to unleash spiritual goals? By which I mean, its power to embody

the mutations of the sensible, and thereby, contribute to reconfiguring the energy of the world.

Rammellzee was under appreciated (in my opinion) as a theorist. I have put some of his writings together here on my blog: <http://post.thing.net/node/3086>

The hidden spiritual dimension of American art
Posted by Taney Roniger at Saturday, April 02, 2011

An interesting topic came up in one of the previous threads that seems to deserve a thread of its own: The undercurrent of Buddhist and other spiritual orientations that "secretly" runs through a lot of American art we don't generally consider spiritual. Below are some of the comments in that thread.

Joseph Nechvatal said...

The topic of the child has reminded me of I book I read in 1972 on non-transcendental spirituality (correct me if I am wrong here): Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind by Shunryu Suzuki. And this reminded me of Suzuki's impact on John Cage and Cage's huge impact on American art in the 60s and 70s via Fluxus. So perhaps there has been a bigger hidden spirituality embedded in American art than we may have assumed. Hmmmmm. What do you think?

Taney Roniger said...

Yes, the influence of Zen specifically and Buddhism in general on American art has been enormous. The show at the Guggenheim a few years back called The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia (curated by Alexandra Munroe) revealed many of these hidden undercurrents. (The exhibition catalogue, by the way, is gorgeous and full of insightful essays by a number of scholars, and Max Gimblett, who is on our panel here, was in the show.) I was surprised to learn that artists such as Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Sam Francis, Lee Mullican, and Gordon Onslow-Ford (not to mention the more obvious ones such as Robert Irwin, James Turrell, and Richard Tuttle) studied Buddhist thought and were influenced by its concept of sunyata, or emptiness. I'm glad you brought this up, Joseph, because indeed Buddhism does offer a powerful model for a non-transcendental, non-theistic, here-and-now rather than there-and-then based spirituality. Perhaps Max will say something more about this. I believe we also have a number of other practicing Buddhists on the panel (Pawel Wojtasik, Atta Kim, and Max are the ones that come directly to mind.)

Yuting Zou said...

I remembered, from somewhere, Yoko Ono pointed out that the NY avant-garde movement was basically influenced by oriental philosophy, Japanese Zen in particular. I guess I read it from her book Grapefruit or some remarks of this book. Duchamp had been a good friend of Cage, they had common interest in the oriental, and had a performance of playing chess one night. they had two groups of people playing together. with electronic device under the chess board. according to the movement of the chess, different electronic sounds were made. they said the concept was that intellectual people can play very chance music... I think chess related event are spiritual, as it was a standard spirit-nourishing practice in ancient China, though it's dead now.

Pawel Wojtasik said...

Joseph, it was another Suzuki, the scholar Daisetz Teisaro (D.T.) Suzuki who influenced Cage. D.T. Suzuki's lectures at Columbia were famous among artists in the 40's and 50's. Agnes Martin, Rauschenberg, Philip Guston, Alan Ginsberg were influenced and inspired by them. And I agree with you, there is a hidden undercurrent of spirituality embedded in a lot of American art in places where we normally would not look for it, for example in the work of Bruce Nauman. Joseph Nechvatal said...

Thank you Pawel.

Might we consider Jungian psychology's influence on Jackson Pollock (and other AE and Surrealist artists?) as another buried spiritual influence on American art? Is Carl Gustav Jung considered a spiritualist? Do his interests in alchemy and astrology qualify him as such?

Taney Roniger said...

I'd say Jung is very much considered a spiritualist, which is why he's fallen out of favor among "right-thinking" intellectuals (I mean right as in correct). The archetypes alone put him in that category -- i.e., their transcendent, universalist nature.

Joseph Nechvatal said...

I saw the show "Malevich and the American Legacy" today and the above logic of suppressed spiritual intentions embedded in American art again came to mind based on Malevich's spiritual goals. I know that the spiritual ideas that Malevich attempted to embody in Suprematism are difficult to summarize, for his writing is often vague and mystical. Can anyone help me here with them?

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Oh wow, I didn't know this thread was still expanding. As far as I know, Jung had a lot to do with I Ching, here is his foreword to I Ching (book of changes): <http://www.iging.com/intro/foreword.htm>
From that book, he developed one of his signature concept "synchronicity." As he said:
"This assumption involves a certain curious principle that I have termed synchronicity,"

Taney Roniger:

For those who may not know: The show Joseph is referring to is currently at Gogosian Gallery through April 30th (980 Madison Avenue in Manhattan).

I love the Malevich and Judd quotes that appear on the gallery's website:

"I have transformed myself into the zero of form and dragged myself out of the rubbish-filled pool of Academic Art. I have destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped from the circle of things, from the horizon-ring which confines the artist and the forms of nature."

--Kazimir Malevich

"It's obvious now that the forms and colors in the paintings that Malevich began painting in 1915 are the first instances of form and color."

---Donald Judd

I look forward to seeing the show this week.

Until then, I love that the bombast of Malevich's quote doesn't strike us as bombastic, his being Malevich. One could never get away with such grand, sweeping statements about one's own work today. But there's something to be said for soaring aspirations, is there not? Perhaps one will be allowed to have them again some day. Going back to the recurring theme of "third ways" that has emerged in this symposium, I wonder if the third way in between the exultant metaphysics of transcendent modernism and the prevailing cynicism of our time will allow for an art that has grand philosophical and spiritual visions once again -- or, will the latter forever be condemned to the status of kitsch?

Reader (Nettrice):

To go further with Pema Rinzin's shift from traditional Tibetan Art to his current exploration of abstraction (urban metaphysics) and how it relates to this discussion... ie how the "prevailing cynicism" of the present has influenced non-Western art and I think this offers us an interesting opportunity for dialogue. I am trying to decide whether or not I like Pema's shift from the traditional to modern abstraction. Of course I don't have a say in the matter but Pema and I have talked about it over beer in a Boston pub, for example. What is at stake is the preservation of traditional Tibetan art for future generations as well as the progression of Tibetan art in a contemporary world. Where does this leave the spiritual aspects of the traditional? Does it remain or does it get sacrificed for progress?

FYI - The bio: Pema Rinzin studied Tibetan painting from 1979 through 1983 in Dharamsala, India, and taught at the Tibetan Children's Village School there from 1984 through 1992. From 1995 through 2004 he worked as an artist-in-residence at the Shoko Temple and Institute, Nagano, Japan, where he completed eight major Buddhist paintings for Yuko Mikasaka, the abbot of the Shingon Temple. After completing his residency, he traveled to Bamberg, Germany, where he had his first European exhibition at the City Gallery. Pema Rinzin was an artist-in-residence at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City and broke out to start the NY Tibetan Art Studio, the only institute in the Western Hemisphere dedicated to teaching and preserving Tibetan art.

Taney Roniger:

Thanks for bringing Pema Rinzin into the fold, Nettrice. And you raise a very interesting question about the sacrifices cultures make in the name of "progress." I'm not familiar with the work, but I'll look into it now...

Reader (Nettrice):

You're welcome. Pema's most recent show:

http://joshualinergallery.com/exhibitions/rinzin_compassion_transformed_january_27_2011

I just informed Pema about this discussion. Maybe he'll make an appearance. To answer my own question about sacrifice: I think the NY Tibetan Art Studio serves as a way to preserve the traditional while the gallery space is Pema's site for transformation (progress). It doesn't have to be either or. On the other hand, the questions I posed remain valid beyond Pema's example.

Jeff Edwards:

@ Yuting: You're right about the Yijing/I Ching, and its influence on Jung's development of the idea of synchronicity.

Thinking about the Yijing jogged my memory about Princeton University's Bollingen series, has published a lot of texts relevant to this symposium over the years, some of which are listed at this link: <http://press.princeton.edu/catalogs/series/bs.html>. The list doesn't seem to be complete, as it's missing the book *Spirit and Nature: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, a collection of essays by Jung and several others that was edited by Joseph Campbell. I don't know what else is missing from the list, but I caught that one.)

As Joseph mentioned above, Jung wrote a lot about alchemy and astrology, both of which he interpreted psychologically; for Jung, the alchemists were working with archetypes in a quest for self-integration, even if they didn't consciously know it. Jung didn't come up with this idea himself—he got it from Herbert Silberer, who in turn got it from Ethan Allen Hitchcock—but he developed it much further than they did. He also studied Gnosticism, though I'm not sure if/what he wrote about it, and he wrote about mandalas and used them as a therapeutic tool for working with dream imagery (his book on mandalas has some amazing full-color images of his patients' paintings). During the height of the late-1950s flying saucer flap in the U.S., he even wrote a book in which he interpreted UFOs in light of the collective unconscious.

I'm not sure if Jung would have considered himself a spiritualist, despite his interest in a lot of spiritually-oriented topics. I've heard conflicting things about that. He always tied his interests back to his own theories on archetypes and the collective unconscious, which he may have considered to be at least quasi-scientific. In any case, the range of these topics was pretty broad, and I think his lingering influence among spiritually oriented people at least merits him the title of honorary spiritualist.

I'm glad that Pawel mentioned Agnes Martin; she's a great person to include in any discussion of spirituality and art. Although she resisted labels such as "mystic" and downplayed any connection between her work and things like Zen Buddhism, she also claimed later in life that all of her paintings came from direct visions, which she called "inspirations". These visions were supposedly very specific (right down to the colors, number of stripes, and proportions), and I think she thought of them as illustrations of the simple, pure states of awareness that are reflected in some of her titles (such as *Innocent Joy*). Whenever the inspirations would stop coming, she would stop painting.

Her writings sometimes read like inspired texts, which is probably why a lot of people associate her with mystical traditions. (Unfortunately, they're out of print right now, and copies of the most recent Hatje Cantz edition are going for ridiculously high prices on the secondhand book market.

Two pretty good sources for information about Martin are the exhibition catalogue *Agnes Martin* by Barbara Haskell, Anna C. Chave and Rosalind Krauss, and the documentary *Agnes Martin: With My Back to the World*, directed by Mary Lance.

Taney Roniger:

Jeff, your comment has me rushing to my bookshelf and dusting off some very old and half-forgotten volumes. One of these rediscoveries I'm particularly happy to have made is that book from the Bollingen series called *Understanding the I Ching - The Wilhelm Lectures on The Book of Changes*, by Hellmut and Richard Wilhelm. Thanks for that! It's a bit of a shame that Jung felt ambivalent (or seems to have) about the spiritual, given that his interests were so obviously inclined in that direction. But I suppose the climate of the times -- coupled with Freud's lifelong insistence that psychoanalysis be considered a rigorous science (doth somebody protest too much?) -- made it difficult.

Yeah, Agnes Martin is hugely relevant here. I tend to find her writing insufferable, however. I wonder if I'm the only one who feels that way. I'm reminded of what Gertrude Stein said to Picasso after reading a draft of a play he'd written: "Picasso, go home and paint!"

Jeff Edwards:

I might have more tolerance for Martin's writing because I've read a lot of similar-feeling things from various different religious traditions.

It may also be due to the fact that the documentary I mentioned above includes a lot of scenes with her speaking in a very similar fashion, and I encountered that at around the same time that I found her writings. The former may have prepared me for the latter.

On a related note, I know a few people who say that the film puts them to sleep. It's very slow and gentle.

Joseph Nechvatal:

From the press release of "Malevich and the American Legacy": "It is not only formal analogy that connects Malevich and American artists but also deeper aesthetic, conceptual, and spiritual correspondences."

This also reminded me of a show I saw in Paris last year: "Mondrian/De Stijl: interweaving paths"
<http://www.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-mondrian/ENS-mondrian-en.html>

Room 1: "'The Spirituality behind the Vision' – casts new light on the Dutch symbolist and theosophical undercurrents that merged into the De Stijl movement, which Mondrian also researched (even though he gravitated away from them later on), and which rippled through early 20th-century art and architecture as far as Bauhaus."

So it seems to me that almost ALL of Modern Art was based in spiritual ideals. The question is, why were they abandoned?

Joseph Nechvatal:

On second thought, I don't believe that there were any "spiritual" virtues attached to Cubism, Futurism, Dada or Surrealism. Am I correct about this?

Reader (Yuting Zou):

A quick thought: I think Cubism was partly influenced by flamenco, and flamenco is quite fragmental, dense and fast paced. Flamenco dated back to the Muslim region early on in Spain. Some typical Spanish architectures give that a visual aid. watch this:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4D7rX6OOljg&feature=related>

Taney Roniger:

It seems we still haven't gotten to the bottom of that question -- i.e., why were they (the spiritual ideals of modern art) abandoned? Somewhere along the way a shift occurred after which artists ceased to pursue these ideals (at least *explicitly*, because as we've seen "the spiritual" has never really gone away but only been pushed behind closed doors). Can anybody identify what changed? I suppose one could cite the increasingly tight stranglehold exerted by all the anti-spiritual modernist forces on the collective psyche (materialism, positivism, etc.), but none of that stopped the likes of Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, etc. It seems clear that somewhere along the line art grew acutely self-conscious about its own impotence in the face of these things, so that the effort to seriously pursue the challenge came to seem vain, futile, and quaint.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

I wonder if the psychological and the subconscious can be regarded as species of the spiritual

Taney Roniger:

@ Yuting: Good question, and I tend to think the answer is: yes! As Barbara Braathen pointed out earlier, "the spiritual" might be seen to encompass the entire spectrum of life's invisible realities, which includes not just entities like souls, spirits, and gods, but also ideas, emotions, sensations, etc. -- in short, consciousness itself and all its constituents. Has anybody ever seen a consciousness? Can anybody measure it empirically, or quantify it scientifically, or render it verifiable, repeatable, etc.? I say no. It seems to me that consciousness is itself the most profound spiritual mystery... which is why I find Freud's insistence on psychoanalysis as a hard science absurd.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Then we now pass the ball to Joseph, as Cubism, Futurism, Dada or Surrealism may all have spiritual values. Even Dada's abandonment of dogmas (can I say so?) is "spiritual" to me. Of course, it's not mystic at all, however, it suggests another level of depth in thinking (consciousness) and problematizes a traditional axiomatic approach.

Reader (Peggy Klineman):

Tapping into the subconscious and/or the intuition definitely seems like a component of spirituality in art. If you believe as I do that we are part of a collective universe, then following one's intuition becomes a key component in the art making process.

Joseph Nechvatal:

Must have had to do with the rise of Art for art's sake. "L'art pour l'art" (translated as "art for art's sake") is credited to Théophile Gautier (1811–1872). I don't know if he got this idea from Ad Reinhardt's philosophy of art Ad called "Art-as-Art" or not - but Frank Stella in 1961 famously said that a picture was "a flat surface with paint on it - nothing more." Barbara Rose is tied in here. Regardless, impossible for me to see Reinhardt as less than a great spiritual artist with his profound interest in Eastern Philosophy and his so-called "Black" paintings of the 1960s.

Taney Roniger:

I guess I would ask: Why the rise of art for art's sake? Am I wrong to suspect hidden (perhaps unconscious) motives in its catching on the way it did? It all seems intimately connected with the underlying mind/body dualism inherent in the modernist vision. If you think about Greenbergian formalism, what is that but the idea that vision -- sight -- can somehow be separated from the rest of the brain and body -- can be isolated and experienced in its "purity," wholly uninfected by "contaminants" like ideas, emotions, longings, memories, etc.?

The following quote from Frank Stella speaks volumes here:

"I have no difficulty appreciating (and up to a point understanding) the great abstract painting of modernism's past, the painting of Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, but I do have trouble with their dicta, their pleadings, their defense of abstraction. My feeling is that these reasons, these theoretical underpinnings of Theosophy and anti-materialism have done abstract painting a kind of disservice which has contributed to its present-day plight."

