PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Before I begin my paper proper I would like to make a few preliminary remarks. The word “Geist” has a long history of philosophical usage in German. Hegel’s “Phänomenologie des Geistes” is the classic example. Kandinsky’s “Über das Geistige in der Kunst” extends that history into art. It attempts to explain what Hegel left unexplained. Hegel begins his account of human consciousness with sense experience and ends with pure spirit, which is consciousness conscious of itself, as it were. But Hegel then asserts that pure spirit, at the moment of its revelation, becomes pure sensation, that is, pure spirit is revealed through pure sensation. But he offers no explanation of this, other than his conviction that the dialectic continues—never stops. Hegel in effect returns us to the beginning of his book, implying that the complex unfolding of the pure spirit in sense experience—an unfolding which encompasses the whole of human development—is a peculiarly circular process.

The question that Kandinsky addresses is how the apparent opposites of pure sensation and pure spirit can be dialectically reconciled to the extent that they seem to seamlessly synthesize. For him the work of art—his kind of abstract art—is the experiential realm in which this occurs. “Über das Geistige in der Kunst” is his account of how pure spirit and pure sensation unite—so much so that they seem the same—in abstract art, and what the emotional effects of their union are. He argues that the experience of their oneness radically transforms the psyche of the viewer, that is, abstract art effects what he calls a spiritual revolution.

It should be noted that “spirit,” which is the English translation for “Geist—although “mind” has been used for it in the case of Hegel—lacks the richness and depth of meaning that “Geist” has in German.

Finally, I would like to remind you that Andre Breton, who was not known for his kindness, praised Kandinsky as “one of the most exceptional, greatest revolutionaries of vision.”

It is almost a century since Wassily Kandinsky wrote On the Spiritual in Art. Why reconsider it now? Not simply because of historical reasons—not simply because it is time to take a fresh look at a text that had profound influence on twentieth century art—but because art faces the same problem now that it did then: how to generate and articulate what Kandinsky called “the all-important spark of inner life,” or, as he also called it, of “inner necessity.” It is the core of “spiritual experience.” The problem is even greater today than it was in Kandinsky’s day: what he meant by the spiritual was self-evident to his audience. Today it is not. Its meaning was anchored in religious tradition. Today there is no religious tradition to sustain it. Thus, in describing how he came to the idea of the spiritual in art—he realized that “the sensations of colors on the palette” could be “spiritual experiences,” as Kandinsky said—he described how he felt as though he was taking a . . . stroll within [a] picture, “that he was “surrounded on all sides by painting,” whenever he entered a church.
It didn’t matter whether it was a Russian Orthodox Church or a Catholic Chapel. The experience was the same whether it was in the Moscow churches or the Bavarian and Tyrolean chapels: it was an artistic experience of religion and a religious experience of art—a sense of the easy and seamless merger of religious and artistic experience, their inevitable reciprocity. The interiors of the churches and chapels that Kandinsky visited are brightly and intricately colored, as he was quick to appreciate, so that the excitement of color and of inner life converged. Color and feeling were inextricable; sense experience was spiritual experience and spiritual experience took sensuous form. That is, the external, visible phenomenon of color seemed to be a spontaneous manifestation of the internal, invisible phenomenon of feeling. Feeling needed color to become consummate, and color needed feeling to have inner meaning—to be more than a chemical matter of fact. Kandinsky insisted that certain colors and certain emotions necessarily went together. They were not simply arbitrarily or culturally associated but essentially connected, as he argued in the chapter on the “psychological working” or emotional “Effects of Color” in *On the Spiritual in Art*.

The public who read *On the Spiritual in Art* when it first appeared in 1911, and also the *Blaue Reiter Almanac* when it appeared a year later—the second and last edition appeared in 1914—thus understood what Kandinsky meant when he declared that “their principal aim [was] to awaken [the] capacity for experiencing the spiritual in material and in abstract phenomena.” It was a religious experience—an experience of inner life. Churchgoing induced it—forced one back on one’s inner life, in forgetfulness of the outer world—and Kandinsky thought that abstract painting induced it, if only because in entering an abstract painting one turned away from “the external aspect of phenomena,” as he said, toward what he called “feelings of a finer nature.” What mattered was the “mood” or “spiritual atmosphere” of the work, not its material or outward aspect. The work had to be seen with “spiritual eyes”—eyes that could intuit inner necessity—not eyes that could see only physical material or outer necessity. When Kandinsky spoke of “my tendency toward the ‘hidden,’ the concealed,” he was talking about his ability to see the spiritual concealed in the unfamiliar emotional reality behind familiar material appearances. As he famously wrote to Will Grohman in 1925, “I want people to see finally what lies behind my paintings.”

*On the Spiritual in Art* begins with a long diatribe against “the long reign of materialism, the whole nightmare of the materialistic attitude, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, purposeless game.” Another reason for reconsidering, and, as I hope to show, the necessity of re-affirming the spiritual in art, is that we have not only not awakened from the nightmare of the materialistic attitude in art as well as society, but materialism has become a plague, indeed, the reigning ideology in both. Kandinsky thought that Impressionism was materialism’s climactic statement in art, but then he never saw Pop art, which began the ascendency, not to say dominance, of media-derived art. The attitude of Pop art is so materialistic, however ironical its materialism is supposed to be, that it is virtually impossible to find any spark of inner life in it. (There is certainly none in Andy Warhol’s media mannequins.)

