As the new century begins to unfold, many optimistic minds are exploring possibilities for a way forward in the arts—a way out of the tired clichés of postmodern theory, the soulless apathy of irony, and the cynical posturing that have become the prevailing attitude (and indeed the burden) of our time. Moving backward being out of the question for anyone genuinely concerned with progress (one strains to think of a single instance in which a willed return to “better times” has truly yielded success), forward is the only option. And yet, curiously, it appears that the seeds of some of the most promising directions are being found in some of the oldest ideas. One such seed lies in what is perhaps art’s very oldest concern: its relation to the spiritual dimension in general, and to spiritual experience in particular.

The current renewal of interest in art’s relation to the spiritual, modest though it may yet be, seems especially timely now, as we are approaching the one-hundred year anniversary of Wassily Kandinsky’s great manifesto on the subject: Concerning the Spiritual in Art (published in 1911). Anyone seriously interested in the spiritual in art will have come across this small but potent classic at some point—and, most likely, will have read it more than once, having returned to it now and again for some morsel of wisdom or a much-needed infusion of hope. And yet in turning to it today one is met with a strange dissonance that seems to complicate more than it clarifies. Generally stated, to read Kandinsky’s text now is to oscillate between an intimate sympathy with the situation faced by artists in 1911 (which leads invariably to the grim realization of how little things have changed in the intervening century) and the dead certainty that we are living in a universe altogether different from the one inhabited by Kandinsky. For while the sense of urgency and the passion with which Kandinsky made his plea for the inner life in an increasingly materialistic world could have easily come from a contemporary of ours, what Kandinsky seems to have meant by “the spiritual” seems today perfectly medieval.

Even in the throes of these wild vacillations, one cannot fail to notice what is perhaps the most striking anachronism of all in Kandinsky’s text, which is the very absence of any definition of the spiritual. Lacking any other explanation for this glaring omission, one readily concludes that in Kandinsky's time it was simply unnecessary to define the term; when one used it, it was probably self-evident that one was referring to an experience aligned with the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Today, it is anything but obvious what one means by “the spiritual.” "Spirituality" has become so polymorphous—encompassing as it does so many different styles, practices, beliefs, approaches, and worldviews—that the general term has become functionally meaningless. Indeed, if Kandinsky were to write his text today, a separate prefatory volume would be required before he could even begin to approach the subject of art.

Clearly, if we are to explore the possibility of a spiritual art for today, it is essential that we first examine the spiritual itself and try to arrive at some kind of plausible definition that will give shape to what we are trying to address. This is no easy
task, but in truth it is not the enormous heterogeneity of the subject that makes it so (for surely it must be possible to identify some common denominator among the many divergent approaches). What is far more daunting is that the subject is so fraught with distasteful associations—ranging in degree from the merely unpalatable to the outright offensive—that to get at what we want to address will require a painstaking process of dissociating ourselves, piece by piece, from all the unwanted material that surrounds it. In happier times, one could be forgiven an avoidance of such things not guaranteed to prove worth the effort it takes to pursue them, but today the need for something authentic, for some truly viable alternative to the current zeitgeist, is too great. In the absence of any certainties, all we have with which to proceed is the hope that nestled somewhere deep inside the thorny mass that is spirituality there lies something worth recovering and cultivating.

The most conspicuous thorn in the side of the spiritual is, of course, its deep historical ties with religion. That religion has been badly discredited in the century since Kandinsky scarcely needs to be pointed out. But even if we withhold the litany of atrocities that have been committed in its name, there remains a subtler, more insidious harm perpetrated by religion that warrants some scrutiny. For while it is true that institutional religion has lost the stronghold it once enjoyed on the collective psyche (the current rise of right-wing fundamentalism notwithstanding), its residual effects live on the theistic worldview it spent centuries inculcating and enforcing. In spite of Nietzsche, the idea of God—as Almighty Father, as an omnipotent, omniscient Being who watches over humanity from somewhere on high, silently approving or disapproving of its actions—seems very much alive even in those who are not, strictly speaking, religious.