And then, of course, we have his famous dictum: "What you see is what you see."

In my twenties, I found this exciting. But I suppose in the intervening years my optic nerve has grown reattached to the rest of my brain.

Joseph Nechvatal:

Yes. Surely the spiritual is about a deeper awareness, in avocation of a fluid evolutionary progress, both personal, social, and technological.

We must identify which artistic practices have fallen into this dualistic trap? What makes them so numerous? What can our creations do in order to confront this challenge?

Taney Roniger:

Joseph, that is *the* question. I hope we can get everyone to address this.

Joseph Nechvatal:

The "Art for art's sake" slogan was first raised in defiance of those who thought that the value of art was to serve some moral or didactic purpose. "Art for art's sake" affirmed that art was valuable as art, that artistic pursuits were their own justification and that art did not need moral justification — and indeed, was allowed to be morally subversive. Such brusque dismissal expressed artists' distancing themselves from sentimentalism of Romanticism.

The explicit slogan is associated in the history of English art and letters with Walter Pater and his followers in the Aesthetic Movement, which was self-consciously in rebellion against Victorian moralism.

Jeff Edwards:

@ Taney, re: Greenberg: Although Formalist criticism is largely about materials, surfaces, and edges, I've always felt like it had a deep relationship to Platonic philosophy. What else is the idea of "significant form" but a quasi-mystical echo of Plato's Ideas? Formalism often exists in an uneasy relationship to its own spiritual heritage, which is always lurking under the surface.

I've been thinking about the larger questions of when and why spirituality was abandoned by art, and I can't come up with a satisfactory response, because I feel like there are many small moments scattered throughout modern and contemporary art history when it's been pushed aside. Joseph's citing of the rise of "art for art's sake" rings true to me, so maybe that's it.

It seems like art history and art criticism have also occasionally gone back to make sure that spirit hasn't crept back into the conversation. In the post I put up earlier today, I linked to one article that kind of does that with Kandinsky, and it seems like every few years a new book comes along that re-asserts the scientific/perceptual basis of Cubism, or the purely aesthetic (and not spiritual) use of primitive art by the Modernists, or something similar.

Now you've got me thinking about the infamous 1985 debate that raged for months in Artforum and elsewhere between Thomas McEvilley and MoMA curators William Rubin and Kirk Varnadoe over the MoMA exhibition "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern." McEvilley's whole point was that the curators stripped the primitive art in the show of its religious and ritual meaning, in an attempt to argue that a universal, Formalist aesthetic sense exists among all people at all times.

Taney Roniger:

@ Jeff: I couldn't agree more about Greenbergian formalism's connections to Platonic philosophy. Is there anything more radically dualistic than the latter? Talk about wresting the world into two! You mention McEvilley, and I'm glad you did. He (and others) have written extensively about formalism's theological/transcendental underpinnings. It all seems to hinge on the notion of "purity" -- Plato's realm of Pure Ideas, the "purity" of sight/vision, etc. So, while formalism might *think* that because it confines itself to materials and means and eschews content of any kind it's radically anti-spiritual, its very doing so puts it in the camp of the transcendental bifurcators.

Joseph Nechvatal:

Then we must turn our attention to "formal" spiritual art qualities. What are they? What might they be?

People spend between 10 to 20 seconds on average looking at a painting in a public space these days. Might the issue of s-l-o-w-n-e-s-s bust up the cynical fastness of uncaring

with an insistence on dignity? This is what I took away from the Black paintings of Ad Reinhardt. You slow down to "see" them or - too bad for you - you don't see them. This is smart slowness in contention with the continuous stimulation that monopolies the consciousness of consumption zapping. I think the same true of the slow films of Antonioni, Bergman and Bunuel - they are formed by reflective dignity in some way. But we also need to think about the "visionary" form.

Taney Roniger:

Ah yes, s--l--o--w--n--e--s--s -- and more silence. Plenty of which we have in store for us this Tuesday night at the Nathaniel Dorsky film screening. People unprepared for an hour of silence be forewarned!

Joseph Nechvatal:

This makes we wonder: Does Warhol qualify as a spiritual filmmaker now? His oh so s--l--o--w films: do they have the effect of a subtle perforation in the compact mass of dominant brutality that envelops the planet today?

Taney Roniger:

I must say, I never thought I'd see "Warhol" and "spiritual" in the same sentence, but now that it has occurred, it's certainly worth pondering. When I think of Warhol, I think of the hypertrophy of "externals" (e.g., appearances, surfaces, etc.), rank materialism, and the utter poverty of the inner life -- all of what I find so troubling about late capitalism. But perhaps I'm being unfair. Those films *are* really, really wonderful.

Jeff Edwards:

The mention of Warhol's films made me remember two other filmmakers who often used long, incredibly slow passages as a way of setting mood, controlling perception, and even making time palpable, almost a character in its own right.

The first is Andrei Tarkovsky, who even used the phrase "sculpting in time" to describe his method. I'm most familiar with the films *Solaris* and *Stalker*, both of which provide great examples of what I'm talking about.

The second is someone people might not think of without prompting: Sergio Leone. In both *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* and *Once Upon a Time in the West* he pairs very slow, long takes with vast expanses of space to create a sense of mythic immensity unlike anything I've experienced in any other film. The technique also helps create the impression that his characters are as much forces of nature as they are human beings, which is something I've always felt about them. Of course, he also uses this technique to add a ton of tension to the inevitable moments of violence; the buildup can be almost excruciating.

I guess Akira Kurosawa might also have done something like this with some of his longer, more measured films (like *Ran* and *Kagemusha*), but I haven't thought about them that way before, so I can't say for sure (the idea just occurred to me right now).

Taney Roniger:

Jeff, Tarkovsky is a **must** in this context. Thanks for mentioning him. *Stalker* is probably my favorite film of all time, and no matter how many times I see it I never get over how incredibly rich those long sequences in which nothing happens -- narratively speaking -- are. By the time one of them ends, you feel like an entire universe of meaning has been compressed into an atom.

I'd love to hear from the film folks on our panel about this.

Joseph Nechvatal:

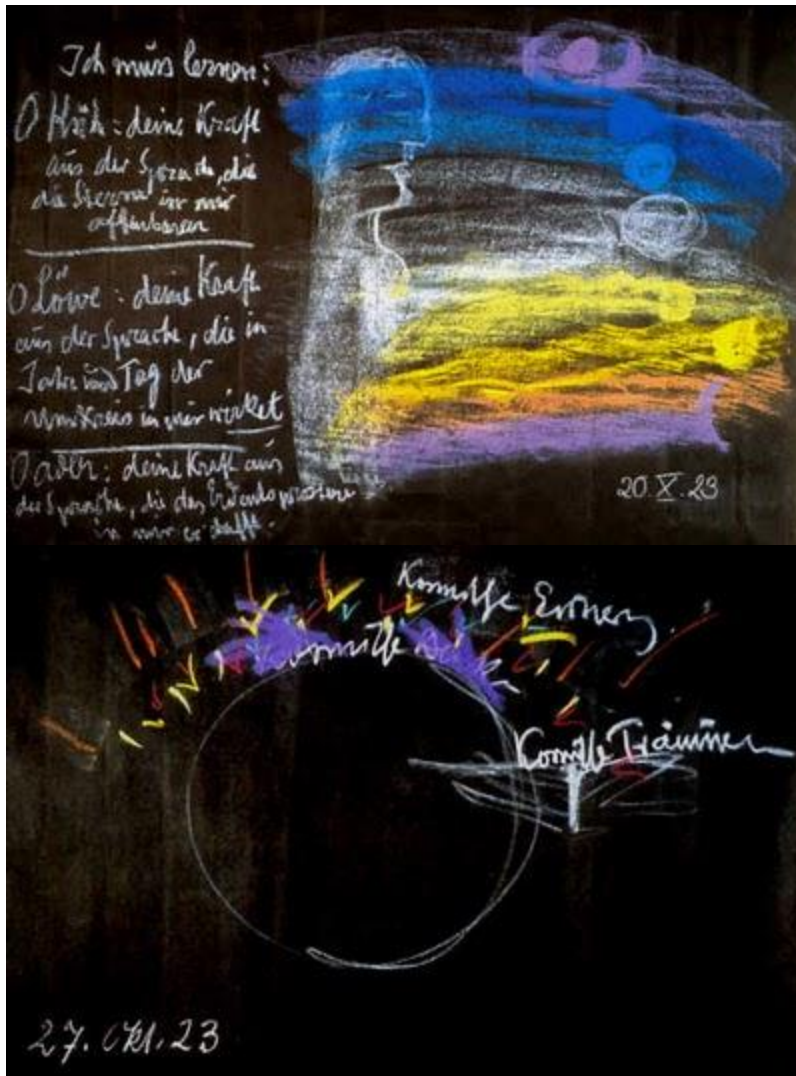
This is a great book: P. Adams Sitney: *Visionary Film: the American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000* <http://burundi.sk/monoskop/log/?p=499> - as is Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema* (1970) <http://burundi.sk/monoskop/log/?p=218>
[And we] cannot forget the films of Jean Cocteau in this context, of course.

Steiner, Thought Forms, and Kandinsky
Posted by Jeff Edwards on Sunday, April 03, 2011

The comments from Barbara Braathen that Taney posted yesterday have spurred me to post some information that I meant to put up during the first session, but didn't have time to. I'd like to throw out some ideas and imagery related to Rudolf Steiner, Annie Besant, and Charles Leadbeater, and consider how/if they might have influenced Kandinsky.

Kandinsky was very open about his appreciation for Helena Blavatsky. He was a lot more elusive about Steiner. I just took a quick look back through the *Collected Writings on Art*, and couldn't find a single mention of Steiner anywhere in the texts. However, his name comes up several times in the editors' introductions, and—most importantly—they cite Kandinsky's attendance at several of Steiner's anthroposophical lectures in 1908.

Steiner's lectures covered a broad range of theosophical topics. He would often elaborate on the occult connection between things like the planets and parts of the body, in a manner reminiscent of the systems of correspondence that became such a huge part of Renaissance magic (as in Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, or the 1620 magical calendar from Frankfurt that was once falsely attributed to Tycho Brahe). During these lectures, he would illustrate some of his ideas with colored chalk. The early drawings were lost, but in 1919 one of Steiner's pupils got the idea to tape black paper to the surface of the chalkboard, so that the drawings could be rolled up after the talks were over. Over 1,000 of these drawings survive, along with notes and transcripts of the lectures. (I've included a couple here. To see a few paired with some of Steiner's text and with commentary by a contemporary anthroposophist, check out this web page.



I've always been wary of giving too much weight to the Kandinsky/Steiner connection, but when I was going back through *On the Spiritual in Art*, some resonances started to strike me. In the chapter where Kandinsky sets out his ideas on the movement and emotional tone of the colors, there's a footnote in which he reinforces his assertion that yellow is inherently aggressive and has an unpleasant "sound" by citing the sourness of lemons and the shrill song of the canary. Earlier in the book, he discusses synesthesia (without actually using the term), but he seems to treat it as a spiritual potential inherent in at least the most sensitive of us, rather than the medical or psychological anomaly that many people consider it to be. I was reminded of Steiner's way of connecting things, his frequent discussions of how the soul is affected by material and spiritual phenomena, and the way that colors were often a crucial part of this. His discussions of planetary influences on the body were often illustrated with specific colors for each planetary ray, and there's a beautiful chalkboard drawing in which he uses a few quick slashes of light blue, yellow, and red to assert a connection between cosmic thoughts, memories, and dreams, and birds, butterflies, and bats, respectively (see above).

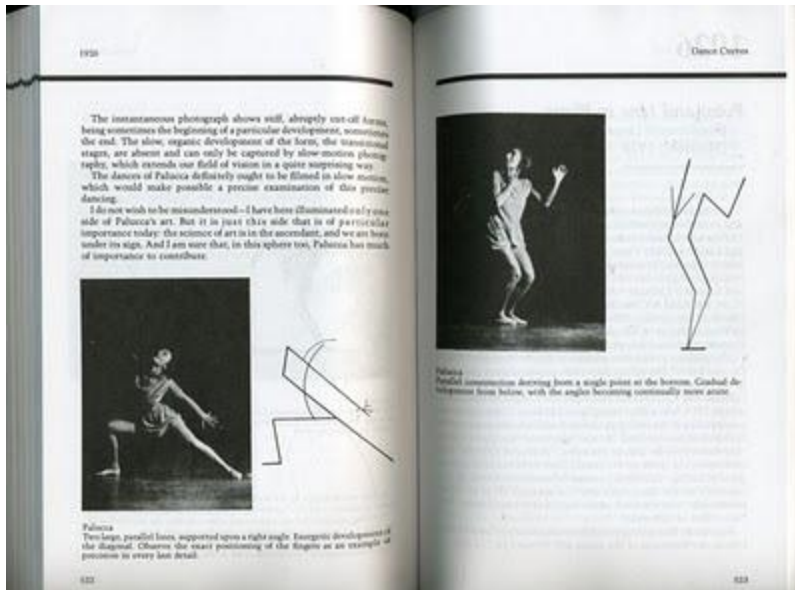
Steiner also spoke about the ability of color to alter spiritual perception. He claimed that meditation on a specific color would render that color transparent, so that one could see the

spiritual entities lurking behind or within it. Such statements were couched in language that often sounds a lot like Kandinsky's recurring image of the soul as a piano, with color as the force that hits the keys and vibrates the strings.

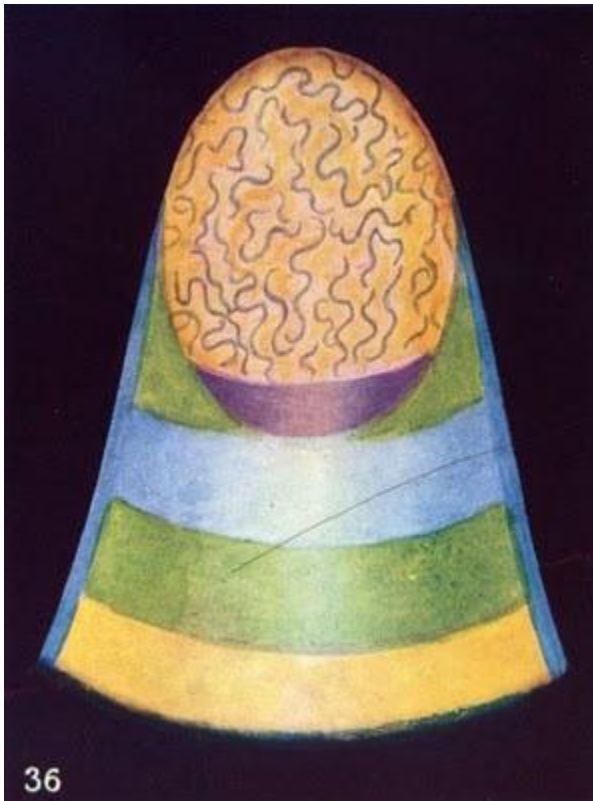
Though I don't want to stretch comparisons too far or claim too much, I should probably also mention Steiner's development of the hybrid art form eurythmy. Eurythmy attempted to blend colors, sounds, and spiritually significant gestures into a new dance form that would directly affect the deeper levels of the viewer's soul. (Some of Steiner's pencil sketches for eurythmy can be seen at [this link](#), along with a few color images created using Steiner's notes. For an example of eurythmy in action, check out [this video](#).)