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

For Kandinsky modern materialism was evident in the “turbulent flood of technological inventions [that] has poured forth,” as he noted in “Whither the ‘New’ Art?” published the same year as On the Spiritual in Art, and the obsession with “the accumulation of material blessings.” But he never experienced the blind faith in technology as the solution to all human problems nor the wealth, however unequally distributed, of our business society. It is possible to argue that in art, which is what we are concerned with, materialism has completely swept the field, so that searching for the inner life of a work of art or expecting any art to have spiritual significance is like searching for the rare needle in a haystack. There is usually no concealed spiritual point in most contemporary art—nothing unexpected that would sting the spectator’s spirit into self-awareness. To put this another way, there is little that is sublime—another idea that Kandinsky used—about contemporary materialistic art, that is, little that would awaken the capacity for experiencing the spiritual.

Materialism has increased exponentially in art and society since Kandinsky’s day, as the business ideology of today makes clear. Business materialism is evident in the eagerness for corporate sponsorship of art—one may say corporate legitimation of its significance. Business materialism is also evident in the implicit belief that the work of art is a commodity before it is anything else, that is, its commodity identity is its primary identity, or to put this another way, its marketplace value is its primary value. It seems more and more foolish and farcical to speak of a work of art’s internal necessity when it seems designed to cater to external necessity. It is harder and harder to know what one is talking about when one does so. It is harder and harder to claim that a work of art can be a spiritual experience, however much such artists as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman insisted that one was missing the point of their abstract art if one viewed it materially. They were not mere technicians of color, to use a term that has been applied to Rothko, but spiritual provocateurs.

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

What I am arguing is that the spiritual crisis of the contemporary artist is greater than Kandinsky’s. Kandinsky knew art was in spiritual crisis, whereas today’s materialistic artist doesn’t see any spiritual crisis. All that matters is materialistic success. The spiritual crisis in art today is more comprehensive than it was in Kandinsky’s time, all the more so because what Jacques Barzun called the modern religion of art—however private a religion it was, and thus more of a cult—is defunct today, however much its vestige lives on in the pseudo-sacred space of the modern museum. Kandinsky could fall back on the religion of art, and contributed to its growth, but today it seems quaint and simplistic, which is why many contemporary scholars and interpreters ignore the spiritual writings of Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, regarding them as so much claptrap beside the point of the actual works they produced. The last religious works of art—the so-called purist works that Clement Greenberg advocated and analyzed—have become history-marketplace as well as art history. Even more crucially, Kandinsky’s assumption that color transmitted and “translated” emotion—that inner life had a necessary material medium, universally accessible and instantly expressive—has fallen by the wayside. The relentless materialization and mediafication of art, if I am allowed the use of a clumsy but I hope comprehensible neologism, which are accessories to its commodification, has stripped it of the sense of subjective presence so basic to Kandinsky’s belief in spiritual experience, leaving us with what from Kandinsky’s point of view is the shell of art rather than its spiritual substance. The point I am trying to make is that there is no longer anything hidden or concealed or behind art, as Kandinsky expected there to be. It is all upfront: what you see is what you get, as has been famously said by Andy Warhol and Frank Stella. If what you see is what you get, then art has lost its internal necessity, that is, its subjective reason for being, and become completely objective or external. One no longer experiences it, but theorizes about its material structure and social meaning. In other words, belief in the spiritual has been completely uprooted and destroyed in most contemporary art—the idea of the spiritual as such has become meaningless—thus completing the process of the despiritualization or demystification of art that began with Cubism and climaxed in postpainterly abstraction, as Greenberg thinks.

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

There is another factor that makes art’s situation today more difficult and desperate than it was in Kandinsky’s day: the avant-garde has been conventionalized, not to say banalized. This is more than a matter of its institutionalization: it is a matter of its bankruptcy. It has run out of creative steam—the age of artistic revolution and innovation is over—and become redundant, feeding on itself, and not always to refine its principles and methods. A good part of what motivated Kandinsky was defiance of convention, as is evident in his pursuit of “unrestrained freedom,” as he said in the essay “On the Question of Form” that appeared in the Blaue Reiter Almanac. This begins, as he wrote, “in the effort toward liberation from forms that have already reached their fulfillment, i.e., liberation from old forms in the effort to create new and infinitely varied forms.” It climaxes in a sense of “unbridled freedom” fraught with “active spirit,” that is, feeling. “The ‘feeling’ that speaks aloud will sooner or later correctly guide the artist as well as the viewer.” The problem is that what was once unripe new form has become overripe old form and no longer seems so infinitely varied, and what once seemed like emotional liberation—fresh and unique and revolutionary feeling—has now become stale and pro forma. The avant-garde has reached its fulfillment, to use Kandinsky’s language, and become decadent.