Evidence to support this claim abounds in the public arena, where we regularly witness political figures, celebrities, and others vying for center stage in the global media spectacle making their childlike appeals to this invisible moral agent (who is always, curiously enough, on one's own side). And then, on the personal level, it is not uncommon to find otherwise quite secular people invoking "God's will" or their "Higher Power" in times of distress or uncertainty, when, their own sense of agency having been undermined or otherwise assaulted, the need for someone or something to be in control becomes stronger than any inclination toward a healthy autonomy. This same God-invoking tendency also appears, somewhat curiously, in times of great triumph or achievement, as, say, in the case of those countless professional athletes whose victory speeches sound more like anxious attempts at public persuasion (viz. that one is “on the right side”) than authentic expressions of gratitude and grace. Perhaps most offensive of all such invocations, however, are the all-too-ubiquitous claims made by survivors of deadly diseases and the like that their being spared the woeful fate suffered by so many others is directly attributable to “God’s will”—the implication being, of course, that the hoards of others whose diseases ended in death were not similarly favored by the divine parent. And finally, even in people to whom the idea of God is intellectually repugnant—or, at the very least, to be regarded with suspicion—one often observes the emotional effects of a deeply internalized infallible father whose authority crushes rather than empowers, cripples rather than liberates. The idea of God-as-inflated-father condemns us, in ways both gross and subtle, to living as children in the house of an Other whose power can be neither questioned nor overcome.
Because of the common misconception that spirituality necessarily implies religion (or theism), the stubborn persistence of the idea of God exerts considerable drag on any attempt to reinvigorate the spiritual. The pressing question is this: Is it possible to remove God from the picture, wholly and completely, but retain a rich and powerful sense of the spiritual? In fact it is possible, and the proof lies in the numerous spiritual traditions in existence today which orient themselves not around God, or any kind of Wholly Other, but around the sacred—as manifested, say, in nature, or in the various kinds of transcendent experiences. One thinks of the so-called Wisdom Traditions, or of Huxley's Perennial Philosophy, all of which are autocentric rather than allocentric, inward-turning rather than other-obsessed, self-cultivating rather than self-infantilizing. The primary task, then, in trying to arrive at a new sense of the spiritual is to insist on a clear and strong distinction between spirituality and religion, and to declare that the former can indeed function independently of the latter.

Somewhat ironically, what is perhaps the greatest menace of all looming over the current undertaking began as just such an attempt to liberate spirituality from conventional religion. This is the problem of the New Age. The problem is not that the New Age exists—for surely the emergence of new forms to replace an obsolescing system is, at the very least, a sign of human creativity of the highest order. The problem with the New Age is that so many of its tenets, practices, and indeed practitioners, are just intellectually unacceptable. The revolutionary precedent set by 1960s counterculturalism seems to have given way to a veritable free-for-all in which anyone can invest any thing, idea, or person (including oneself) with spiritual authority and, without bothering to subject his claims to even a modicum of intellectual scrutiny, expect to be taken seriously. Everywhere we turn we find another devotee of astral bodies, auras, goddesses, crystals, past lives, etc. spinning his wares and making grandiose claims of special access to some higher realm or another. Granted, even the New Age's most absurd concoctions have their roots in a very real and sincere yearning—namely, the need for new systems of meaning, new pivotal values around which to orient one's life. But too many of its products make a mockery of spirituality. Indeed, one is loath to even mention the word spirituality in public these days, lest it unleash the host of New Age associations poised to spring into action at the slightest provocation.

Related to the New Age, but less intellectually offensive than it, is the issue of the rapid proliferation of Eastern philosophies and practices that has been taking place in this country over the last several decades. At issue here is not the rising interest in the East per se but rather the particular way in which its forms are seized upon by popular culture, denuded of their original meaning, and reshaped to suit the needs of a vain and shallow populace. The practice of yoga, for example, has become all but obligatory for anyone wanting to be regarded as hip and culturally sophisticated (the notion of "being regarded"—of concern with one's image—being, of course, the very antithesis of what any real spiritual practice is about). Especially in our large urban centers, it is the external