By 1926, Kandinsky had shifted his focus away from color and toward shape and form; this was the year that *Point and Line to Plane* was published. His only other published work that year was a piece called *Dance Curves*, in which he turned four photographs of the dancer Palucca into simplified schematic drawings (see below), with the idea of showing how the precision of her movements carries deep significance for those sensitive enough to recognize it (he states this idea much more vaguely and obliquely than I have, and the entire article—which is very brief—is pretty opaque). Though I've never seen anything to connect *Dance Curves* to eurythmy, the emphasis they share on precision and meaning in the body's movement has always kept me speculating.



Not everyone is comfortable with this sort of tale-spinning. There are writers who try to downplay the Steiner-Kandinsky connection, under the assumption that it makes it too easy for Kandinsky to be dismissed as a serious artist. For a discussion of this, see this essay by artist, writer, and Studio International co-editor Janet McKenzie, written on the occasion of the 2006 Tate Modern exhibition “Kandinsky: The Path to Abstraction.”



Finally, I should mention the 1901 book *Thought Forms* by Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater. Besant inherited the leadership of most of Blavatsky's Theosophical Society after the latter's death, and Leadbeater was a clairvoyant who claimed the ability to see the shapes and colors of people's emotions. Their book begins with a detailed chart that lays out the spiritual meanings of 25 colors (for example, red-orange is listed as "pride"), and then discusses the ethereal forms of a wide range of subjective phenomena, including things like "greed for alcohol" and "listening to the music of Mendelsshon." The book is illustrated throughout, and some of the more complex images begin to approach the complexity of some of Kandinsky's paintings. (One of my favorites is the illustration for "appreciation of a picture," shown immediately above.) Once again, without trying to claim too much, I'm very interested in the way that the specificity of Besant and Leadbeater's system looks a lot like Kandinsky's ideas on the distinctive "feel" of various colors. At least one writer of books on Theosophical history (Gary Lachman) has stated that Kandinsky owned a copy of *Thought Forms*, and that it was one of the most influential sources of his speculations on color.

Joseph Nechvatal:

As subjective as the spiritual notion can be, I begin, with Steiner, to recognize changes in the notion's increasing emphasis on social progress - a progress that tends to carve a path out for our more scientific understanding of vibrational energy.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

@Joseph: as what is said, science has done a lot for art, including today's book by Lynn Gamwell [i.e., *Exploring the Invisible: Art, Science, and the Spiritual*]. Some people in recent years have been questioning what art can do for science. To me, the former has much stronger impact than the latter. I want to know what others think.

Joseph Nechvatal:

@Jeff. Is there any evidence of a Rudolf Steiner - Emanuel Swedenborg connection? I ask because a lot of this corresponds to a melting of the individual's limits, which were formerly sharply outlined, in favor of a new organization of awareness which Emanuel Swedenborg, principally, furnished Baudelaire. Swedenborg's unitary theory provided the metaphysical basis for many artists of Romanticism, including Turner, Constable and Friedrich.

Swedenborg posited that matter consists of particles that are indefinitely divisible, and that these particles are in constant vortical (swirling) motion. Furthermore, these particles are themselves composed of smaller particles in motion, an idea which strongly resembles the modern conception of the atom as described in terms of a nucleus and its electrons. Moreover, Swedenborg wrote voluminously concerning what he saw to be the correspondence between the spiritual and the material planes (i.e., the viractual) and he consistently maintained that there was an infinite, indivisible power to life; an idea which reinforced the neo-Platonic sublime ideals of Romanticism thoroughly.

Jeff Edwards:

Hi, Joseph. Sorry that it took me a while to reply; I was teaching classes today. Steiner definitely knew about Swedenborg's writings, but I don't know how deeply he studied them or how he was influenced by them. I've heard mention of an article or lecture by

Steiner on Swedenborg, but I've never seen it. I just checked an online database of Steiner's writings and learned that it's called "Swedenborg's Power of Vision," but I don't if/where it's publicly available.

My knowledge of both men's work is relatively shallow. I've only read Swedenborg's greatest hits (*Heaven and Hell*, *Apocalypse Revealed*, and a few shorter works). I've never taken the plunge into the *Arcana Coelestia*, though I've looked at small sections of it. My study of Steiner has mainly been limited to the book *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* and some of his lectures on color.

The parallel you describe between Swedenborg's theory on matter and contemporary ideas on atoms and subatomic particles is intriguing, and something I want to look into.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Titus Lucretius Carus is said to be one of the earliest atomist. I wonder if he had anything to do with this lineage.

**Nathaniel Dorsky film screening this Tuesday
Posted by Taney Roniger on Sunday, April 03, 2011**

In conjunction with our Beyond Kandinsky symposium, SVA will be hosting a film screening of the work of San Francisco-based filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky this Tuesday, April 5th. The screening will be held at the School of Visual Arts Theatre, which is at 333 W. 23rd St. in Manhattan, at 7:00 pm. The event will be free and open to the public. Nathaniel, who is one of our symposium participants, will be present at the screening. I hope those of you in New York will join us for Tuesday's event.

Nathaniel will be showing four films—*Sarabande*, *Compline*, *Aubade*, and *Winter*—and giving brief introductions before each. The total running time for all four will be just over an hour, after which we'll take questions and comments from the audience.

For those of you unfamiliar with Nathaniel's work, I encourage you to visit his page on our project's website: [Nathaniel Dorsky](#). Below are two stills from *Sarabande* to whet your appetite:





Some Formal Qualities of Visionary Art

Posted by Joseph Nechvatal on Sunday, April 03, 2011

Visionary art is more affective than discursive. More enigmatic than dogmatic. Its intricate patterning seems to contain many possibilities of interpretation—and thus seems magical, as magic does not conform to modern canons of causality.

Visionary art is full of complex inter-relational transitions and rhythmic overlapping perceptions that interlace. It displays elasticity through the principle of sameness with difference. There are forms emerging from other forms, both up and down in scale. Possible figures are nested within larger units, so things become component parts of other things. Here we are calling up image-formations from the depths of our mind. And this experience cannot but remind us that the primary feature that distinguishes aesthetic consciousness is imagination and that imagination entails visioning and symbolizing—areas of practice useful in heightening perception and intuition. Indecision, ambiguity and conflict become dynamic and useful values here. Because apparent secrets and angelic visual pleasures are concealed in visionary art's florid ground, apparent “flaws” like the all-over ambivalence of the superficial illusory groundlessness become affirmative values.

This is the interfering shift I detect in visionary art—what I think of as the responsibility of looking—a shift towards (and into) visual noise. Here we can re-appropriate our senses and our fragile capacity to visualize on a personal basis. Here is an inner reverberating resonance that cannot be appropriated by capital. Here one feels oneself feeling as a first person singular. This is an art to self, in self and for self. However, the result is empathetic—as one experiences one's own powers of imaginatively projecting feelings and perceptions into vaguely apprehended forms. So a visionary shift in art is suggestive of an anti-pop, no-logo emancipatory labor indicative of social relationships outside of passive pop consumption. Here we can take back our head.

Jeff Edwards:

Hi, Joseph. I don't know if I missed this in another thread, but who/what do you consider as good exemplars of visionary art? I can't think of any offhand, but I

think that's because I'm getting mental interference from the occasional (and hotly contested) use of the term to describe outsider art.

Joseph Nechvatal:

Anything with the pareidolia effect. A complete historical account of the global visionary art tradition would fill volumes. The 16,000 year-old cave paintings of human/animal hybrids, such as the Sorcerer of Trois Freres are a good place to start – but the best example of a prehistoric visionary practice that I know of is the Abside (Apse) of Lascaux - a roundish, semi-spherical, penumbra-like chamber (like those adjacent to romanesque basiliques) approximately 4.5 metres in diameter covered on every wall surface (including the ceiling) with thousands of entangled, overlapping, engraved drawings. Leonardo da Vinci offers us a rare aspect of the art of the High Renaissance which has visionary characteristics similar to those we previously saw in the Apse of Lascaux. He identified and worked with a general, unifying effect called sfumato composition; a smoky technique used for decreasing the separating dramatic force and physical presence of isolated figures in a work of art through immersing them in a fummy, semi-imperturbable equilibrium.

I think it may come down to particular pieces, but I can suggest some visionary artists: we can count Hieronymous Bosch, William Blake, Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, Hans Arp, Hans Bellmer, Roman Verostko and Carl Fudge. As you suggest, there is a lot in Art Brut or Outsider Art. I really found it in the 2009 Turner Prize winner Richard Wright (Tate Britain) See: <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2010/02/artseen/letter-from-london-richard-wright-turner-prize-09> but the photos are better here:http://www.eyewithwings.net/nechvatal/London/london_review.htm

Jeff Edwards:

Thanks, Joseph. This has helped me get a better handle on the material you've provided in your post.

I read your piece on Baudrillard and the Lascaux Apse in The International Journal of Baudrillard Studies a couple years ago. I liked the connection you made between the Apse and immersive virtual reality. It's a fascinating interpretation of the shimmering, densely overlapping imagery in that part of the caves.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Exactly! As Jeff said, "the connection you made between the Apse and immersive virtual reality" is a classic. In fact, it helps me realize that the immersive virtual reality doesn't need to implement the fancy technologies like VR. The prehistoric people merely used tools for body tattoos to paint the caves.

Reader (Andrea Ferrigno):

The catalog from the show "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985", is amazing and worth tracking down for anyone interested in these ideas.

Taney Roniger:

Is that the Maurice Tuchman catalogue, Andrea? I was waiting for that to come up. Thanks for that.

Taney Roniger:

"Here we can take back our head." -- Hear, hear!

Jeff Edwards:

Thanks, Andrea. I'd heard about that catalog a while back and planned to seek it out, but then forgot the specifics. I'm going to look for it.

Reader (Suzanne Silk):

Joseph + Taney...following this conversation over time + space has been a Joy. This IS what ART is truly about. All else is rubbish. The book, "Towards the Spiritual in Art" needs to be required reading for any art student. Thank you for this wonderful event.

The abandoned spiritual ideals of modern art
Posted by Taney Roniger on Sunday, April 03, 2011

Before our current session draws to a close this evening, I thought I'd re-present an interesting question that came up in one of our recent threads, lest it become buried in the archive prematurely. The question seems fundamental to what we're trying to accomplish here, in the sense that in order to move forward we need to have an adequate understanding of how we arrived at our current situation. The question is: Why were the spiritual ideals of modern art, embodied so powerfully not just by Kandinsky's enterprise but also by Mondrian's and Malevich's, abandoned? What was the shift that occurred after which artists felt they could no longer seriously (or at least openly) pursue spiritual ideals in their work?

Joseph has cited art for art's sake as a probable cause and has implicated figures such as Barbara Rose in its rise. Although I agree with this, I think we would do well to push the question one step further and ask: How to account for the widespread appeal of art for art's sake on the part of the artists who took it on and the larger art world that embraced it? To what complex of attitudes or unconscious desires did it appeal? Could a sense of failure, of art's impotence in the face of the great tragedies of the twentieth century, be a part of this?

I'd be interested in hearing any thoughts on this from either our panelists or our reading audience. The question currently has us stumped.

Joseph Nechvatal:

I will speculate that this psychic lock down occurred when artists turned away from the unconscious mind (sought via automatism in Dada, Surrealism and AE) and towards the conscious mind in Formalism, Hard-edge painting, Color field painting, Minimalism and Pop art. The why this happened may be as stupid as market saturation for AE.

Taney Roniger:

That's an interesting shift in orientation you point out there, Joseph: from unconscious to conscious, and it seems right to me. I may be pressing the issue too hard, but my question remains: why? I'm going to suggest it may have had to do with a resurgence of the need to control (i.e., one's own mind, one's environment, other people, etc.). I'm reminded of Wilhelm Worringer's book *Abstraction and Empathy*, with its thesis that links the tendency toward rigid, geometrical forms and a fundamental sense of existential insecurity. Do we seek in art what we lack existentially?

Daniel A. Siedell:

The first world war seemed to have a tremendous effect on the spiritual--the Dadaists, especially those in Berlin (Hausmann, Baader, et al) blamed the German Expressionists and their excessive concern with The Spiritual for the War and current state of German culture.

I have also thought about what motivated Malevich to retreat from abstraction and return to figuration later in his career. I wonder if that is related somehow to the state of the spiritual.

Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual* had a tremendous impact on American artists, though, during the first few decades of the twentieth century, and I wonder if the American artists approach the Spiritual through a particular Emersonian/transcendental approach to Nature that is particularly receptive to the Spiritual at a time when it wanes on the Continent. What this might mean is that there are two careers of "The Spiritual" at this time, a Continental one and an American one.

Taney Roniger:

Dan, you bring up a topic that seems crucial to our current session (and the next), and this is the perception held by many that concern with the spiritual is escapist or indulgent -- that it is unconnected to the "real-life" concerns of things like poverty, hunger, violence, etc. -- , making its pursuit in art seem frivolous at best. The example you cite of the German Dadaists blaming the German Expressionists' concern with the spiritual for the war is an extreme case, but I think that sentiment is still operative today in many circles.

I wonder if there is any truth to this perception. I'm personally inclined to deny it, and to assert that engagement with spiritual concerns *is* engagement with real-life concerns, but I think the question is worth asking. There are figures such as Suzi Gablik who have pushed for a re-engagement with society in art and whose vision for a new spiritual art has artists out of their studios, away from the rarified concerns of "spiritual" painting and drawing, and out acting *in the world*.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

@Daniel: if possible, I'm eager to hear what your voice on the impact of Christianity on the spiritual art. In particular, the rise and fall of different schools of Christianity and the split of doctrines...

Joseph Nechvatal:

Seems to me we need to then trace German Expressionism to its root in German Transcendental Idealism, basically the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and his immediate followers. The basis of the aesthetic idealist movement, which manifested in the art and poetry of the period, was largely Kant's transcendental idealism. Kant had upheld that the phenomenal world is produced a priori by the activity of consciousness reacting on an external reality which cannot be known. The constancy of experience is accounted for by the very fact that the world as we know it is only the sum total of phenomena. This becomes the basis of the universal validity of certain principles of explanation, for example space and time become subjective and thus ideal. Taken together they form a mould in which we shape the impressions coming from an unknowable, transcendent reality.

Thus with Kant the imagination is celebrated as a "creative transforming of the real into the ideal."

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) was the first representative of the transcendental idealistic movement to articulate an inner aesthetic development of the mind. Thus Lessing situated idealism directly in aesthetics. Thereafter, the German librarian and archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) applied transcendental idealistic ideas to the visual arts.

Joseph Nechvatal:

On the basis of Kant's transcendental deduction Friedrich Wilhelm Josef von Schelling interpreted the process of development in a purely ideal manner, as the unconscious opposition of the absolute to itself. Schelling, whom H. D. Schenk in his book *The Mind of the European Romantics* characterizes as being "self-intoxicated on metaphysical speculation", worked out his *identitätsphilosophie* by extending to consciousness the view that conscious subject and object are identical. The sum-total of existence then becomes the absolute as perceived by itself. With Schelling the absolute comes to consciousness in order that we may enjoy the pure aesthetic contemplation of the unity of mind and nature.

It should be remembered however that already by 1800 many spheres of life had proclaimed their independence from religion, as politics first exerted its autonomy followed by economics and science; a trend which lead up to Théophile Gautier's (1811-1872) celebrated declaration of the *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) ideal in his 1852 poetic book *Emaux et Camées*.

The immediate result of the aesthetic-metaphysical system of Schelling was a revival of the poetic production known as Romanticism.

Response to Several Questions on 3 April Posted by Charlene Spretnak on Sunday, April 03, 2011

What a juicy day! Not to take up too much space here, I'll offer some brief responses to several questions that have been posed today.