The moment of unpredictability and improvisation that was so important to Kandinsky, and that he struggles to achieve in the abstract works produced under the auspices of On the Spiritual in Art—as Richard Stratton has pointed out, it has a unique place in the history of avant-garde thinking, for Kandinsky’s ideas were developed before the art that exemplifies them were made, that is, On the Spiritual in Art is prospective and prophetic rather than retrospective and rationalizing—has passed and vanished, never to return. It is incidentally worth noting that the root word of “improvisation” is “not to foresee,” which is not the same as accidental or spontaneous, by chance or by impulse, and why improvisation is more enlivening than either—and Kandinsky’s whole point is that art has to be inwardly alive or it is not worth the creative trouble—since the results of chance and impulse can be foreseen, however not precisely predicted.

As Franz Marc, Kandinsky’s close friend and colleague, wrote in the Preface to the second edition of the Blaue Reiter Almanac “With a divining rod we searched through the art of the past and the present. We showed only what was alive, and what was not touched by the tone of
convention. We gave our ardent devotion to everything in art that was born out of itself, lived in itself, did not walk on crutches of habit. We pointed to each crack in the crust of convention only because we hoped to find there an underlying force that would one day come to light. . . . It has always been the great consolation of history that nature continuously thrusts up new forces through outlived rubbish.” Well, nature itself seems like outlived rubbish in modernity and especially postmodernity, and no new spiritual forces have come to light in art. Avant-garde art has become habitual—a dead letter with little spiritual consequence, however materially refined. Are there any works of art made today that do not walk on the crutches of avant-garde habit, that do not have the tone of avant-garde convention, that one can return to again and again as a resource of inner life? There are no doubt works that seem emotionally powerful, and even deep, but rarely does one find a work in which the emotion and the medium seem one and the same. I am perhaps overstating my point, but the fact remains that the problem that motivated Kandinsky to write On the Spiritual in Art has grown greater and seems unsolvable, and that his idea of an improvisational art seems naive and inadequate in the current sophisticated situation of art. Kandinsky began “Whither the ‘New’ Art?” with a cynical statement from a famous scientist, Rudolf Virchow: “I have opened up thousands of corpses, but I never managed to see a soul.” Kandinsky attacked Virchow’s remark as an example of scientific and materialistic philistinism—in a sense, Greenberg is the Virchow of art criticism and theory, just as the works of Stella and Warhol tend to be Frankenstein monsters, that is, technologically animated corpses—but it raises the important question: if one opened up thousands of works of art made today, how many souls would one see? Behind this question lurks another one: what state would they be in, if they were there?

One might ask, incidentally, how Kandinsky’s improvisations, in practice, avoid the fate of Stella’s and Warhol’s works, that is, avoid becoming materialistic corpses or Frankenstein monsters. In what does the radical unconventionality of the improvisations consist? If the core of scientific and materialistic philistinism consists in the power to measure and quantify, as has been argued, then Kandinsky’s improvisations resist measure and quantification, to the extent that they seem inherently unmeasurable and unquantifiable altogether beyond scientifically control and analysis. They come to suggest the immeasurable, that is, the spiritual in contrast to the material. The ancients were terrified of the immeasurable—the uncontrollable beyond, as it were, which was rationalized as sublime—and their art, which has been the model for so much subsequent art, is about measure and the sense of control and mastery measure brings. In contrast, one might say that Kandinsky’s improvisations deliberately construct the unmeasurable in order to suggest the same sense of immeasurability that the churches and chapels he admired conveyed by way of color.

He too uses color, which is experienced as unmeasurable, and thus suggests the immeasurable—the inherently unmeasurable, as it were. Color seems to transcend the environment in which it appears. It is materially the case even as it seems ungraspable and thus peculiarly immaterial. Color is constitutive of space but because its appeal is entirely to the optic sense, leaving the haptic sense unengaged, to use Bernard Berenson’s terms, it seems boundless and intangible. In The Measure of Reality Alfred W. Crosby has shown that the segmentation of space and time into measurable, self-contained modular units is the basis of Western scientific materialism. Kandinsky’s improvisations achieve their spiritual effect by presenting unsegmented color—going altogether against the quantification of color we find in Seurat—and thus seemingly spaceless and timeless color, that is, nonobjective color. Such color is not firmly attached to or contained by objects, and in visual fact seems to float free of them,
to the extent of existing independently, becoming, as it were, an amorphous subjective gesture which can never be seen in perspective, that is, measured and fixed in its place. Kandinsky’s rebellion against measure, order, quantification, number may look psychotic—utterly unrealistic and irrational—from a scientific materialistic point of view, which in fact is epitomized by the rational perspective construction of the traditional picture—but it opens up the possibility of a new vision of vision. Indeed, his improvisations return to a prelapsarian vision of reality—reality with which one is in spontaneous spiritual harmony, that is, with which one has an inner relationship rather than a measurable materialistic and thus contrived relationship. It is the difference between the way reality appears when it is freely engaged—when it seems abstractly and spontaneously expressive—and the clear and distinct way it begins to appear as one brings it under control by measuring it. I am suggesting that Kandinsky’s improvisations, in overthrowing the quantified picture, are inherently more revolutionary than Cubism’s quantifiable pictures, which still hold on to measure, however mischievously and equivocally. Ironically, Kandinsky’s improvisations show that one way of being modern is by rebelling against the modern vision of reality as measurable and quantifiable, that is, one way of making avant-garde progress is by regressing to a vision of reality that scientific materialism has discredited.

