

Artweek



■ Spiritual Art ■ Roy De Carava ■ Theophilus Brown

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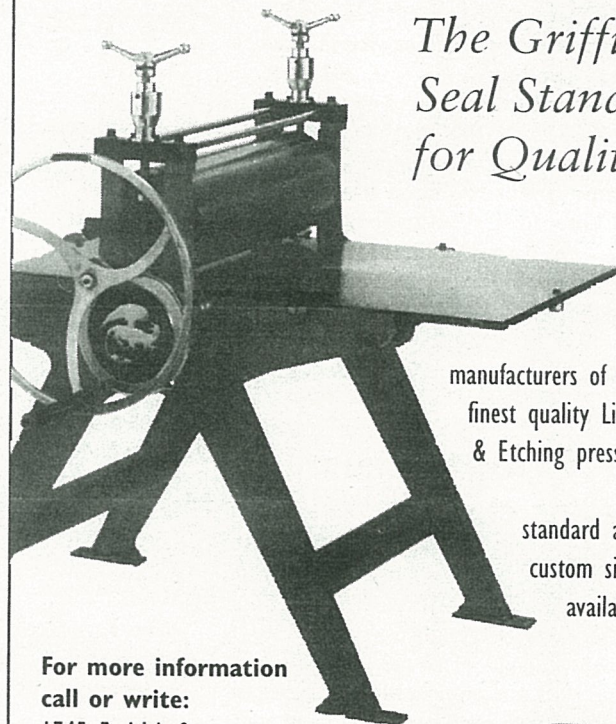
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Wisdom Like Perfume: Writings on the Spiritual in Art

By Meredith Tromble

Thoreau gave us the image of “wisdom like perfume,” an understanding which subtly pervades and enhances ordinary existence. Writers attempting to talk about the spiritual in art face the task of translating experiences which are by definition mysterious into ordinary language. Despite the difficulties, there is a growing body of literature which may help develop a reader’s own wisdom. What follows is a selective review of useful writings in the field.

Wassily Kandinsky, in his small book *The Spiritual in Art*, (trans. M.T.H. Sadler, Dover Publications, New York, 1977) theorized about the energies of color and form. He attempted to grasp intellectually material which earlier abstract painters had received intuitively, as if from a higher consciousness.

Kandinsky’s book, which was first published in 1911 and appeared in English in 1914, remains a touchstone for those interested in the subject, instructive as much for its failures as its successes. Reading his theories of “universal” energies associated with color and shape, one is struck by how personal and individual his associations are. (For example, he writes that yellow has a disturbing influence, and reveals an insistent, aggressive character.) But although he fails to discover objective principles of form and color, he identifies with unusual clarity his own subjective responses to them. The way he grapples with his questions is both impressive and enlightening. Even if the particular trail of thought he followed proved to be a dead end, his sincere exploration remains an inspiration to others.

Although for many years critics regarded spiritual content in art as an insignificant, even embarrassing deviation from the modernist concerns, Kandinsky was not alone in his interests. Artists from Mondrian to DeFeo tapped spiritual sources for their work. One of the first books to bring attention to this was a 1977 exhibition catalog, *Perceptions of the Spirit in 20th Century American Art*, by Jane and John Dillenberger (Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana). Covering a remarkably diverse group of artists for the time, the Dillenbergers touch on approaches to the spiritual that range from Mark Tobey’s “white writing” to Horace Pippin’s eschatological visions.

In 1986, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (Maurice Tuchman et al, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press, New York) was published to accompany the exhibition of the same name at the Los Angeles County Museum. This substantial catalog remains one of the most useful and thought provoking works available on the subject. Unlike the Dillenberger catalog, which notes the presence of spiritual references in the work of many artists but does not suggest that the subject is more than a peripheral concern for twentieth century art, Tuchman’s book makes a solid case that spiritual concerns generated abstract painting. Sometime before the turn of the century abstraction appeared in Western art as an attempt to communicate spiritual experience. *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting* introduced American

viewers to the work of Swedish artist Hilma Af Klint, who, starting in 1905, channeled a number of abstract paintings and, on the direction of her spirit guides, left instructions in her will that they be preserved and be kept together until the world was ready to receive them.