On Buddhism—It's not really accurate to say that Buddhism is not a transcendent spiritual practice, though it's certainly not an example of the sort of vertical transcendence we are accustomed to into the West. Rather, it's a spiritual practice that illuminates nonduality and also

transcends the mundane mind by showing meditators a glimpse of the incredibly dynamic, subtle field of energy/matter arising and passing away, arising and passing away every fraction of a second. Also, the Buddhist concept of karma is far more complex than the reductionist version known here (i.e., you do something good or bad, and it comes back to you). Instead, what Buddhist meditation teachers mean by karma is the interplay of all the dynamics in the universe, past and present, coming into play every moment, a "mind-blowing" totality far beyond the ken of the human comprehension. That is a transcendent dimension of reality.

On Steiner's influence on artists—There were two exhibitions on this in Germany last year (can be Googled): "Rudolf Steiner and Contemporary Art" at the Kunstmuseum in Wolfsburg and "Rudolf Steiner—Alchemy of the Everyday" (re historical modern artists) at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein.

On why Kandinsky went geometric—Not that the other influences mentioned weren't important, but the main reason was that when he had to leave Germany (being a foreign national) at the outbreak of WWI and return to Russia, what he found in the avant garde artists' scene back in his beloved Moscow was an all-encompassing fascination with the concept of sacred geometry (regarded as an illumination of the invisible reality and a path to evoking a new society). The Constructivists and Malevich considered Kandinsky a bit of an old fogey, but he was clearly influenced by their deep attraction to sacred geometry. He maintained his [really great, I feel] organic abstract style in his paintings till 1920, but when he returned to Germany the next year and took a position at the Bauhaus, he changed entirely to geometric abstraction for the rest of his life (though he introduced some biomorphic forms among the geometric shapes during his last decade, in Paris).

On why artists stopped talking and writing about esoteric spirituality after WWI—The sacrifice of almost an entire generation of young men (poured into the idiocy of trench warfare for more than four years [in the last two years of that war, life expectancy in the trenches was two weeks]) was a trauma that shattered European faith in Enlightenment promises of the progressive perfecting of society. Among the avant garde, there was reaction against "cosmic wallpaper" (as Van Doesburg and Grosz called Kandinsky's pre-war paintings) has an art that had proven itself powerless not only to bring forth a new society (as the artists had hoped) but even to stop the carnage in the trenches. The new priest was to be the engineer and the architect; the new path to deliverance from "materialism" was to be the clarity of their diagrams and blueprints. (However, this did not mean that that dozens of the "greats" of modern art lost interest in the spiritual, only that after the late 1920s they largely kept quiet about it, while still exploring it in their art. I have found that they often wrote about it in late-life letters and journal entries.)

On Malevich's spirituality—too long a story for here, but the short answer is that it was a combination of his Russian Orthodox formative experiences (he loved the medieval Russian block-form cross), the esoteric charge around sacred geometry, and his sense of his own role as a spiritual/aesthetic visionary. Here's the closing of a poem he wrote:

The live Spirit carries the flame
further and further and all see
the star and the sun already dead
for in the new transformation it
is not necessary.
In the new miracle there is no
Sun, no stars.
The light of Paradise

has gone out.
The era of the new beginning has dawned.

Jeff Edwards:

Thanks, Charlene. This is an incredibly rich post, and it's deepened some thoughts I had about some of these topics, jogged my memory on others, and given me a lot of great things to track and consider more thoroughly.

I'm glad you brought up the general misunderstanding of karma in the West. It's a very nuanced topic, especially when you start looking at it in terms of things like Madhyamaka (middle way) philosophy and its arguments that emptiness and dependent co-arising are two inextricable sides of the same coin. The concept is starting to gain ground in the West with the increased presence of scholarly books on Nagarjuna and on later Tibetan interpretations of his writings, but there's still a long way to go before cliches about karma are defeated.

I also really like your description of attitudes after WWI and their effect on openness toward spirituality in art. It rings very true to me.

Taney Roniger:

I want to echo Jeff's response to this post, Charlene, by expressing my gratitude for your bringing new depth to our understanding of Buddhism, among other things. To me (and I'll admit that I've always been partial to the Hinayana or "lesser vehicle" school), Buddhism has always seemed particularly non-transcendent, in the sense that it stresses the here-and-now, rather than the there-and-then, dimension of salvation. But now that you've introduced the distinction between a vertical transcendence and another kind (I don't want to say horizontal), I have a better understanding of how we might conceive of transcendence differently.

I also appreciate your pointing out the difficulty that ensues from our conventional Western notions of things like karma and reincarnation. These misconceptions no doubt contribute greatly to the suspicion of -- and resistance toward -- the spiritual in contemporary culture (certainly among intellectuals).

A Footnote to "The Changing Shape of Art"
Posted by Pawel Wojtasik on Monday, April 04, 2011

Georges Braque, toward the end of his life (in the course of a conversation with John Richardson) made the following statement:

You see, I have made a great discovery. I no longer believe in anything. Objects don't exist for me except in so far as a rapport exists between them, or between them and myself. When one attains this harmony one reaches a sort of intellectual non-existence—what I can only describe as a sense of peace, which makes everything possible and right. Life then becomes a perpetual revelation. That is true poetry.

As a result of his studio practice, painting the same motifs over and over, including the characteristic bird in flight (comparable to Brancusi's birds), Braque apparently attains the state

of no-self, seeing the insubstantiality of appearances. That would be defined as “enlightenment” in Buddhist parlance. I am bringing this up as an example of a natural, largely unconscious, development towards spiritual maturity that seems somehow ahistorical, in the sense that a solitary, contemplative artist working at any point in time could arrive at that same “harmony.”

It may be worthwhile to note that Braque fought, and was wounded, in WWI, yet that experience seemed to have no impact on his work.

Taney Roniger:

Pawel, thanks for giving us your thoughts about Braque and his late-life realization of insubstantiality. I've never heard this, and indeed he's certainly not someone I would associate with the spiritual (in art or otherwise). His statement is beautiful, and it *does* resonate so deeply with some of the fundamental philosophical tenets of Buddhist thought (e.g., dependent co-origination, etc.). I wonder if Braque had any contact with or knowledge of Buddhism.

I also didn't realize that Braque fought (let alone was wounded) in the war. This is interesting in light of what Charlene has just brought up about the pervasive trauma at that time of having sacrificed an entire generation to the trenches. I find myself disinclined to accept that the experience had no impact on Braque's work. Perhaps it did influence, however unconsciously, his movement toward an appreciation of transience, impermanence, insubstantiality, etc. If this is the case, it seems his witnessing the trauma sent him *toward* the spiritual rather than in the direction taken by so many in the generation of artists to follow (i.e., away from it in disgust).

In any case, this is a beautiful example of, as you said, a "natural" development of a spiritual attitude later in life. I wonder what he would have thought of the word "spiritual."

Session III: Art and Its Audience

Session III: Art and Its Audience

Posted by Taney Roniger on Monday, April 04, 2011

With our third session, which will carry us through the next two days, we'll shift our focus away from art and its making and toward the various ways in which it is experienced and understood by its audience. Keeping in mind the larger context of a culture in which entertainment has acquired the status of a primary value, I present the following questions for consideration:

1. What is the current role of experience in the making and beholding of art? Has aesthetic experience been displaced by the current practices of interpretation, "decoding," identifying references, etc?
2. Is there a relationship between synaesthesia and the "immersive experiences" of today's multi-media and interactive art? What might the rise of these immersive forms say about the role and status of the body in an emerging worldview?
3. What role might there be for art criticism in providing new interpretive frameworks that include room for the recognition of the spiritual in art?
4. Is it time to replace "the viewer" with a designation less mired in the Modernist ethos of objectivity, distance, "disinterestedness," etc.? If so, what might some alternative terms be?
5. How might a different understanding of the experiential or spiritual value of art pose a challenge to the current emphasis on monetary value endemic to our market-based system?

Joseph Nechvatal:

Re: point #4: One of the wider implications for art in our new viractual space is the proclivity to solicit the theoretical viewer/participant (what I call the viewpant) to respond to the work in both a contemplative and physical way, or at least in an implied tension between these two poles when one side outweighs the other. It is important to remember that the viewpant is involved often with a series of different levels of contemplation/action in a dynamic emergent continuum.

Taney Roniger:

I couldn't agree more, Joseph, about the need to encourage "viewers" to engage with work in a way that includes *all* aspects of the bodymind (I want to thank Charlene for this word, which I'd not heard of until coming across it in one of her books recently). The privileging of sight, with its implications of distance or separation from that which is being beheld, is part of the old paradigm of dichotomous thinking that we're trying to move beyond. Toward this end, I'd prefer a new term devoid of the word "viewer" altogether -- one that would emphasize the entire bodymind *and* its relationship to its environment. I've gotten in the habit in recent years of using the term "experient," but that now strikes me as too passive. I might simply prefer "participant."

In any case, we certainly need to work toward an increased awareness of the participant's role co-creating each work he/she experiences, as well as an increased awareness of the role of the functions one typically considers "merely" somatic in this process. Nathaniel Dorsky, whose work we'll be showing tomorrow at SVA, has written about film's appeal to the human metabolism -- about how a large part of the transformative potential of the film experience is in the degree of the work's resonance with the deep internal rhythms of the human body. Although he's speaking primarily of and for film, I think we can extend the idea to transformative art of any medium. My own sense is that much of what we take to be a work's "presence" has to do with this.

Reader (Nettrice):

Today I am absorbing the notion of telepresence, of seeing art as a way of mapping a series of relationships that explore where we are now and as we want to be in the future (Roy Ascott). This is not a new concept but about contemporary art is about finding ways to build on past ideas in new and innovative ways. I just watched a TED talk by John Crawford who presents Embodied Media in Performance: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6lZXeFpR5E>.

Telepresence refers to performances that happen in multiple sites simultaneously; embodied media in performance uses the lessons from the performing arts to connect and create a new way of interacting with computational devices and tools, including real-time interaction in or through augmented, or virtual 3D platforms and environments. This notion addresses how audiences make substantive interventions in performances by artists, whether in physical or virtual space.

Response to Joseph

Posted by Laura Battle on Monday, April 04, 2011

To me, the question of an artist's audience, or lack thereof, is hugely important to the question of spirituality in art. Who an artist makes work for can enable or disable the potential for such transformation. Emma Kunz comes to mind. (She was introduced to the US mostly through the remarkable show at the Drawing Center along side Hilma af Klint and Agnes Martin some years ago). Her enormously complex geometric works were done for individuals as healing drawings, their axis determined by the movement of a pendulum swung in front of the person seeking help. She often worked a drawing to completion in a single sitting over the course of 24 hours. I highly recommend a visit to the Emma Kunz Zentrum in Switzerland, which includes a visit to her meditation grotto, next to the house.

I teach drawing in prisons upstate and many of my students are incarcerated for life. These men have no background in art history, no idea of the art world, and no audience beyond their cellmates and occasionally family members to whom they might mail out a drawing or two. They make their work for the purest of reasons. Taney mentioned in one post that she showed her students a film on William Kentridge. I have shown this video as well to my students in prison, to begin the conversation about process, as a trigger for contemplation, about the potential of the journey to help them escape the here-and-now, for a host of reasons, all tied up with the hope of giving them some optimism, a topic touched on my so many of the participants here.

I was glad that Tuchman's show/book *Abstraction: The Spiritual in Art* came up. A major exhibition is long over due as a follow up, addressing all of the issues that this forum is bringing forth.

Joseph Nechvatal:

Oh, big yes to Emma Kunz. I saw that show. I also forgot Félicien Rops and Henri Michaux (and others I am sure). And I forgot perhaps my favorite (the little known) Austin Osman Spare.

Congrats on doing such fine work, LB.

Taney Roniger:

Laura, the experience you describe of teaching art to inmates sounds really powerful, and I'd be very interested to hear more about that. It seems by the way you describe it that their engagement with art is not so much as a means of communication (i.e., of rendering the internal external, of "expressing themselves") as it is a means of entering into a sense of connection, or communion, with something larger that gives them meaning, satisfaction, and solace.

I wonder if the same kind of satisfaction can be had by people who don't make art themselves but who are nonetheless able to feel intimately connected to it by way of the beholding experience. I ask because you and I agreed in an earlier thread on the incomparable power of practice -- of making -- and its strange power to generate meaning. But most people don't have a practice of this kind.

Joseph Nechvatal:

Obviously we need to learn a great deal more about this visionary art tradition: about its sources, internal developments, spiritual affinities and its cross-cultural manifestations.

Joseph Nechvatal:

@Laura. With respect to conducting a "conversation about process, as a trigger for contemplation, about the potential of the journey to help them escape the here-and-now, for a host of reasons, all tied up with the hope of giving them some optimism", I can also advise a general look at Adrian Henri's book *Total Art: Environments, Happenings and Performance* (where Henri identifies a tradition of "total art") that has distinctive liberational/spiritual tendencies.

Two responses to Session III

Posted by Max Gimblett on Monday, April 04, 2011

(1) What is the current role of experience in the making and beholding of art? Has aesthetic experience been displaced by the current practices of interpretation, "decoding," identifying references, etc?

Experience in the making and beholding of art is crucial. It is all in the quality of attention.

(3) What role might there be for art criticism in providing new interpretive frameworks that include room for the recognition of the spiritual in art?

Writing serves art as a dialogue. Writing is crucial.

Taney Roniger:

Thanks, Max. I agree wholeheartedly about the centrality of experience in art -- on both ends of the making/beholding continuum -- but it seems increasingly clear to me that the kind of attention we're talking about is under assault from all cultural directions and is seriously at risk of becoming a rarefied experience pursued only by the few. Someone here earlier (I think it was Joseph) cited a statistic about the number of seconds the average viewer spends with a work of art these days, and the number was in the single digits (most probably under five). This is horrifying to me. Time being such a crucial element in visual art (even in the "still arts," as we painters know), how can anyone really have an experience with a work without it? Art simply doesn't lend itself to "speed viewing."

Another issue that provoked my question was the now-prevalent tendency to think and talk about art in terms of "decoding" -- as if each work of art were an encrypted message that the viewer's job is to "crack." This turns art into a kind of intellectual game with a very clear point and end (i.e., "getting the message" = you win!), and reduces meaning to a one-dimensional gimmick.

I wonder if you'd share some of your thoughts about these things, since you've been experiencing the vicissitudes of the art world for far longer than I and no doubt have a much broader perspective.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

I think this discussion is very important. I'd love to hear what others say about the "experience in the making and beholding". On one hand, I totally agree on "the centrality of experience in art", [while] on the other hand, I've noticed people's preference of their "experienceable" (or, perceivable, in a weaker sense). (And it seems to me that viewpant's occupations tend to encode them with preoccupations.) So I wonder how both ends meet. Especially in the making of art, should an artist adapt the work to a mixed group of viewpant's? Suppose our viewpant's are of very different backgrounds -- in particular, a great diversity of their occupations (we may assume that the global network already/will even out geographic/cultural difference)?

Taney Roniger:

Yuting, can you say more about what you mean by people's preferring their own "experienceable"? Do you mean that people have difficulty entering into work that is foreign to their own personal or cultural sensibilities? If so, I would agree that, yes, this is definitely a barrier to participation. People are often disinclined to give work that doesn't confirm their own "knowns" a second glance. But of course this is precisely the point of art: to take one out of one's knowns and provide an opening onto a space where they can dwell in the unknowns for a bit (and then, ultimately, to emerge an altered human being). But if the work is too "foreign" (read: threatening) the probability of entry is slim.