The basic question that haunts *On the Spiritual in Art* is what Kandinsky means by spiritual experience. He never exactly defines it, beyond associating it with religion, and declaring it to be at the center of inner life. The German scholar Klaus Lankheit thinks that for Kandinsky spirituality refers to “the subjective ‘freedom’ of creative man,” and another German expert, Wieland Schmied, thinks that Kandinsky wanted to raise “the problem of the purpose of art” by introducing the possibility of its spirituality. I think they are both correct, if incomplete in their understanding of what Kandinsky meant by the spiritual. As I hope to show, they miss what is fundamental to spirituality for him, and in general. Nonetheless, Lankheit and Schmied make it clear that the crisis that led Kandinsky to attempt to create a modern spiritual art—an art that would unequivocally express a spiritual attitude—had two aspects. It was a crisis of creativity, that is, it involved the question as to just how much subjective freedom there is in creativity, implying that if creativity is not completely free subjectively—if it is in any way bound by objective necessity—it is not really creativity. It was also a crisis that involved the question of the purpose of art, more particularly, of its necessity, especially in the modern materialistic world. In other words, Kandinsky’s spiritual crisis involved self-doubt, that is, doubts about his creativity, and, implicitly, originality, which correlated with his doubts about his subjective or inner freedom, and also uncertainty about art’s *raison d’etre*. The latter is in part an extension of Kandinsky’s uncertainty about the purpose of his own art. Broadly speaking, Kandinsky’s spiritual crisis was haunted by the unresolvable question of the relationship of freedom and necessity in the creation and significance of art.

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

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

The ultimate religious ambition—the ambition realized by the saints, and I believe that Kandinsky thought he was a kind of saint, the holy man of modern art, or at least a prophet announced its potential holiness—involves transcendental resistance to the everyday world in order to enter a more extraordinary, higher world of experience. It is a world that seems fresher and more alive than the everyday world—a world that seems to have been just created—just come into being. Kandinsky's abstract improvisations are meant to be as otherworldly as traditional religious renderings of otherworldly beings and experience. They are meant to show the creative forces—the creative conflict between spirit and matter, light and darkness, as Kandinsky says, using gnostic language—that brought the world into being, and remain alive and active in the inner world. It as though Kandinsky has projected himself into the moment of origination, as Schmied says, and witnessed the creation of the world from the inside. What Schmied calls his “cosmic landscapes” are microcosms of primordial process—of the creative process, which inevitably involves the processing of emotions, indeed, one’s deepest emotions about existence.

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

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

Kandinsky had in effect come to doubt that art was a vehicle for creative transcendence—that it could transmit a sense of transcendence of what it represented in the act of representing it, indicating the artist’s spiritual superiority to it, that is, implying that the artist’s creative subjectivity is more to the human point than materially given objective reality. The artist’s fundamental act of creativity consists in projecting his or her subjectivity, with all its problems, into objective reality—creating into it, as D. W. Winnicott eloquently says—making it seem humanly meaningful as distinct from merely materially the case. The appropriation of some aspect of objective reality as the temporary sensuous form for the artist’s subjectivity imbues objective reality with a spiritual consequence it otherwise lacks. It was Kandinsky’s spiritual crisis, involving doubt of his own creativity, as noted, generalized into the disturbing feeling that art had no purpose—this art that he had given up a promising career as a lawyer and professor to pursue, and that now seemed to be abandoning him that led him to abandon the representation of objective reality for the direct presentation, as it were, of his subjectivity, which he had in effect lost contact with. In a sense, Kandinsky reasserted art’s divine right to creative transcendence in order to rediscover and renew his own subjectivity—to heal himself, as it were. To put this the other way round, he in effect subjectified art to regain faith in himself and his own creativity, giving art a sense of transcendental or spiritual purpose in the process. If “crisis” is understood in the sense in which Hippocratic medicine understands it, namely, as the critical moment when the outcome of an acute sickness is in suspense—when it is about to change dramatically for the better or the worse—then we can say that Kandinsky emerged from the sickness of his own subjectivity with a new sense of his personal significance and creative power, that is, the power to endure and transcend his objective situation in the material world.

I am suggesting that Kandinsky experienced what Viktor Frankl calls an existential neurosis, that is, “frustration of the will-to-meaning,” indeed, a sense that human life, especially inner life, had become meaningless in the modern scientific-technological materialistic world, and with it art, the keeper of inner life, as it were. As Frankl says, such a crisis is spiritual because it involves loss of belief in the possibility and even reality of spiritual experience. According to Frankl, spirituality means “freedom in the face of three things: 1. the instincts; 2. inherited disposition; and, 3. environment.” Spiritual experience declares “the freedom of the spirit in spite of nature.” To use Ernest Becker’s words, spirituality involves “the problem of personal freedom versus species determinism,” or, as Silvano Arieti writes, the attempt to “increase [the] capacity for choice and to decrease determinism in every possible way, to move away from physical necessity and toward free will.” In other words, spiritual or subjective freedom involves the transcendence of natural and social determinism, in whatever form they take.