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1 A contemporary example is the New Humanism movement that is gaining adherents from every background and tradition. New Humanism is geared toward people who are by temperament religiously inclined but who are also atheists. The movement professes to be a new kind of atheism, one which aims to define itself not by what it does not believe in (i.e., God) but rather by what it does believe in, which is the capacity of humanity to achieve its highest potential by way of ultimate human values. Harvard University’s Humanist Chaplain, Greg Epstein, is a very lucid spokesperson for this position.
signs of "being spiritual" rather than the experience of it that matters. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the yoga mat, which is to be carried in public alongside one's briefcase, has become the ubiquitous signifier of membership in a new class of elite progressives who, while fully participating in all the material delights of consumer capitalism, are also, by virtue of this coded object, of higher consciousness about it—and therefore exempt from any accusations of materialistic decadence.\(^2\) (Whether any kind of practice is actually being done with these mats is another question, the important thing being to be seen carrying one around.) And practices such as Buddhist meditation, Chinese medicine, Tantric sex, and Kabala study have become \textit{de rigueur} in many hip circles—much, one suspects, the way séances and other exotic parlor games were to former cultural elites.\(^3\) But as easy as it is to lampoon the superficiality of today's trends in popular culture, there is undoubtedly some real significance to the particular shape they are taking. What seems clear is that beneath the current obsession with "the East" there is a growing awareness that our established systems of meaning are failing us in some fundamental way, and people are reaching into other cultures for substitutes. But even in the case of the most earnest seekers, one wonders to what extent looking \textit{elsewhere} is the answer. Is it even possible to fully assimilate practices and traditions, thousands of years in the making and in cultures so different from our own, without distorting, diluting, or debasing them in the process? Perhaps it is possible, but given the costume ball that too often passes for spiritual activity in our culture, the phenomenon of grazing on the spiritual wealth of other cultures is to be regarded with suspicion. Merely being exotic is not the same as being spiritual.

The last of the great thorns to be removed before we can begin to examine our subject is perhaps the least conspicuous, but no less damaging because of it. This has to do with the basic implications of the root of our term, "spirit." In its basest sense, the word evokes images of the various immaterial beings—the ghosts, apparitions, phantoms, etc.—that inhabit the world of the Spiritualists, whose chief concern is communication with the dead. We may find these particular ideas easy to dismiss (for surely we mean something more sophisticated by the spiritual than such notions as séances and Ouija boards would suggest), but with some scrutiny it becomes evident that the "spirit" in spirituality is not by any means confined to the fantasies of those occupying the séance parlors. In fact, this spirit makes its appearance in nearly every approach to spirituality, and it does so in the various notions of the supernatural. One is hard pressed to think of a single spiritual tradition that does not contain some element of the supernatural—from the miracle or divine intervention to the fantastic story about the origin of the universe to any number and kind of other-world and after-life. Evidently the need for something \textit{else} to exist—something other than the natural world—runs very deep in the human psyche and is surely connected with the human longing for immortality. But is a supernatural order really a necessary precondition of the spiritual? What about those of us who find

\textsuperscript{2} The relatively recent phenomenon known as “power yoga” perfectly epitomizes the kind of bastardization being underscored here. Aimed at corporate professionals and other ambitious seekers of wealth and status, power yoga exploits the athletic component of yoga in the service of strengthening its practitioners’ zeal for ego enlargement.

\textsuperscript{3} It is true that many who are undertaking the study and practice of these Eastern traditions are doing so with the greatest degree of sincerity, rigor, and depth of understanding. Institutions to support these serious-minded people have arisen all over the country, and regardless of what we might think of their prospects for success we can at least respect their efforts.
we cannot believe in the existence of another order—in a realm that is separate from nature, not subject to its laws, and utterly withholding of convincing evidence in support of its existence? Are we who believe in the exclusivity of the natural order barred from spiritual experience? Much anecdotal evidence would suggest not, for it seems that in the last analysis what people seek in spirituality is meaning—a meaningful and coherent life. And being a matter of quality and not quantity, the kind of meaning a life has is little affected by whether it lasts eighty years, one hundred and eighty years, or “forever.” It would seem, then, that both the preoccupation with immortality and the whole supernatural order that the anxiety over it gives rise to, are, in a sense, asking the wrong question.