My instinctual answer to your question about whether artists should "adapt" their work to a specific audience is no, because once we begin creating *for* an audience we become message-senders, idea-illustrators, social workers, or propagandists rather than artists. But I understand the source of your concern. I simply don't know what to do to encourage

people to take the leap into art that challenges them. The verbal promise of reward is evidently not very convincing.

Reader: (Yuting Zou):

Yes, Taney -- pretty much as what you clearly said: the "entrance" problem. In fact I have some people (my friends) in my mind as models [when I] pose the question of their "experienceable". Few of my friends like art, (which they think is not perceivable, or they are not sensitive enough to perceive it). It leaves me to wonder how to involve more people in general by widening the entrance. I know it's hard to preserve the essence of the work and entice people into it, at the same time. Well, some people appear very interested in what they are interested in. That's what makes me think hard to add the "bait"/adaption (elements of typical interests of viewpants) to the work. That is a hard problem to me.

One little thing to add: the entrance may better be considered as a passage with beginning or end, not just the moment of entering. For example, applied to a film, the problem is how to provide a plausible thread that clings to a viewer throughout the screening time. And so, if viewers are of different types, the threads are many, and that makes a work complicated.

Response to Joseph and Taney

Posted by Laura Battle on Monday, April 04, 2011

If this ends up NOT as a comment to the thread, my apologies. I am technologically challenged. Joseph, thank you, I will certainly look for that book.

And Taney, as far as "the incomparable power of practice—of making—and its strange power to generate meaning", as an artist and teacher (I am by no means a scholar), all I strive to do is to convey exactly that to others.

My students in prison do dwell on their individual narratives as a means of self expression. They don't know any other way. Since I am not allowed to discuss their crimes with them, I try to work them towards a kind of poetry. Abstraction? Forget about it. They could care less. Tried that. (They HATED Kandinsky and Klee!). One successful assignment was to have them each write a haiku and to draw it. I figured, "How much of a story can they tell in 17 syllables?". (Though the next week one student said, "Professor, did you know that the word 'incarceration' has 5 syllables?"). Most, however found symbolism and universal meaning by being limited to a few words. That was a major breakthrough.

Four films by Nathaniel Dorsky, tonight at 7 PM, SVA Theatre

Posted by Eric Zechman on Tuesday, April 05, 2011



Still from "Aubade" (2010) by Nathaniel Dorsky

A rare screening of four films—Sarabande (2008), Compline (2009), Aubade (2010) and Winter (2008)—by filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky. Presented by the BFA Fine Arts Department at the School of Visual Arts in conjunction with "Beyond Kandinsky: Revisiting the Spiritual in Art." Mr. Dorsky will be present at the screening.

Tuesday, April 5th, 7pm, School ofVA Theatre

333 W 23rd Street, between 8th and 9th Avenues, New York City
The screening is free and open to the public.

Reader (anonymous):

Will Dorsky be present at the screening?

Taney Roniger:

Yes, he will be present.

Max on the quality of attention

Posted by Eric Zechman on Tuesday, April 05, 2011

Since we're showing four films tonight at the SVA Theatre, I'm wondering if Max or anyone else would address the "quality of attention" that Max brought up yesterday. What are the qualities of attention necessary for properly experiencing art? As an artist, how would you like the viewer/participant to engage your work? What role does time play in that attention? How is it different with time-based media like film, video, digital art than with art that does not engage the participant over time?

Max Gimblett:

Krishnamurti -- "The Flame of Attention":

Breaking down the veil between the viewer and the object, with attention.

Ideally time ends in concentration and pain leaves with time.

The entry point is selected and the painting entered and the journey commences. A fresh view ensues and all is miraculous.

In the observation of the object one becomes close to it and perhaps at times at one with it.

An object walked past has not been experienced.

Krishnamurti said that "direct perception is insight which transforms the brain cells themselves."

This a goal of art.

Taney Roniger:

Krishnamurti is a great source of instruction on the cessation of time (by which I take him to mean psychological time). Since David Bohm came up quite a bit at the beginning of this symposium, this seems an appropriate time to reintroduce him by way of his work with Krishnamurti. The two of them collaborated on a book called *The Ending of Time*, which I found a powerful argument for the practice of attention when I first read it ten years ago. I'll have to take another look at it to refresh my memory, but it seems that together they were able to articulate some of the experiential and physical dynamics of attention especially powerfully because their approaches to the subject were polar opposites -- Bohm's being that of a Western physicist and Krishnamurti's that of an Indian philosopher.

Max, you mentioned in another comment that experience (aesthetic or otherwise) "is not a group activity." While I agree that experience is in itself radically private -- you have no experiential access to my consciousness and I've none to yours -- there remains the issue of our responsibility as artists to enrich the experience of others -- or, at the very least, not to contribute to its contamination. But this is the subject of our next session, so perhaps we can wait till tomorrow. I just wanted to put the question out there, because you seem able to ignore the current state of affairs far better than I.

Max Gimblett:

I merely meant to suggest perception is private, but surely sharing it with others is the drive of our objects. They are placed in the flow to encourage perception by others, this is all I meant to imply, nothing further.

Jeff Edwards:

A very important aspect of attention came up in an earlier thread: the ability to slow down enough to engage a work deeply, and let its quieter and more subtle aspects find their way to the surface.

It's something we discussed a lot when I was still a student in the MFA Art Criticism and Writing and program at SVA, and my practical experience writing reviews and criticism since then has shown it to be true. Sometimes art you might dismiss offhand on a cursory glance reveals hidden depths or amazing complexity when you give it time to speak.

Joseph Nechvatal:

One might consider the spiritual qualities in the work of Bill Viola here.

Yuting Zou:

As Max said, "Ideally time ends in concentration and pain leaves with time." Together with Bill Viola's work, I realize pain/suffering is the fundamental (or required) perception in all Zen/Buddhism inspired spiritual works. Then the "quality of attention" only remains in the group of people who can perceive pain as something. Many people can feel it but won't take it seriously. So, it makes me think that any work of art with a certain spiritual orientation tends to select its audience. In order to get more people engaged, the spiritual, in the mind of the artist, should be less axiomatic. Maybe I'm terribly wrong here, please correct.

Joseph Nechvatal:

What about the work of James Turrell in this context?

Yuting Zou:

I guess James Turrell intended to affect the immersant with the light--the visual correspondence of his inner (specific) enlightenment (come from the realization of pain?). But his works really make me happy, life is happy and sunny :-D

Returning to the abandoned spiritual ideals of modern art

Posted by Joseph Nechvatal on Tuesday, April 05, 2011

I have been thinking back on the *why* of the abandoning of spiritual ideals in Modern art. I first thought it might be traced to the rise of the philosophy of Pragmatism, and that of Friedrich Nietzsche, then Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. And with the advent of phenomenology—most noticeably that of the French philosopher Henri Bergson. I recall reading about the strong impact Henri Bergson's theory of vitalism had upon Henri Matisse and other Modernists (including the Cubists) with the release of his book *Creative Evolution* in 1907.

Then I recalled that the Symbolists's spiritualist interests were focused on the possibility of combining and superimposing symbol systems into a *universal symbolic language*. When the universal symbolic language flopped with boring and vapid Modernist conceits, symbolist spirituality was clearly abandoned. But it occurs to me that a scientific spirituality has never been sought after in art.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

It looks complicated, a batch of history to be learnt. Does *universal symbolic language* refer to the logical positivism's principle: "the idea that all knowledge should be codifiable in a single standard language of science"? Then, it seems to me that Idealists and Symbolists are not the same. For example, Russell and his student Ludwig Wittgenstein were not Idealists, Russell's logical atomism is commonly called monism. But they were Symbolists, if I get it right. Since Russell opposed Henri Bergson in his writing *The Philosophy of Bergson*, I infer that there is a split among non-idealists. So, do you suggest that, with the rise of nonidealists and the fall of symbolists in this camp, spiritual ideals (expressed in a symbolic way) of modern art were abandoned?

Then I'm curious about the scientific spirituality in your mind. Will you say more about it? I guess not the formal science that is still symbolic, but some "avant-garde" empirical science, like Vitalism-related subjects -- for example, this one? <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qi>
mystical science...

Joseph Nechvatal:

I think I said what I have to say on this subject in my post: Current definitions of "spirituality".

However, I can point you to a new controversial school of philosophy that I find interesting that seems to be pushing towards a scientific spirituality. It is called Speculative Realism - specifically their work on Transcendental Materialism / Neo-Vitalism.

I have only read Quentin Meillassoux's book *After Finitude: an Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* that was translated by Ray Brassier.

Keep in mind that Ray Brassier criticized the movement as a mix of actor-network theory spiced with pan-psychist metaphysics and morsels of process philosophy.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Now I remember you quoted Ray Brassier a while ago in Paris. It says he is a founder of Speculative Realism, why did he criticize it?

Joseph Nechvatal:

I don't know. Do your research.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Now I manage to make a connection. The scientific spiritual is attained by the omnijectivity. And the omnijectivity, in a narrower sense, can be regarded as speculative (view[ing] things in any/all direction(s)). Then it also "occurs to me that a scientific spirituality has never been sought after in art". Maybe it's a good thing to do.

The End of the Overtly Spiritual Period of Modern Art

Posted by Charlene Spretnak on Wednesday, April 06, 2011

The avant-garde artists in many countries felt they were on a spiritual quest to "save civilization from materialism" from the late 1880s until World War I. It's true that the Symbolist aesthetic of the 1880s petered out, but the quest went on with various new aesthetic approaches for another fifteen years. The big shut-down came after WWI, with the turn toward the machine aesthetic (art deco in design, geometric abstraction in painting) and hard-edged rationalism. In its early years after WWI, the Bauhaus was a pocket of hold-outs of spiritual painters (Klee, Kandinsky, and others), but as Gropius was forced in the direction of having to distance the school from pre-war "cosmic wallpaper" and to accept more and more industrial commissions over the years, as did the subsequent directors, the mission and the ambiance of the Bauhaus changed entirely.

Taney Roniger

To think that there may have been a causal connection between the deep sense of trauma following the First World War and the rise of the machine aesthetic in art is very troubling indeed. The phrase "association with the aggressor" comes to mind.

Joseph Nechvatal:

Also remember the emergence of logical positivism empiricism of the Vienna Circle group of philosophically minded scientists and logicians organized around Moritz Schlick - as influenced by the anti-subjectivist, positivist, empirical philosophy of the Austrian physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach. Logical positivism was based in opposition to the idealist philosophy of Hegel and hence stressed the exclusive value of logic and positivism (Comte) over self-attentiveness. Schlick and the Vienna Circle's other members; Otto Neurath, Kurt Gödel and Rudolf Carnap maintained that only verifiable statements (verified by observation or empirical data) were meaningful. Statements about art were nonsense to them.

Taney Roniger:

I agree that logical positivism had a central role in the general cultural shift we're trying to get at here, and it's helpful to see it in light of that which it positioned itself **against** - - i.e., Hegelian idealism. But I still have trouble understanding how a philosophical position so dismissive of invisible realities (whether we're talking about spirits, souls, **or** simply the contents of consciousness) could evoke anything but horror and resistance in artists.

Joseph Nechvatal:

Well Taney, I suppose with the rejection of symbolism and its modernist aftermath, some artists were stimulated intellectually by logic and a rational approach. Famously, for example, Jasper Johns has found great inspiration in the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein. "The world and life are one." - Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Taney Roniger:

Interesting, Joseph. I had no idea Johns was inspired by Wittgenstein. It's funny, though - - although Wittgenstein is in some ways the arch-logician, he's also so clearly a figure with a profoundly religious, or at least metaphysical, sensibility. And didn't he spend most of his later years renouncing the views laid forth in the *Tractatus*? In any case, Wittgenstein's whole enterprise seems to me to be more about the **limits** of language, logic, and science rather than about their absolute authority as ways of knowing.

Joseph Nechvatal:

Indeed Wittgenstein did renounce his *Tractatus*. But in his late writings (*Philosophical Investigations*), he still maintained the need for silence on topics that could not be proven analytically.

It is now widely agreed that the writings of the period from 1946 until his death (1951) constitute a distinctive phase of Wittgenstein's thought. These writings include, in

addition to the second part of the Investigations, texts edited and collected in volumes such as Remarks on Color, Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Zettel, On Certainty, and parts of The Foundations of Mathematics. Besides dealing with mathematics and psychology, this is the stage at which Wittgenstein most seriously pursued questions traditionally recognized as epistemological.

The general tenor of all the writings of this last period can be viewed as, on the one hand, a move away from the critical (some would say destructive) positions of the Investigations to a more positive perspective on the same problems that had been tasking him since his early writings; on the other hand, this move does not constitute a break from the later period but is more properly viewed as its continuation, in a new light.

Jeff Edwards:

Re: Wittgenstein, logic, and spirituality. There's a lot of similarity between Wittgenstein's later writings and the philosophy of the 2nd/3rd century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, who wrote within the context of sectarian logical debate on emptiness.

There have been a few articles on this similarity, and the introduction to the 2007 translation of Nagarjuna's Sixty Stanzas on Reason by Joseph Loizzo develops a detailed comparison of both philosophers' thoughts on the inability of reason to make definitive statements on many areas of human experience. Nagarjuna often used the tactic of pursuing his opponents' arguments to their logical extremes, at which point they would collapse from within, leaving nothing in their place.

Joseph Nechvatal:

We might remember here that there was at least one overtly spiritual artist at the heart of modernism: Yves Klein.

Klein first studied Oriental languages, Zen philosophy and Judo and wrote a book about the subject after spending fifteen months at the Kodokan Institute in Tokyo. He then went on to found his own Judo school in Paris, making a living teaching Judo from 1955 to 1959.

Back in 1948, at age 20, Klein discovered a book by Max Heindel which teaches the basic beliefs of an esoteric Christian sect called the Rosicrucians. Klein obsessively studied the book for five years, and after coming to Paris in 1955, began to refer to himself as an initiate in the sect (he was made a Knight of the Order of Archers of Saint Sebastian) and was married to the beautiful Rotraut Uecker (now Rotraut Klein-Moquay) within its highly flamboyant and ritualistic ceremony.

Based on the Rosicrucian metaphysical ideology, Klein avowed to indicate to the world a new age, the Age of Space. In the Age of Space, boundless spirit would exist free of form, objects would levitate, and humans would travel liberated from their body. This contextual understanding is essential for understanding Klein's artistic importance, as this ideology of the immaterial informs all his work, even the paintings, but most explicitly such conceptual-technological works as the Sculpture aérostatique (1957) which was the release of 1001 balloons, and the Illumination de l'Obélisque (1958) in the Place de la Concorde.

Klein's metaphysical ideology is the basis of his well known monochrome paintings. Definitely the well-known blue monochrome were for him no more than an introduction

to his ideological "blue revolution", which he saw as the diffusion of immaterial pictorial sensibility throughout the whole cosmos, both visible and invisible. So blue color was for Klein was not pigment and binder but a spiritual, cosmic force that stimulates the entire environment, transforming life itself into a work of art.

Admittedly, Klein's idea of pure open space (free from form) was first actualized in his blue monochrome paintings, where the bisecting nature of line was rejected in favor of an even, all-over, ultramarine-blue color which he called IKB (International Klein Blue). However, later some of his monochromes were painted pink or gold.

The Ex-voto dédié à Sainte-Rita (1961) which was deposited by Klein at the Convent of Santa Rita in Cascia, Italy is valuable evidence of Klein's spiritual imagination.