More broadly, spirituality involves the general experience of transcendence, that is, what Erich Fromm calls the X or mystical experience that is the “substratum” of the “religious attitude.” It involves the negation of the world and history and the self that is their expression, and, at the same time, the liberation of the all-embracing love latent in the selfless self that survives the negation. The X experience “is expressible only in poetic and visual symbols,” and underlies or
stands behind “the most widely differing systems of [religious] orientation.” They are “various conceptualizations” of the way to realize the X experience. However, transcendence does not mean “a movement toward a transcendent God but refers rather to the transcendence of a narcissistic ego—that is, to a goal within man himself.” That is, transcendence means inner liberation from authority, divine or human. Spirituality separates human beings from animals, who find transcendence incomprehensible, indeed, unthinkable, for it is beyond the ken of their existence, which submits to the authority of instinct. The less instinct rules one’s existence, the more one feels able to transcend it, and enjoy the experience of transcendence in general.

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

Kandinsky’s early abstractions are attempts to convey the X or mystical experience, that is, to realize it through transcendence of the social determinism implicit in representation of the world. Initially he found suggestions of transcendence in nature. It is a familiar romantic discovery, involving the transformation of the inevitability implicit in nature—that inevitability we call instinct—into the sense of freedom called transcendence, ultimately freedom from or transcendance of nature itself. In a sense, Kandinsky’s early abstractions improvise spirituality out of instinctively felt sensations of nature, more particularly, out of primordial sensations of naturally given colors. For Kandinsky, vivid color is not only a sign of natural vitality, but also evidence of eternal life, even a trace of it, for color is the earthly catalyst and carrier of the X experience, that is, it is the transcendence immanent in nature. Thus Kandinsky’s improvisations are mystical experiences—more familiarly, perceptual epiphanies—of color. They pay homage to its transcendental power. Transcendental experience is there for the asking in even the most familiar color, if one knows how to ask. Kandinsky conveys this inherent
transcendence by liberating color from confining line. In his improvisations color is uncontainable and infinitely expansive, indeed, an expanding, boundless cosmos of mystical experience.

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

The issue today is that spiritual freedom seems more and more improvised, and as such uncertain and even untenable. This is no doubt because it is no longer anchored in religion, which has been discredited, bringing the idea of spiritual freedom into intellectual disrepute. But it is an emotional matter not an intellectual matter, and the question is whether contemporary artists have the emotional capacity that Kandinsky had—whether they are willing to go through the emotional struggle he went through. Like Kandinsky, the contemporary artist stands at the beginning of a new century, but it is a different century. Kandinsky’s century is over, and the artist today no longer knows what it means to “make it new,” as Ezra Pound said the twentieth century artist should do. It is not even clear that he or she realizes, as Kandinsky did, that sometimes one can only make art new by returning to old ideas. Kandinsky’s belief that the artist must live for the spirit the way, as he said, “the divine martyrs and servants of humanity did,” and through his or her art re-awaken “spiritual life,” seems absurd. The third chapter of On the Spiritual in Art is called “Spiritual Revolution,” but the spiritual revolution of art that Kandinsky started—and I think he is much more of a revolutionary than Picasso ever thought of being—seems to have failed. It is doubtful that modern art ever made anyone spiritual—changed his or her lifestyle and attitude to a spiritual lifestyle and attitude—however much one may continue to believe, as Kandinsky did, that art is “one of the mightiest elements” of the spiritual life, and as such a major weapon against the “modern sense of insecurity,” that is, a source of spiritual security. Nor is it clear that art is the best way of discovering what Kandinsky called the “internal truth” about oneself. Perhaps the biggest problem facing artists today is that they no longer believe that art is an element of the spiritual life, let alone a mighty element—no longer believe that to make art is a spiritual activity, however much some may still believe that it can be a vehicle of the internal truth. But one wonders how much their inner life involves the internal necessity that drove Kandinsky to make his art.

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

NOTES

3. Ibid., p. 381.
8. Ibid., p. 258.
9. Ibid., p. 98.
10. Ibid., p. 47.
13. Ibid., p. xvi.
14. Ibid., p. 16.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question 1: Was it you or Kandinsky who suggested that the only path to spiritual art is in opposition to materialism?

Donald Kuspit: It was Kandinsky’s Idea. He begins his text with an attack on materialism. The idea of the spiritual emerges from the attack.
Q1: Do you agree? Is that the only path?

DK: I’m not sure. I think one has to deal with materialism, which seems all-pervasive. One has to take an inner stand towards it. But the idea of withdrawing from the world, which is implicit in Kandinsky’s mystical concept of abstraction, and a standard part of mystical thinking in general, doesn’t work because the world doesn’t withdraw from one.

So I would argue that one has to be in the world, but maintain a certain sense of otherworldliness as well. I think Picasso was saying something similar when he remarked that however much he was with people he was always in his own solitude.

Q1: Let me say I disagree. I believe there is another path.

DK: Which is?

Q1: Prayer. At the risk of sounding foolish, to my mind, as an artist, I find that it works.

DK: But when you pray you’re still in this world.

Q1: In a manner of speaking.

DK: I suppose that after you have finished praying you can go out into the world and teach. Unless teaching is prayer for you. Certainly prayer is a way of concentrating oneself, a kind of meditative positioning of oneself. But it depends on what’s going on in the prayer, and that is not always self-evident.