The recent discovery in Australia of highly developed abstract paintings channeled by Georgiana Houghton, a Victorian spiritualist, pushes the advent of abstraction back even further. Houghton’s work, recently rediscovered in the collection of the Victorian Spiritualist Union in Melbourne, was exhibited in England in the late 1870s and appears to have connections back to William Blake and forward to the circle of Theosophists who influenced Kandinsky. (Information about Houghton’s work can be found in the catalog for *Spirit + Place*, a November 1996 publication of The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Australia, which arrived too late for inclusion in this article.)

Another important book, which considers both abstract and figurative modern art, is *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art* by Roger Lipsey. (An article by Lipsey appears elsewhere in this issue of *Artweek*.) Lipsey approaches the issues largely through essays on the work of individual artists, using their statements, historical information, and his own thoughtful readings of specific works to think about what it means to make spiritual art. He also includes a chapter analyzing the relationship between artist and art market from the angle of a spiritual life, which, although it appears as an afterthought to his primary argument, may be one of the most useful chapters in the book to working artists.

Most of the artists considered by Tuchman and Lipsey were working at a time when discovery of “universal truth” seemed possible. Approaching the turn of a new century, the attention of the art world has been focused on difference. “Universal truth” has been revealed as a mask for the imposition of the interests of one group on other groups. Yet humans exist both as individuals and as part of something larger; as beings with some degree of autonomy and as beings subject to forces beyond their control. Having examined differences with respect and care, is it possible to responsibly reopen the question of connection? What happens when the politics of difference meets the search for a connection?

Taken together, two books by critic Suzi Gablik offer a method for exploring this question. In *The Reenchantment of Art* (Thames and Hudson, New York, 1991) Gablik equates the metaphysical with the ecological. She argues that artists must transform personal vision into social responsibility and articulates a new set of values for art, based on a sense of community, an ecological perspective, and greater emphasis on spiritual renewal. *Reenchantment* struck a responsive chord, and Gablik spent the early nineties traveling the world to give talks about her ideas. In the course of her travels, she met many other thinkers, with different ideas, and began to confront the contradiction inherent in imposing fixed ideas about community. She began to look for nonpolemical ways to work, a means more in

keeping with her ideals. *Conversations before the end of time: Dialogues on Art, Life and Spiritual Renewal* (Thames and Hudson, New York, 1995) is the result. *Conversations* is a collection of interviews in which Gablik explores ways of maintaining a vigorous point of view without negating the existence of others. As a challenge, she includes the conservative critic Hilton Kramer, whose position on almost any question differs from her own. She models a process of allowing the truth of the subject to emerge from many points of view.

Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives (Richard Francis, ed., The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1996), an exhibition catalog, explores the application of this multivalent approach to exhibition with an approach informed by critical theory. Several of the essays, which are from a disparate group of authors, are written in an academic style which begs for translation into English. Following the twisting thoughts in the title essay, a deconstruction of the terms “negotiate” and “rapture,” one finds the author pushing at the boundaries of language. If one turns with relief to the delightful, straightforward contribution on the art of India or the thoughtful disquisition on sainthood, one can still appreciate the effort to point to mysteries beyond words.

The most fascinating part of the catalog is a map explaining the way the exhibition was hung. The presentation was structured in a nonlinear fashion, with works arranged so that the viewer could carom from Shirazeh Houshiary to Canova to Lucio Fontana. Although the book format imposes its own linearity, a reader finds reproductions interspersed with literature and historical information in a refreshingly free chain of associations.

The experience of connecting with something beyond the human self is not always benign. *American Magus: Harry Smith A Modern Alchemist*, edited by Paola Ilgiori (Inanout Press, New York, 1996) is a tumble of raw source material on the life of painter, filmmaker, and magician Harry Smith. Smith’s life embodied a troubled relationship with the divine “other,” sacrificing common sense and comfort to the attempt to reach greater inspiration.

In *Technicians of Ecstasy: Shamanism and the Modern Artist* (Bramble Books, Norfolk, Connecticut, 1983), Mark Levy explores the similarities between the role of contemporary artists and the role of traditional shamans, who serve society by mediating between ordinary and non-ordinary states of reality. Levy suggests that shamanic techniques, if used wisely, can be a non-destructive means for artists to invite visions and gain knowledge about themselves.

There’s a parable about three blind men attempting to understand an elephant by feel. The one near the trunk understands an elephant to be like a snake. The one near a leg thinks an elephant is like a tree. And the one near the tail finds it to be like a whip. The parable could apply to this collection of readings—in the search for the spiritual in art, each version of the truth has something to offer.

Meredith Tromble is the editor-in-chief of *Artweek*.