Reader (Frank P.):

Response to Charlene Spretnak: I think that a parallel to the spiritual, by another angle of inner life, that has been left out of the discussion thus far is the Psychological, and notions of the Unconscious . What was called Surrealism is interestingly kept separate in our Art History from concerns of Kandinsky's spiritual. Both forms, Surrealist and Kandinskyian, led to forms of abstraction stemming from the interior life. The conceptualized site of this difference could perhaps usefully be seen in terms that Post Jungian James Hillman referred to as Spirit and Soul (the Greek source of the word Psyche, as in Psychology, referring to the soul, this both being related to and different from the religious notions of soul.

Taney Roniger:

Joseph, I'm glad you brought Yves Klein into the fold, since he's certainly someone who had no compunction about making his spiritual views explicit. I'm reminded of the very interesting review written by Peter Schjeldahl for The New Yorker of Klein's Hirshhorn retrospective a few years back. At the very end of the review, Schjeldahl -- clearly a fan of the work but not at all an enthusiast for Klein's spiritual ideas -- says:

"But there's no separating the improbable power of conviction in his art from the worship of a cosmic principle. The problem points up a recurring blind spot in the reception of modern art, as when scholars duly note the Theosophical faith of Kandinsky or Mondrian and then make as little as possible of it, concerning their work. And let it be recalled that Andy Warhol, as revolutionary an artist in effect as Klein was in aspiration, was an observant Catholic, too."

James Elkins, in his book *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, puts the point succinctly by stating: "There is no end to great art made by artists who had ridiculous or misinformed theories."

All of this has me wondering about the degree to which an artist's ideas (spiritual and otherwise) should be considered an integral part of the work's "content" (in quotes because I am always reluctant to isolate content from form). Can the very ideas, passions, obsessions, and convictions that give rise to great works really be considered superfluous, when without them the works would never have come into existence?

The above quotes both further our ongoing theme of the denial or suppression of the spiritual in modern art and raise an interesting question about how an artist's ideas can be separated from the work, it seems to me.

Daniel A. Siedell:

The question of how an artist's ideas can be separated from the work is an interesting one in this context because it seems that the spiritual role of the artist (prophet, priest, mystic) carries much more of the burden than the work itself. The response, influenced by our Greenbergian approach to art, is to easily dismiss the artist's silly ideas. But I'm not so sure that it's so easy. What is sillier, that Kandinsky believed that art could save the world or that painting stripes could save the avant-garde from kitsch?

There is still the problem of the traditional and I think quite problematic difference between the spiritual and religious. Kandinsky, like many (Hegel and Kant) spoke of the spiritual firmly within a religious context.

Taney Roniger:

Dan, I agree emphatically that the Greenbergian paradigm continues to influence our sense of the work's autonomy -- both in relation to the artist's ideas (silly or otherwise) and the context of a larger cultural web of meaning. It's always interesting for me to observe people who by self-description are avowed anti-formalists dismissing an artist's ideas as irrelevant to the meaning of the work (insisting, instead, that signification has a life of its own, wholly separate from the intentions of the "author").

The inversion of values you point to in your "what is sillier?" question is the very heart of this entire project, it seems to me. Thanks for putting it so succinctly.

I wonder if you might say a bit more about the difference between the spiritual and the religious, since we've not really touched on that here. I'm afraid our conflation of the two has probably been a bit clumsy.

Joseph Nechvatal:

"Religion is not identical with spirituality; rather religion is the form spirituality takes in civilization." "Where religion ends, spirituality begins"
-Babuji Maharaj

Daniel A. Siedell:

My understanding of the religion and spirituality relationship is not shaped by the traditional modern notion of viewing religion in purely negative terms and the spiritual in purely positive. Nor do I see them as opposed but intertwined. What often happens is that the most interesting of spiritual discourses occur within a religious context that remains present but also usually suppressed--and sometimes for good reason. (I'm thinking of Bonhoeffer here and the church under Nazism.)

I would argue that "the Spiritual" in Kandinsky emerges within a religious context that is shaped by Russian Orthodoxy. His understanding of the relationship of spirit to matter is profoundly influenced by the icon, which regards the material as the vehicle through

which, not against which, spirit is revealed or experienced. (Within the history of Christian thought it is Gnosticism that denies the validity of matter to embody the spiritual and it's a heresy.) Russian Orthodoxy as a religious practice is very different than the kind of pietistic (Lutheran) Christianity that shaped Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Yet even for these thinkers, Lutheran Christianity as a (privatized) religious practice continues to form their worldview, including their habits of thought. So, too, is Kandinsky's work inflected by a Russian aesthetic that has its roots in concrete religious practice, that is, the practice of the veneration of icons. I have always felt that Kandinsky, like Malevich, want their paintings to be "venerated" in a particular way and that way isn't "spiritual" it's religious and shaped by his experience of (or imagination of) how believing Russian peasants venerated their icons.

Religion is not merely an oppressive limiting institution, it's a public culture (literally a "cult") that shapes actions, practices, and thoughts. If I would be critical of "the spiritual," it would be that it tends toward fluffy thoughts un-anchored to actual practices.

I like the fact that Wittgenstein was reported to say something like, "I'm not a religious person but I approach everything from a religious point of view." I find it interesting that he didn't use the word "spiritual."

One of the more interested trends in intellectual history is to trace various genealogies in modernity that are profoundly religious and theological, which I would define as religious thinking.

Kandinsky's text has some relevance, I think, in that discourse.

Taney Roniger:

Thanks for giving us your thoughts on the distinction between the spiritual and the religious, Dan. Fluffiness is indeed the bane of the former, just as oppressive authority is the bane of the latter.

And I'm so glad you brought up the veneration of icons, both with regard to Kandinsky's work and within the larger context of religious tradition. Not being familiar with this tradition myself, one of the most fascinating things about your book (*God in the Gallery*) for me was your discussion of the "economy of the icon." I've long argued in favor of a work's *presence* being its primary vehicle for conveying meaning, by which I've meant something like its inexplicable but palpable embodiment of a richness unrealizable by any means other than the material -- as if somehow meaning is compressed or enfolded in the making of the object. "Presence," however, is not an easy sell on anyone, not least because it's so hard to define.

I'd be grateful if you could say a few words about the "economy of the icon," or how "presence" figures in the veneration of icons.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

@Dan: I find this paragraph particularly illuminating: "Religion is not merely an oppressive limiting institution, it's a public culture (literally a "cult") that shapes actions, practices, and thoughts. If I would be critical of "the spiritual," it would be that it tends toward fluffy thoughts un-anchored to actual practices."

Do you mean that we should integrate religion and the spiritual for the actualization?

Daniel A. Siedell:

The icon opens up an interesting divide in the history of Christianity, between the West and the East. The West never really gets what the fuss is all about with the icon and the violent iconoclasm that ensues in the eighth century. In the West icons/images, etc. are good for teaching and illustration. In the East, it is more profound; it is a matter of preserving the Incarnation of Christ and the connection of the spiritual and the material. The economy of the icon presumes this connection. The icon reveals the union of the divine and the material. One of the more interesting aspects of this tradition is the criticism that Eastern thinkers level against Western representational art, especially the Renaissance. This is also why there is a certain connection to the icon and abstract art. The Russian Pavel Florensky is an example. He sees the Renaissance as draining the spiritual (and divine) from the material with its excessive naturalism (perspective). Nature is not denied, it is pushed through to reveal its true basis as a spiritual reality.

The philosopher Jean Luc Marion has argued that the contemporary crisis of the image (his phrase) could be rectified by Nicaea II, which is the seventh ecumenical council that mandated the use of icons--a rather provocative and interesting assertion.

But the economy of the icon also includes its use. It is venerated--that is not just looked at but kissed, bowed in front of, touched, etc. Icons were present in churches but also in homes--little prayer corners. Malevich made use of the "prayer" corner as well in exhibiting his paintings.

Another aspect of the icon is the character of the artist, who must engage in fasting, prayer, etc. to be prepared to make the work. Tarkovsky's film, "Passion of Andrei Rublev" doesn't depict him painting a single icon.

I think that aspect of ascetical commitment to art on the part of the icon painter was extremely attractive to Kandinsky and Malevich--that the artist needed to have a certain kind of character in order to make spiritual art. But that spirituality is informed by a profoundly embodied sense of religious practices in and around the making and venerating of icons, a sense they had experienced both directly but perhaps most important indirectly.

Such theological discourse around the icon is clearly "religious," in the sense that it is shaped by public ritual, practice, etc. and for the purpose of establishing institutional boundaries. However, I'm interested in exploring how such thought, clearly shaped by "religion" can be exhumed from that context and made to serve non-religious needs, serve or illumine certain "spiritual" concerns in an explicitly secular cultural context.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

"In the West icons/images, etc., are good for teaching and illustration." Is it true that in the northern Europe, the use of icon is minimized? Since you put it "The icon reveals the union of the divine and the material." will you explicitly say something about the problem of northern Christian religion (reformed doctrines, in my mind)?

Since then, there are many more divisions in the history of Christianity, probably not to do with Icons. @Dan, will you say more about how these "bifurcations" of Christianity affect the related aesthetics, or vice versa?

Taney Roniger:

RE: "The economy of the icon presumes this connection [i.e., between the material and the spiritual]." This makes a lot of sense to me in terms of my ideas about presence. I also seem to remember your writing somewhere about the space in between presence and reference -- about how this "in between" is where meaning resides. I like this idea of the "in between" very much.

Thanks for all your thoughts, Dan, and I'm glad Tarkovsky's "Passion of Andrei Rublev" made its way into the discussion. Perhaps some of the other panelists will comment on what you've said.

Daniel A. Siedell:

William Desmond makes a lot of "in between," which he takes from Plato and the "metaxu." Desmond is a specialist on Hegel and a very original thinker who might be very helpful.

Although the West (Latin Church) didn't know what the fuss with icons and iconoclasm was all about, the West however did believe that the Eastern defenders of icons were crypto idolaters. Charlemagne received a very bad mistranslation of the Nicaea II and that lingered for a long time and did in fact color Northern European understanding of images, effecting Luther even but more particularly Calvin and Zwingli and the "Reformed" branch of the Reformation. Leo Koerner has written a tremendous book on Luther and Lucas Cranach, entitled *The Reformation of the Image* that explores Luther's ambivalent attitude toward images. Even the humanism of Erasmus is iconoclastic and thus bears the Northern European attitude of skepticism of images, a skepticism that requires words to anchor them, discipline them.

Christianity has unity but it is much more diverse intellectually and culturally (i.e., "religiously") than is often acknowledged. The most surprising revelation is to encounter the Eastern tradition which at times seems to bear more kinship to Buddhism and Taoism than with contemporary Protestant Christianity. Although the different Christian traditions aren't defined by images, they can be distinguished by their views on the Eucharist and therefore on their views of matter. The higher the view of the Eucharist (whether Christ is truly present in the elements) the more friendly the tradition is to art and the image. So, Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopalian traditions are much more open to imagery than Reformed (Calvinist), Baptist, and other Free Church traditions.

Modernity as a cultural, social, and intellectual phenomenon seems very Protestant to me, which makes such artists like Kandinsky and Malevich (Matisse, too?) and their interest in icons to be evidence of some resistance to a purely materialistic view of the world.

For a great introduction to the theology of the icon, Gabriel Bunge wrote a little essay on Rublev's Holy Trinity, translated by Andrew Louth and published by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

@Dan: I find [this] a great point: "Although the different Christian traditions aren't defined by images, they can be distinguished by their views on the Eucharist and therefore on their views of matter. The higher the view of the Eucharist (whether Christ is truly present in the elements) the more friendly the tradition is to art and the image." It reminds me of An Oak Tree by Michael Craig-Martin, who took the blood and flesh as real (due to his Catholic background). Reformers only took them symbolically.

Session IV: The Artist in Society

Session IV: The Artist in Society

Posted by Taney Roniger on Wednesday, April 06, 2011

Our fourth and final session, which begins today and runs through tomorrow evening, will set its sights on an issue that echoes throughout Kandinsky's book and that continues to haunt serious artists in our time—namely, that of the role of the artist in society. Whether as prophets or visionaries serving as beacons to a benighted world, as in Kandinsky's case, as “interventionists” seeking to bridge the gap between art and life, as with such figures as Joseph Beuys and John Cage, or as champions of art's utter autonomy such as Frank Stella, the role of the artist remains as fraught and problematic as it was a century ago. With a view toward opening possibilities for how a new spiritual art might position itself within the larger culture, I pose the following questions:

1. Shaman, seeker, prophet, visionary; genius, eccentric, cultural rebel, renegade: Have these roles gone the way of the Modernist dream? What kinds of alternative roles can we conceive for the artist, and how can we work toward their implementation?
2. Has Kandinsky's enterprise of defiance and revolt—his self-appointed role as “spiritual warrior”—been rendered suspect by contemporary sensibilities, or is there still a place for an oppositional avant-garde in contemporary culture?
3. What role might activism—environmental, political, social—play in a new spiritual art?
4. What is the role of the personality of the artist in today's art culture? Has the person of the artist displaced the former role of his/her work, and in what ways might this be damaging and/or beneficial to the “spiritual atmosphere” of our culture?
5. Does the supreme value placed on the individual that is such a large part of the legacy of Modernism continue to disincline artists toward work that engages questions of relatedness, or our embeddedness in the larger whole? Are these latter engagements seen as “weaker” pursuits, suited only for the less talented and ambitious?

Daniel A. Siedell:

As extreme as the spiritual roles are, it seems that a recovering or reviving of them might offer an needed antidote to the cynical unbelief in art that dominates the contemporary art world, which might give artists a purpose for making art that is more than reflecting the confusions of society.

Taney Roniger:

Dan, your comment brings up the age-old question about whether art is a mirror or lathe to culture. I'd say it can and should be both. While there is certainly something of value in art's reflecting societal ills, it seems to me that it should also have a more active, creative, and inspiring role. The distinction breaks down anyway when one thinks of the reinforcing effect that being constantly reminded of one's failures and shortcomings has - i.e., that it tends to perpetuate them. So by “merely” reflecting, art is in fact further

shaping culture, whether knowingly or not. I myself don't need to be further reminded of the fragmented, confused, cynical, and base aspects of our culture in art, since I'm treated to all these every day in just about every other sphere of culture.

I wonder how we can work toward a reintroduction of some of the spiritual roles for art in a way that won't seem like a recapitulation of the failed utopian ideals of the past.

The Observer Is the Observed

Posted by Pawel Wojtasik on Wednesday, April 06, 2011

Max is right. Attention is of paramount importance. How can one speak of the spiritual in art without being able to pay attention to it in such a way that the spiritual dimension becomes manifest? I mean the spiritual dimension of the art *and* of the beholder, which amounts to the same thing, because, as Krishnamurti said, "The observer is the observed."

Brice Marden tells the story about how Jasper Johns came to his studio once, in the early days of Marden's career. Marden had been working on a long painting, which was hanging on the wall. The sun was setting and cast a big shadow across the painting. The two painters sat there looking at the shadow slowly, imperceptibly moving across the canvas. It seemed to Marden like hours have passed as they waited for the shadow to go off the canvas. The moment it went off the edge, Johns looked at Marden and said, "That was nice".

Nathaniel Dorsky's films, to me, are a manifesto of "just seeing".

The analytical, critical phase cannot replace the "just seeing" phase of an aesthetic experience, I posit the two are mutually exclusive, although both are necessary. This may have something to do with the way our brains are built, with the way our cognition works, with the division of the brain into two hemispheres, fulfilling different but complementary functions, etc.

There are probably countless ways of "entering" a work of art, in order to properly see it. In my own experience, I have observed that one needs to get out of the way of the artwork. The all-knowing ego/self is a barrier as it keeps on imposing, layering itself over the work.