Question 2: What reaction are you getting in the modern art world? You’re an establishing critic and what you’re saying sounds pretty revolutionary. You’re really attacking so much of contemporary and modern art. What has been the reaction in the current artworld to the things you’re saying?

DK: I’ll answer you in two ways. I think there is fatigue with conceptual art and pop art in the artworld now, and a search for something more substantial, at least in certain quarters. I think, regarded as a whole, the artworld is a highly fragmented place, with the loss of coherence and clear purpose masquerading as diversity or pluralism. They are of course nothing new. So I appeal to certain interests, who want a new sense of purpose, but not others, who have a vested interest in past successes. This is always the case with any critical position.

On the other hand, many of the would-be legislators of artistic significance think I’m a little bit New Agey and going off the edge. They think I’ve entered old age, if not become completely senile. Whatever they think, I find, going around to studios and meeting many artists, young and old, there’s discussion of the idea of art as a special kind of spiritual enterprise, although it’s not, always clear what they mean by that. Both art and spirituality seem marginal in our society, however much they are yea-sayed. A new generation is coming along that wants to see them link up.
I think a leading artist in this new surge of spirituality is the Norwegian Odd Nerdrum. He was virtually mobbed by young students at two talks. I was present at them. Some 500-600 students expressed great enthusiasm about his work. He is admired both for his craft—so many contemporary artists eschew it, no doubt because conceptual art and pop art didn’t think it was particularly necessary—and what the students called his “spiritual atitude” or “spiritual position.” You may recall he attacked modernism, not to deny its achievements, but its exclusions. He suggested that there was something farcical about much of it. It’s no doubt provocative to call Barnett Newman’s paintings “wallpaper with theory,” but it points to the fact that a colored flat plane is not automatically spiritual. It points to the power of theory over art, and its use to rationalize and elevate, not to say hype, a good deal of equivocal art.

I think that “spirituality” is regarded as an alternative—not to say antidote—to “irony,” which has become de rigueur. Many young artists regard irony as sterile and stale, while spirituality promises fresh creativity. No doubt they seem, unsophisticated from the point of view of the ironical sophisticates, but then unsophistication may be necessary to recover from a decadent situation.

Question 3: I’d like to say that I thought you gave a wonderful lecture.

DK: Thank you.

Q3: It seemed to be a profound analysis of the distance that we’ve “moved from Kandinsky. But I’m curious about this. In the middle of your lecture, you said there are some works of our time that are powerful, but you wanted to say, if I’m not mistaken, nonetheless they’re not spiritual. I’m wondering what works you have in mind? And, more importantly, in what does their power consist?

DK: It’s a difficult question, but I do think there has been emotionally powerful and in fact spiritually resonant art made in recent times. I am thinking of works by Kiefer, Baselitz, Clemente, and various Viennese artists. I think in this country there are artists like Alex Gray, a brilliant craftsman making meditative art that squarely addresses the problem of how to make a post-religious spiritual art. He has been dismissed as New Age, but then I’m not certain what’s wrong with New Age, especially in our Old Pop Age. There is also the work of Hans Breder, one of the founders of intermedia, who has also made amazing iconic paintings with great spiritual import. (He will speak to you tomorrow.) All these artists have a certain visionary power.

What makes me hesitant about the German and Austrian artists is that I am not always certain that what I call the will to transcendence is evident—whether there is not a certain kind of defeatism, acknowledging the depressing insanity of our times, that undermines it. They seem trapped in a kind of morbid mentality, preoccupied with morbid memories. They are trying to shake the whole Nazi thing, but it is hard to shake, and seems to cling to them.

My answer to you, then, is that there are artists, in various places—I’ve seen some in Scandanavia, some in Great Britain, some in Japan—who are making what might be called a new spiritual art. Sometimes it is abstract, sometimes figurative. I don’t think there’s much of it in this country because we’re just too Popified. Everything has been Elvisized and the artists also want to be celebrities, which doesn’t automatically make their work creatively significant.
has been said that the artist was the rock star of the eighties and now, in the new millennium, he and she want to be movie stars. There seems to be complete capitulation to the media culture in some artistic quarters. A San Francisco artist-critic I know and admire has said that artists have become the research and development wing of the film industry. He was pointing to the fact that we’re living in the Age of Entertainment, and that art has become part of the entertainment industry.

**Question 4:** Would you think Frank Stella’s later development qualifies as spiritual? He certainly took a big, experimental leap from his early work.

**DK:** Yes, he’s certainly a great experimenter. His quasi-expressionistic sculpture recently installed in the Hirschhorn Museum indicates as much. So does his extraordinary recent exhibition at the Locks Gallery in Philadelphia. However, he still seems to think of his work in strictly formal terms, suggesting that he sees no spiritual import in it. He’s a great technician, but indifferent to—art’s importance as a symbol of transcendence and Its power to generate spiritual feeling.

**Question 5:** Could you say a few things about German Expressionism regarding this. You started with Hegel as far as the decline of the spiritual dimension with the demise of German idealism, if that’s the right word, with the first and second world wars.