It is like inviting a guest (artwork) into one's house (one's own being). One then plays host to the artwork's guest. Now if I open the door and invite the guest, but all the while I keep talking and making assumptions, and comparing and judging and analyzing, taking the guest apart before it can come inside, the guest does not feel acknowledged for what it is, it abhors such a situation and pulls back, refusing to enter. If, on the other hand, I open the door and, letting go of myself with all my prejudices and opinions, allow the guest to just be, just stand there in front of my door, i may be ready to receive my guest properly. The guest, for its part, may now be ready to come in.

It is not guaranteed, even then, that it will come in, that an act of pure seeing will take place. But it may happen that one will experience the work of art as if alive within one's own being, in fact, in some sense, becoming the work.

From that perspective a proper critical analysis may take place.

Taney Roniger:

Pawel, your calling the work of Nathaniel Dorsky a "manifesto of 'just seeing'" seems exactly right to me. He's written wonderfully about the power and primacy of vision in

his book *Devotional Cinema* -- about how we see space before we act in it, and certainly before we "ornament" it with language. For Dorsky, the film viewing situation is a metaphor for (or reflection of) our vision; the dark theater illuminated by a rectangle of moving light is much like how we seem to "sit inside" the darkness of our skull and watch the world of light through our eyes. I find this incredibly powerful and moving, although I would probably take issue with the privileging of vision over the other senses. To me, the Buddhist notion of pure perception, which is inclusive of all the senses (including the mind) is the great paragon of active, engaged attention.

And what a beautiful story about Johns and Marden!

Pawel Wojtasik:

Taney, by "seeing" I mean perception as a whole. Thanks for pointing it out. It's a total surrender...

Response to Session IV: The Artist in Society

Posted by Max Gimblett on Wednesday, April 06, 2011

(1) Shaman, seeker, prophet, visionary; genius, eccentric, cultural rebel, renegade: Have these roles gone the way of the Modernist dream? What kinds of alternative roles can we conceive for the artist, and how can we work toward their implementation?

Any and all personas serve art.

(2) Has Kandinsky's enterprise of defiance and revolt—his self-appointed role as “spiritual warrior”—been rendered suspect by contemporary sensibilities, or is there still a place for an oppositional avant-garde in contemporary culture?

The avant garde is alive and well. It always is.

(3) What role might activism—environmental, political, social—play in a new spiritual art?

This is essential. The example of Ai Wei Wei is pertinent here. His art and his life, his political actions, are one. He is the example.

(4) What is the role of the personality of the artist in today's art culture? Has the person of the artist displaced the former role of his/her work, and in what ways might this be damaging and/or beneficial to the “spiritual atmosphere”—or interior dimension—of our culture?

"Anonymity is humility; it does not lie in the change of name, cloth or with the identification with that which may be anonymous, an ideal, a heroic act, country and so on. Anonymity is an act of the brain, the conscious anonymity; there's an anonymity which comes with the awareness of the complete. The complete is never within the filed of the brain or idea."

Krishnamurti, "Krishnamurti's Notebook", page 10.

(5) Does the supreme value placed on the individual that is such a large part of the legacy of Modernism continue to disincline artists toward work that engages questions of relatedness, or our embeddedness in the larger whole? Are these latter engagements seen as "weaker" pursuits, suited only for the less talented and ambitious?

"Creation is never in the hands of the individual. It ceases entirely when individuality, with its capacities, gifts, techniques and so on, becomes dominant. Creation is the movement of the unknowable essence of the whole; it is never the expression of the part."

Krishnamurti, "Krishnamurti's Notebook", page 11.

Relatedness and embeddedness are a fact of life. We all live in one community

Taney Roniger:

Thanks for bringing up Ai Weiwei in this context, Max. He is indeed pertinent and introduces another possible role for the artist: that of political hero.

I wonder if we can think of artists in our own country who have demonstrated a similar commitment to political change (albeit in a very different context) without falling into the trap of "message art" or propaganda. Such is the bane of art that addresses identity politics, in my opinion -- i.e., that the more heavy-handed the message, the less effective and powerful the art is *as art*. It seems clear that art operates on a level far deeper than political rhetoric (or indeed any other kind of rhetoric). I wonder, then, if the most effective way to engage politics in art might not be to concentrate on sending work into the world that somehow awakens and intensifies people's sense of inner freedom and works toward healing the alienation (from body, other people, and world) that we all struggle with.

Reader (Yuting Zou):

[To] be honest, I think Ai Weiwei was used by a third party, like many other similar "heroes". For example, the students [at Tiananmen Square] were fooled and used by some organization, [which] they later regretted.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiananmen_Square_protests_of_1989
Chinese politics is too complicated for me to comprehend, dark matters...

Taney Roniger:

Yuting, I'd not heard that speculation. These are matters about which I know nothing! So horrible...

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Indeed, horrible. I was too little at that time to know that massacre. Later I heard [about it] from one professor in my current department. He was actually involved and got trauma, and later had to flee to US. He couldn't imagine those real bullets and tanks. I personally prefer art that's not intensely political.

The Artist in Society: Individualism and Personality
Posted by Eric Zechman on Wednesday, April 06, 2011

Suzi Gablik (Has Modernism Failed?) argued that a key tenet of modernism is the idea of "uninhibited individualism," which she suggests can only progress at the "expense of the strength of common beliefs and feelings." In other words, such individualism is inherently antisocial. At the same time, she states that artists have a responsibility to be a moral presence in the world and suggests that such moral authority requires that artists make themselves into "exemplary beings," individuals with the charisma to influence society by positioning themselves outside of the

dominant culture. She ends up saying that it all comes down to the quality of the individual: "to recognize truth is not a matter of talent but of character."

I wonder if the artists in our midst care to comment about the either: 1) the role of the "personality" of the artist in today's art culture; or 2) the importance of the "moral" authority of the artist?

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Both roles are too ambitious for me. At present, I could only think of offering myself as an object of self-study. As in this networked society (towards a global mind), an in-depth study of an individual could be a representative of the universal.

Taney Roniger:

The issue of the "moral authority" of the artist is a tricky one indeed. To begin with, if we were to eliminate from the record all artists whose "authority" was profoundly immoral, anti-social, or amoral at best, we'd be left much the poorer for it, artistically speaking. While I don't think there's necessarily a connection between great art and troubled or destructive psyches, neither is there a connection between great art and moral superiority. That said, I think there *is* a role for the artist as "pointer" toward the higher aspirations of humanity, whether she/he embodies them personally or not.

I suppose I have a problem with Suzi Gablik's vision for a "connective aesthetics" -- not because I find the vision problematic, necessarily, but because of the way in which this approach to art too often turns art into a kind of social work or activism that ignores art's unique properties *as art*. I also don't agree that there's something *inherently* disconnective about the conventional object-oriented media (i.e., painting, drawing, and sculpture). The problem seems to me to rest in the fundamentally dichotomizing worldview with which artworks of any kind are experienced.

One of the things I do appreciate so much about Suzi Gablik's writing is her insistence on a general "turning outward" in art and in the larger culture -- a leaving behind of our preoccupation with self (witnessed especially vividly in psychoanalysis) and a turning toward an address of the larger whole in which we all participate. Her redefinition of the spiritual in art to include not just introspection and self-healing but also "extrospection" and the healing of the earth and world was (and is) a much-needed one.

Kandinsky: A Close Look, a film by Grahame Weinbren

Posted by Taney Roniger on Thursday, April 07, 2011

As a contribution to our project, filmmaker Grahame Weinbren has generously offered to host a private screening of his film *Kandinsky: A Close Look*, this Friday night in his Manhattan studio. Seating is limited, but a few spaces are still available. If anyone from our reading audience would like to join us for the screening, please send an e-mail to info@beyondkandinsky.net, and include a brief note about yourself. The screening will begin at 7:30pm. The location will be given to those with reserved seats.

Commissioned by the Guggenheim Museum for the occasion of last year's Kandinsky retrospective, the film is a three-part, high-resolution movie that draws extensively on Kandinsky's writings (including *On the Spiritual in Art*), and runs for 36 minutes. For more information about the film, please see: *Kandinsky: A Close Look*.

Conclusions

Final Day: Open Forum

Posted by Taney Roniger on Friday, April 08, 2011

Before our symposium draws to a close this evening, I'd like to invite our panelists and members of our reading audience to bring whatever final questions, concerns, ideas and reflections they may have on our subject to the table. We've covered quite a bit of terrain over the last ten days, but, as is to be expected, so much has been left untouched.

Additionally, I'd like to invite the visual artists on our panel to post some images of their own work, and our writers, critics, and philosophers to post whatever they'd like to about their work with the spiritual in art. I think our readers would appreciate seeing some examples of current work that engages the spiritual in some new and exciting ways.

RE: Open Forum

Posted by Jeff Edwards on Friday, April 08, 2011

I can't come up with anything else I'd like to address. Whatever questions are still open seem bound to remain open. They're constantly evolving, and there's always another tangent or new side path to explore. That's one of the things that's so compelling about the things we've considered here. Spirit (however you define it) is endlessly and relentlessly productive, and can't be pinned down.

Though I teach a class at SVA that draws from various spiritual traditions, my own published writing usually has little to do with spirit, at least in any direct sense. The major exception was a short catalogue essay I prepared for a 2009 exhibition of Tobi Kahn's works at the Museum of Biblical Art. In that piece, I wrote about the resonance between Kahn's art and the deeper spiritual currents found in various religious and philosophical traditions (including Daoism, Upanishadic nondualism, and the Biblical exegeses of Jacob Boehme; Plotinus and William Blake also got mentioned in passing). Most of the other art I've written about is more grounded in earthly concerns of one type or another, and my writings have reflected that. However, spirituality will probably always be a part of my critical toolkit, ready for use if/when it's needed.

Taney Roniger:

Jeff, is there a link to your essay on that MoBiA page? I didn't see it. Those are beautiful Tobi Kahns, though.

Jeff Edwards:

Hi, Taney. Unfortunately, the essay itself is only available in print, in the exhibition catalogue. I linked to the exhibition page so that people could see what the works looked like.

My piece focused on a few of Tobi's pieces, and talked about the way in which they embody the same interplay of opposites rooted in a single underlying reality that's seen in the traditions and texts that I mentioned above.

Joseph Nechvatal Images

Posted by Joseph Nechvatal on Friday, April 8th, 2011



cConcerning Abu Graib

Triptych, 66" x 132"

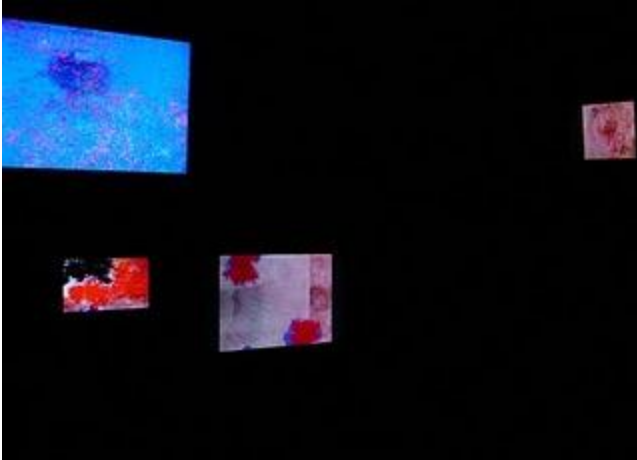
Computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas



vOluptuary drOid décOlletage

66" x 120"

Computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas



vOglia
Room of digital projections
Claudio Bottello Gallery,
Torino, Italy



becOming mOre
becOming multiple
Each 44" x 66"
Le val des nymphes



Orgiastic abattoir
 flawless ignudiO
 Diptych, 88" x 66"
 Computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas



Still from performance of XS: The Opera Opus
 New York, Dannheisser Foundation



Viral Counter Attack
Projection
Galerie RLBO
Marseille, France



back tO Order : cOnjugated bOodies
Diptych, 87" x 66"
Computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas



Art R tinal Revisit : Histoire de l'Oeil
 Installation view (partial)
 16" x 20" Computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas
 and screen with digital animation
 Galerie Richard, Paris, France



fleur de lys rectal
 20" x 20"
 Computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas
 and screen with digital animation



The Informed Man

82" x 116"

Computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas

Reader (Yuting Zou):

Ecce Homo should be the (suggested) title of the last image (right above). It's the Ecce Homo, I'm convinced. I finally got it!!!

Taney Roniger:

Joseph, could you provide some descriptive information for the images? For example, I'd love to know if the first and second images are paintings, digital prints, multi-layered collages, or something else entirely.

Joseph Nechvatal:

OK I dropped that information in. Thanks for asking.

Taney Roniger:

Thanks, Joseph. Before time's up: Would you tell us a little bit about the "computer-robotic assisted" component of your work? It's not clear to me how the robots, especially, come into play. If you're all out of time, I understand -- I'll look it up elsewhere!

Joseph Nechvatal:

The images are created digitally on my computer and that digital data is sent to an industrial robotic painting machine that paints them on canvas.

Laura Battle Images

Posted by Taney Roniger on Friday, April 08, 2011

Laura Battle has submitted the following images: Landscape, 2010, ink on paper, 22" x 72" (image 1), and Spell, 2010, ink on paper, 24" x 72". (Click on images to enlarge.)



Reader (Yuting Zou):

Thanks Laura Battle, I like all these "Sines" and "Cosines", cones and rotations.

Atta Kim Images and Video

Posted by Taney Roniger on Friday, April 8th, 2011

Atta Kim has submitted the following images and a link to a video showing a project he's been working on for the past year.

The first set of images (images 1 and 2) are from his ON AIR Project, and the second set (images 3 and 4) are from his Artist Indala Series, in which Kim superimposes all the paintings of artists he admires to form a single composite image. Image 3 is Artist Indala: Kandinsky (109 Paintings), and Image 4 is Artist Indala: William Turner (155 Paintings). The final image (image 5) is from Kim's The Museum Project (#149). (Click on images to enlarge.) To see the video of Kim's current project, please visit Atta Kim's video [\[link\]](#).



©The Art Project 1997-2000. The Art Project, Hanoi, Vietnam, 1997-2000. 2000. 2000. 2000.



©The Art Project 1997-2000. The Art Project, New York City, 1997-2000. 2000. 2000. 2000.





The Museum Project #100, from the series "Narcissus," 1970/1971, 48x64 inches, 2011, chromogenic print

Kandinsky and the Red Corners

Posted by Anney at Friday, April 08, 2011

Many thanks to Taney and Eric for their initiative and enthusiastic follow-through on a subject that while taboo and invisible in many circles seems like the elephant in the room to me.

I especially appreciated the generous contributions of Joseph, Jeff and Charlene and loved reading Barbara Braathen's lively recollection.

Some thoughts researched, some imagined referencing the nature of spirit and icon painting, unfortunately written before I read Dan's post. I am indebted to the scholarship of Peg Weiss, Carol McKay and Hans Belting.

CIRCLING BACK TO THE RED CORNERS

Kandinsky was often teaching, telling stories, but he was secretive about the deeper content. To echo Charlene...

He was the first artist extensively trained as an ethnographer. And that partially set the terms of the recurring theme that has been reviewed several times in the symposium, but here again: the

art and science dichotomy. When scientists admitted the atom was not, after all, the ultimate indivisible unit of life, Kandinsky seemed to take it as a personal/cataclysmic betrayal, saying:

The crumbling of the atom was to my soul like the crumbling of the whole world... Everything became uncertain... Science seemed to me destroyed; its most important basis was only a delusion, an error of the learned, who did not build their godly structures stone by stone with a steady hand in transfigured light, but groped at random in the darkness for truth and blindly mistook one object for another.