**DK:** Yes, we live in hard, rather unspiritual times. It’s hard to sustain a spiritual attitude when the question becomes one of physical survival not just psychic survival. World War I destroyed German Expressionism, which had a spiritual dimension—although I think it continued, in however reduced form—and the generation of German artists who came to maturity after World War II revived it in however different a form. The Germans have been obsessed with the spiritual bankruptcy of modern society and have felt that art can be a source of spiritual revival. They lived in a seriously destructive world—it remains seriously, indeed, morbidly destructive—and art was one way of articulating the spiritual failure implicit in destructiveness as well as suggesting a creative and spiritual alternative. They are idealists despite being realists. They insist on the possibility of spirituality in defiance of the reality of sadistic violence. They were survivors, and they wanted something spiritually and emotionally better than the brutal society that was their heritage. The German Expressionism that was also their heritage suggested something better without denying social reality. It is the dialectic between outer realism and inner idealism that make German Expressionism, pre-World War I and post-World War II, so fascinating and engaging. Baselitz and Kiefer share with Kandinsky and Marc the experience of destructiveness and the hope for recreation—at least self-recreation—through the working through process called art.

Beuys, who to me is the key figure in post-World War II Germany—the father-figure of postwar German art—thought that art could catalyze society’s as well the sea’s respiritualization. He experienced the war directly and he used art to re-spiritualize himself afterwards. He also thought it could help re-create German society on a new model, preventing the kind of mentality that had caused so much suffering. Art was a means of emotional and spiritual renewal in a bankrupt society. Strange as it may seem to say so, he was the new Kandinsky. My point is that the old and new German Expressionists kept Kandinsky’s idealism alive while acknowledging the death all around them—the widespread institutionalized death that Hegel never experienced and couldn’t begin to comprehend, however much he witnessed the
Napoleonic wars. He never knew of the Holocaust, which was the final defeat for idealism, and he never faced the problem of maintaining spiritual idealism despite the reality of the Holocaust. Beuys faced the problem, producing an art admirably suited to the times, articulating its reality while conveying the possibility of surviving and transcending it while functioning to change it for the better. Hegel never understood the need for a healing art, while Beuys knew that it was the only kind of art that was really needed. A healing art is one that can convey the sickness while suggesting its cure—be realistic and idealistic at the same time. This is the essence of a genuine spirituality.

I am suggesting that the most spiritual art in the twentieth century was Expressionistic art, in all its varieties, abstract and figurative. In the United States we had a number of Jewish-American artists, such as Rothko, Newman, and Rudoff Baranik who made important spiritual art, although I think they did not sufficiently attend to the sickness that prompts and informs it. In 1937 an advocate of Expressionism associated with The Ten described Expressionism as a Visionary art that conveyed the throb of life in a world in which it was threatened. It was aware of both internal and external reality, and tried to synthesize them in an intense vision. This is what Beuys did in an inimitable way, not only synthesizing subjective and objective reality in his art, but using it as a form of social action. He was the supreme post-Hegelian German idealist-realist.

Question 6. I want to congratulate you on delivering a wonderful talk.

DK: Thank you.

Q6: I find myself in particular sympathy with your attack on materialism in the modern world, and I wonder if you could speak to the following concern I have. I wonder if you’re setting up a dichotomy between spirit and matter.

In particular, you mentioned the saints, whose business was to push away from the world. But that’s not the meaning of sainthood. The meaning of sainthood is the transfiguration of this world. Kandinsky may be saying something in his theoretical statements about setting up this dichotomy, but in his artwork he actually objectifies the spiritual, as you have wonderfully shown in your talk. You evoked Hegel in the beginning and for Hegel that would be a completely unacceptable idea of setting up a dichotomy between spiritualism and materialism. Spiritualism is supposed to redeem materialism and transfigure it, and that’s the concern I have, having listened to your talk.

DK: If there’s a dichotomy, let’s refine the terms. Its not so much between spiritualism and materialism, as between the spiritual and determinism. The so-called spiritual brings with it a sense of free creativity, as distinct from the sense that we are bound, determined, whether we know it or not. Experiencing the spiritual, we suddenly realize that we’re determined. It’s then that the issue of who we are, and the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, becomes an issue.

As for Hegel, I think that you’re right, but not entirely right For Hegel spiritual consciousness is an ongoing process, involving the movement from one level of consciousness to another, each level putting you in a different world, as it were. You don’t just transfigure the world you find yourself in, you find yourself in a different world. You’re somewhere else.
But then something else happens, as Kierkegaard’s discussion of the religious personality suggests. The world stops changing, but you’ve completely changed. You see things entirely in spiritual—existential terms, even as you go about your ordinary daily business in a world that has become radically banal because it can’t be changed. You make a leap of faith, which doesn’t transfigure the world, but rather confirms that you have been transfigured. Apply this to the saints you mentioned: they’re not transfiguring the world, they’re transfiguring themselves despite the world. They experienced in a kind of mystical moment, as it were, the sense of being connected with something not of this banal world, something within but beyond the wretchedness of existence. They experienced something immeasurable within the measurable, something transcendent within the empirical.

It is the kind of experience a Gothic cathedral thrusts upon you. It’s not about transfiguring the world, but the sense that the world doesn’t matter when you’re inside the cathedral—inside the body of God, as it were. The cathedral doesn’t deny that you have to deal with the outside world, but rather asserts that there is something more important than it, and you can find that something within your own worldly self—through prayer and meditation, to refer to an earlier question. The great saints, for example, Loyola, did work hard to transform the world for the better, but only after they transformed themselves for the better. And they always worked with the awareness that the world could always relapse to the worst.