For him, science was analogous to positivism, materialism and later representational painting. He redirected his scientific aptitude in the service of a more systematic defense/canon of his artistic intuitions. That practice may have been seeded in 1889 when he discovered the shamanic tradition, possibly reclaiming his own heritage, almost by accident. Submitting a paper on "The Beliefs of the Permians and Zyrians" to a competition at the Russian Imperial Society, he won sponsorship for an expedition to the Vologda Province. The project would require a synthesis of scientific analysis and subjective insights that focused on the nature of spirit.

Kandinsky wrote in *Reminiscences* that:

Apart from my chosen specialization (economics...), I was strongly attracted...by various other disciplines...criminal law... the history of Russian law...peasant law...[and] ethnography... which, I promised myself initially, would reveal to me the soul of the people.

He had to probe deeply just to uncover Zyrian beliefs about the soul. He noted their concept of "Ort" (spirit) in the *Ethnographic Review*, defining it in a series of apparent self-contradictions. On one hand "Ort" could mean spirit (dukh) or soul (loi), but on the other hand Ort shouldn't be regarded in the Christian sense as opposed to matter. Part of the Zyrian paradox centered on the substance of deities, the fact that they had specific elemental compositions. "All [Zyrian] Forest and Water Deities, etc. have a substantial form. All these beings can be seen and they can incur physical injury." There simultaneously coexisted the natural, the supernatural and its darker side, sorcery.

Some believed that Orts were materialized tutelary spirits that accompanied people throughout their lives. Most agreed that Orts came to announce death whose arrival might be negotiated, that is—delayed. Orts could also leave physical marks, like bruises, on the bodies of those they were warning.

Zyrians believed shamans could occupy their material bodies after death and wander in the world. They shackled dead shamans' bodies during burials in order to restrain them. Kandinsky included the belief that Shamans could predict and transcend death in his report. He had to make sense of the Zyrians more fluid interpretation of matter and spirit. Ethnography challenged him to extend his own objectivity towards intuition.

And something happened to Kandinsky in Vologda that lay outside ethnography's academic grasp. The red corners at the heart of every Zyrian home introduced him to the syncretic practice of double faith, known as "dvoeverie".

I entered the living room for the first time and ...stopped... on the threshold before the unexpected vision... every object [was]... covered

with brightly coloured and elaborate decorations... the 'red' corner ('red' is old Russian for 'beautiful') [was] thickly, completely covered with painted and printed pictures of the saints... I felt surrounded on all sides by the painting, into which I had thus penetrated.

—Reminiscences

Kandinsky experienced the medieval Christian icons contemporaneously with the rich residue of the shamanic, pagan beliefs that had preceded them. When he later borrowed the style and outer forms of the Finno-Ugric folk traditions, he tried to incorporate the sense of transformed space/time embedded in their cult images and the rituals that lay behind them, but in private. The Shamanic and the Christian influences were equally absorbed. His work would allude to their stories.

In his essay "The Storyteller" Walter Benjamin focused on Russian author Nikolai Leskov—not to bring him closer to the reading public, but to increase critical distance. Benjamin felt people were forfeiting their ability to tell stories: the art of exchanging experiences. And what was at stake specifically in Leskov's tale of "The Sealed Angel" (1873) was not only the power of story, but also the redemptive capacity of the medieval Russian icon as the venerated image and the fact that in their history East met West.

Leskov's novel was published thirteen years before Kandinsky went to Vologda. Its message that "the icons of the Old Believers... [were] an authentic [religious] tradition... symbols of their oppressed faith" reached a wide audience. Besides emphasizing the original image as the authentic one, the book promoted a populist re-identification with Russia's past, something very much on Kandinsky's mind as well.

The saint's image could trigger the memory of the saint's story—the miracle communicated without being seen, without blaspheming the invisible reality of the sacred. Its "reduced but universally valid canon of forms reflected in the icon a super-ordinate canon of values..." The fusion of icon as spiritual image filtered through the displacement of story to thread Kandinsky's early Munich paintings to his later non-objective abstraction. And this was the breakthrough period, the time of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*'s publication that occasioned this symposium.

Taney Roniger:

Anney, thanks so much for this wonderful encapsulation of Kandinsky's involvement with ethnography, Orts, and icons. You've added yet another dimension to many of the topics we've touched on during this symposium. Your bringing up Kandinsky's interest in science and ethnography brings to mind another role for artist that hasn't been mentioned here: that of voracious polymath. Kandinsky's refusal to limit himself to any one area of study is truly inspiring and can serve as a model for those of us seeking further possibilities for the arts today.

Some examples of my work (Max Gimblett)

Posted by Max Gimblett on Friday, April 08, 2011



Max Gimblett

Gesso, Acrylic & Vinyl Polymers, Epoxy, Oil Size, Swiss Gold Leaf & Japanese Champagne
Pink Colored Silver Leaf, Clear Acrylic Overcoat / Canvas

25.00 x 25.00 x 2.00 in

P7160



Max Gimblett

Such Bamboo's Will Be The Hardest To Find, 2010

Gesso, Acrylic & Vinyl Polymers, Epoxy, Aquasize, Swiss Gold Leaf / Canvas

70.00 x 70.00 x 2.00 in
P6949



Max Gimblett
Such Bamboo's Will Be The Hardest To Find, 2010
Gesso, Acrylic & Vinyl Polymers, Epoxy, Aquasize, Swiss Gold Leaf / Canvas
70.00 x 70.00 x 2.00 in
P6949

Pawel Wojtasik Images and Video
Posted by Pawel Wojtasik on Friday, April 08, 2011



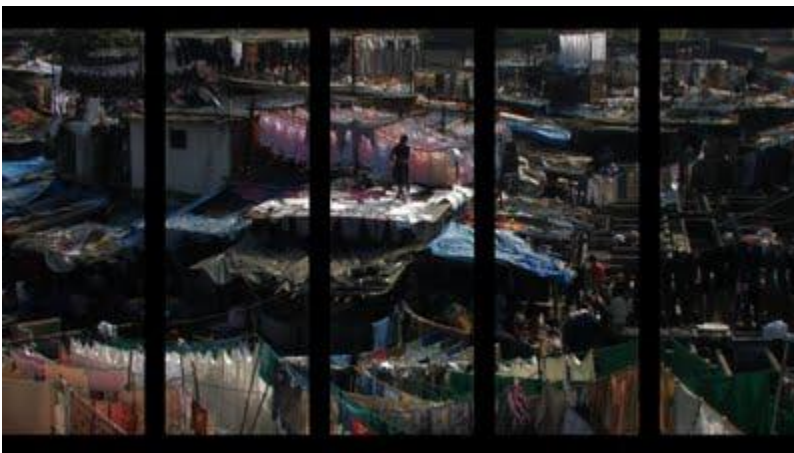
Pigs (2010) still from video



Dark Sun Squeeze (2008) still from 3-channel video



Nascentes Morimur (2008-9) still from video



At the Still Point (2010) still from 5-channel video

Video: Pigs
<http://vimeo.com/19511153> [link]

Final Day: Acknowledgments
Posted by Eric Zechman on Friday, April 08, 2011

On this the last day of the Beyond Kandinsky: Revisiting the Spiritual in Art symposium, I'd like to express my appreciation for everyone who contributed to the project.

Most important, I want to commend Taney Roniger for her initial inspiration for the project and for providing the critical guidance necessary to shape the material into something that would get to the heart of many of issues relevant to the spiritual in contemporary art. I know that her commitment to this inquiry began long before we ever talked about the symposium and will continue long after, as it is central to her deep commitment to her own creative work and view.

I would also like to thank Suzanne Anker, Chair of the BFA Fine Arts Department at the School of Visual Arts, for recognizing the value of hosting such a discussion at this point in time. While the centennial of Kandinsky's 1911 book provided an inspiration and point of departure, the interest and response the project has received underscore the continued relevance of this subject for artists today.

In addition, I'd like to thank everyone who participated in the ongoing dialogues over the past 10 days, including the discussions that occurred at the Nathaniel Dorsky screening on Tuesday, April 5th. I've been struck by the incredible range of views expressed by the participants in the symposium, views that mirror the infinite variations of feeling and thought aroused by any earnest investigation of the deep mystery embodied in the spiritual.

I hope that the dialogues and conversations started here will continue.

Final Thoughts
Posted by Pawel Wojtasik on Friday, April 8th, 2011

At the end of the Symposium these somewhat random thoughts occurred to me:

The value of silence—what was not said was as important as that which was.

We use the word “spiritual”—it is so painfully inadequate, even after so much clarifying. I am reminded of a Zen master who said one needs to wash their mouth every time one utters the word “Zen” or “Buddha”.

What was the purpose and effect of the symposium? Was it to re-affirm the presence of spirituality in art in the forum of ideas? It certainly could accomplish that. But perhaps another objective could be to bring about a spiritual state within individuals and society at large. For that, a kind of “via negativa,” a way of unlearning might be necessary

Finally, for no particular reason, here is a quote from Bruce Nauman, a real Zen master:

I HAVE QUICK HANDS MY MIND IS ALERT

I HOLD MY BODY READY FOR INSPIRATION
ANTICIPATION ANY SIGN RESPIRATION
ANY SIGH I THINK NEITHER AHEAD NOR
BEHIND READY BUT NOT WAITING NOT
ON GUARD NOT PREPARED

Thank you Taney and Eric.

Joseph Nechvatal:

Center of all centers, core of cores,
almond self-enclosed, and growing sweet--
all this universe, to the furthest stars
all beyond them, is your flesh, your fruit.

Now you feel how nothing clings to you;
your vast shell reaches into endless space,
and there the rich, thick fluids rise and flow.
Illuminated in your infinite peace,

a billion stars go spinning through the night,
blazing high above your head.
But in you is the presence that
will be, when all the stars are dead.

- Rainer Maria Rilke

Final Thoughts from Barbara Braathen
Posted by Taney Roniger on Friday, April 8th, 2011

Barbara Braathen, a reader who submitted an eloquent statement early on in the symposium, has offered some final thoughts on our project. I'm deeply grateful for her contributions. Here's what she said:

Interest in the Spiritual in Art has risen and fallen a number of times over the last hundred years, and is treated differently and in varying intensities in different circles. It was exciting to hear about the techno-garde lingo of the 90s... spirituality peeps over the horizon again!

My belief is that the spiritual is what provides art with value. This would be the loosest possible appraisal of the spiritual, viz., that it is pleasurable, it stimulates the imagination, and it is expansive. The art realm, the entire realm, and all works of art participate in the spiritual in this manner.

I disagree with Alex Grey that in order for an artist to deal with mysticism in art, the artist must have a mystical experience. After 50 years of interest in this subject, perhaps my mystical

experiences (not counting those regarding art) might add up to five seconds. The mystical experience is in the making of the art, not exactly in purveying the content of spirituality. One artist referred to the "numinosity" of the making experience, a sort of bond between self and other.... When ordinary time does not pertain as one is lost in the process of creation. This unity, this placement of self within the whole, can be felt as well when apprehending the work of art. It's a mystical process... not the conscientious engagement of mysticism as a topic.

My belief is that, until recently, artists have always known that their enterprise was on spiritual, and valuable, ground. All the cheeky inventions of the avant-garde—for which we must be humbly grateful—were made because the artist worked with total confidence that whatever was produced was for "higher" purposes. The spiritual content of art might be left unsaid, unexamined, and unacknowledged, but it existed as an unquestioned given. Even the turn to machine aesthetics was for a utopian, harmonious society, a visionary quest; this was not non-spiritual.

The nervousness, uncertainty, and doubt about much of today's art production is, I believe, because that lifeline, the spiritual in art, is ignored, even disparaged. The teachers of art and art history listened too hard and ultimately believed hook, line and sinker, in the party line of nihilism. Yes, Duchamp broke open the field of materials in art, bringing in the realm of the ordinary. But Duchamp was an occultist. If, as an art student, you learn only that he took any object and claimed it as art, voila... and you can do it too.... This is only part of the truth.

When did it become forbidden to mention the word spiritual regarding art? The interesting formalist trajectory, begun with Manet in the 1860s, terminated in the 1970s with body, process, installation, and new media art. Coming off the decade of the 60s, where Pop, in joke form, and Minimal, in silent mode, reacted to the passions of Abstract Expressionism... we had already by the 70s almost a decade of marginalizing the spiritual in art. Cool prevailed, and still does. Since then, there have been other major developments to absorb. In the 80s, the cult of the personality, of social circles, and entertainment columns became more important than talking about the work itself. Then, in the 90s and 00s, the extraordinary expansion of the once-tiny art market into the global and corporate player it now is. Art is participating in the larger culture of the spectacle on a scale unheard of previously. There is now so much art and so much art activity, there is no way to know everything, there is no way to go to all the art fairs. We are not only overwhelmed with data, but the contemporary art world is now a large social circle of interdependents who don't want to offend each other... so there is no judgment. Coolness is reinforced by the era of political correctness. But I view this cynicism as skin deep... not even beginning to penetrate the value of the spiritual.

In this large circle, there is no "high art". Because the "spiritual" rests upon values determining "higher" realms, perhaps this is why the spiritual is not addressed. Or perhaps nothing much is being expressed... better silent than wrong? I paraphrase here a statement made some years ago by Philippe de Montebello in Art Newspaper as an aside during an interview: "It seems that in the field of contemporary art, people do not feel free to comment." Curious, because as far as I know, the spiritual is about achieving ultimate freedom.... And so is art.

Closing Remarks

Posted by Taney Roniger at Saturday, April 09, 2011

First, I want to thank everyone who attended last night's screening of Grahame Weinbren's wonderful film Kandinsky: A Close Look, hosted by the filmmaker for the occasion of the

closing of our symposium. Even more, I want to thank Grahame himself, whose generous contribution to our project could not have been surpassed as a way of bringing things to a close. Not only were many of us given the opportunity to meet in person for the first time, but, by way of Grahame's piece, the man whose work and life inspired this symposium was made a living presence among us for the entire evening. Sitting in the darkness of the theater with Kandinsky, I felt the desire to thank him for all he's given us and inspired in me, but I also wanted him to understand that in many ways it is indeed time for us to move beyond him. I think I heard him say that he understood.

The last ten days have been exciting for me, and I find myself emerging from them with a renewed sense of the vitality and vigor of the spiritual, of the strength of its pulse that is far from fading. I've learned about new perspectives on and approaches to it that I did not know existed, and I feel positively infused with a whole new set of questions to begin pursuing. I've no doubt that for all of us similarly infused, the dialogue will continue.

None of this would have been possible without the enthusiastic and generous contributions of everyone who participated—panelists and readers alike. I'm deeply grateful to all of you for taking the time out of your busy schedules to give us so much of yourselves.

I also want to thank my project partner, Eric Zechman, whose commitment to our subject is deep and abiding. Eric's longstanding involvement with the film work of Nathaniel Dorsky has brought new dimensions to my understanding of the spiritual—and indeed to our project as well. I want to especially thank Eric for his heroic efforts in the coordination of our hugely successful film screening of Nathaniel's work on April 5th.

And I want to reiterate my thanks to Suzanne Anker, Chair of BFA Fine Arts at SVA, for her continued support of our project. We're very grateful to have had her sponsorship.

Last but certainly not least, I want to thank my husband, Colin Selleck, for his tireless work on our web site over the course of the last year. Colin has been the invisible force behind the scenes without whom there would have been no scenes. If I didn't know it before, I certainly know it now: he truly has the patience of Job. Thanks, Laz!

Wassily Kandinsky , 1866-1944

Posted by Taney Roniger on Saturday, April 8th, 2011