Kandinsky thought the same thing, and so did Mondrian—they thought that their self-transformation, symbolically visible in their art, could be a “model for world-transformation, but that remained a utopian fantasy. They were saints of art, but they had no church of art to sustain their vision and make it socially effective. They were not part of any organized belief system, but individualists. They transformed themselves through their artmaking, and their transformation survives in their artwork, but their artwork had no transformative effect on the world, however much it helped other individuals transform their consciousness. They used the symbolic mode called art to transform themselves, but the artwork, which is a symbolic structure, can’t transform the world. To do so you need social action, and art is not exactly social action. Engels once said that an ounce of social action was worth a ton of theory. Similarly, an ounce of social action is worth a ton of art Symbols are necessary, but they are stepping stones not ends in themselves, although we can regard them as ends in themselves, as the “art for the sake of art position does.

Q6: My point is that artworks are objective, are physical objects. The Gothic cathedral is built of stone where stone is made to fly and where glass is made luminous and the human being is made to soar.

DK: But they stand apart from the world. The Gothic cathedral is separate from the world. It’s a separate space. It’s a sacred space. It’s a symbolic space. What it symbolizes is important, but it won’t absolutely change profane social space, whatever changes it may effect. What we now call Ground Zero has become sacred space—acquired spiritual meaning—by reason of the destruction and loss of profane social space, but I don’t think that’s the kind of transformation you mean by “transfiguration.” Ground Zero is a huge crematorium—a site of death—now symbolizing transcendence of the world, but it won’t transform the world for the better. In fact, it represents the fact that the world is still the same lousy brutal, inhumane place it was, is, and will continue to be, however many sites of spirituality are ironically created by mass death.
**Question 7:** But it is transforming to see it.

**DK:** Yes, it transforms you, but not the world. At Ground Zero you experience hope, and the recuperation and recovery of spirit it indicates, and you can then go out and fight the dragons again.

**Question 7:** People are shifting their consciousness.

**DK:** Yes, they’re shifting their consciousness, but then they have to leave the invisible cathedral of Ground Zero and return to face the dangerous world that created it. It might be nice to turn the whole site into a park, but the world won’t allow that. The real estate is too precious. The world even owns and manages the sublime spiritual spaces.

**Question 8:** With all respect, I cannot agree with your Manicheanism.

**DK:** I understand that. I don’t think it’s Manicheanism. It’s pessimistic realism.

**Question 9:** I want to change the subject again. You were talking about painting, and earlier today I was talking about artists who were doing spiritual work, among them Bill Viola and James Turrell. I think they do succeed in taking us out of the ordinary and placing us in a context that is transformative.

**DK:** I agree with you. You have to make a pilgrimage to Turrell’s Arizona mountain. It’s a wonderful experience. But you have to convince yourself that he’s not just a technician of light. At the same time, I agree with you that it’s transformative to be within the space he has created.

**Question 10:** I think what is missing in the discussion of transcendence is the notion of immanence. If the Gothic cathedral is a space apart, symbolizing transcendence and otherworldliness, it is still a space in the world. It’s a transcendental space that’s immanent in the world. While I really enjoyed your talk, I found this notion of immanence missing.

**DK:** You have acknowledged something very important, what Kandinsky called the capacity for spiritual experience immanent in us. I think it is activated, as Kandinsky suggested, only in situations of extreme duress. The pressure can come from society or from inside oneself or from both at once. The transformative spiritual experience that emerges from it and rises above it can later be institutionalized and manipulated, perhaps to catalyse spiritual experience in the individual, perhaps to sell spiritual experience short by using it as the jumping off point for socio-religious doctrine and dogma.

**Question 11:** I haven’t got a question, but I want to tell you of an experience. I was born in Germany, and back in it two years ago, sitting with a happy group, talking about how extroverted this or that person is, I was aghast. To be “introverted” was regarded as extremely extraordinary, special. This wasn’t made to be. The reason I am saying this is that it pertains very much to this very necessary talk you gave. You are really referring to the inner light or inner way. It is all the more necessary in this extroverted materialistic world.
DK: One of the things Europeans fear most is Americanization, which seems to mean being entirely extroverted. It’s a kind of total otherdirectedness, in which the very idea of innerdirectness becomes absurd. I agree that American otherdirectness seems to be taking over the world, however much the World Trade Center disaster seems to have turned people inward. To what extent is not always clear. It seems that people want to heal the emotional wound the disaster inflicted in order to go back to being totally extroverted. I think the bankruptcy of American extroversion is shown by Giuliani’s statement that people should shop if they wanted to help New York recover from the disaster. That doesn’t suggest much of a change of spirit. One doesn’t dare turn so inward that one realizes that one has to change the whole spirit and tenor of one’s life. Unless, of course, shopping is a spiritual activity, which it may be in America. Nonetheless, there was, in the aftermath of the disaster, a sense of communal spirit. People worked together for a good cause, which was somewhat different from returning to shopping as usual. Are New York firemen and policemen more spiritual than New York artists?