Although not by any means an exhaustive list, the foregoing says enough to expose something of what a minefield we tread in pursuing the spiritual. Given the abundance of unseemly associations that it gives rise to, one could easily conclude that the best way forward would be to abolish the word spiritual altogether, to pronounce it dead and to begin anew with an entirely different term. But aside from the obvious problem of what word to elect as a more palatable substitute, the fact is that the evolution of language does not work through the mechanism of force. Examples abound in which a concerted effort to expunge a word from the language only served to magnify the power—and therefore the appeal—of that word. And invented words tend to suffer the justifiable derision of their would-be users, to whom the idea of being issued "correct" replacements for words deemed incorrect by somebody else feels infantilizing. Clearly, language evolves in a way that is much more organic than such heavy-handed tactics would imply. A more reasonable way forward, then, is to retain the word but strive toward changing the associations conjured when it is used.

The central question that emerges from all this is: Is it possible to re-conceptualize the spiritual in such a way as to rid it of all its distasteful associations and infuse it with a new sense of validity and relevance? In light of all that has been said, several initial criteria present themselves for what such a conceptualization might look like. We are interested in an approach to the spiritual that is: (1) Non-theistic; (2) Intellectually rigorous (i.e., devoid of unacceptable New Age concepts); (3) Firmly rooted in the here and now (i.e., endogenous rather than exotic); (4) Naturalistic (i.e., devoid of supernatural elements); and (5) Ultimately applicable to a new spiritual art.

The first and most fundamental task in moving toward this end is to establish a working definition of the spiritual. To what, broadly speaking, does "the spiritual" refer? Sifting through the enormous number and variety of approaches to the subject, a conspicuous constant can be detected, and this is the experience of transcendence. The first thing to note about this very basic definition is its experiential component: wherever there is "the spiritual," there is somebody having an experience. Then there is the crucial notion of transcendence which makes the experience unique. This consists in the perception that one is moving through or beyond some given state or situation in order to

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4 One thinks of the current movement to abolish the loathsome word nigger from the English language. It seems clear in this case that the ban has only lent the word a more emphatically offensive quality, which is exactly what those who would use it are after.

5 Some current examples are to be found in the ubiquitous suffix "-challenged" which is being promoted as a euphemistic replacement for disabled (e.g., "mentally-challenged," "vertically-challenged," "mathematically-challenged," etc.). Is there anyone who can use these terms with a straight face?
arrive at something else. Exactly what it is that is being transcended in transcendence differs among traditions and individuals, but in every case there is something being left behind in favor of some other thing that is held to be superior. In the Christian tradition, the state to be transcended is that of fleshly or corporeal existence—the woeful reality of the body, with all its desires and afflictions—so that one can enter "salvation," perfection, divinity. In other traditions, that which is to be transcended is defined variously as the phenomenal world (which is to be left in favor of the noumenal), the realm of illusion or appearances (which is to be left behind in favor of "nirvana" or "ultimate truth"), the mundane (which is to be left in favor of something like "the wondrous"), the realm of "clock time" (which is to be left in favor of timelessness, eternity), etc. What is clear from these few examples is that the notion of transcendence is fundamentally predicated on the perception of a rift which separates the world into two parts. Spiritual experience, then, is the experience of moving from one of these parts to the other.

In light of this basic notion of spiritual experience as a movement away from one thing and toward another, we can begin to examine Kandinsky's sense of the spiritual. For Kandinsky, the rift that formed the wellspring for transcendence was that which he saw as separating the material or "outer" world from the inner, subjective world of the individual (or, as he called it, the "all-important spark of inner life"). Of course, nowhere in Kandinsky's text does he explicitly cite this dichotomy as being the foundation for his sense of the spiritual, since, as has been noted, he offers the reader no clear definition of his subject. That it is so is only inferred from Kandinsky's numerous references to "the spirit" and its plight as it strives, in teleological fashion, to liberate itself from matter.

Placing Kandinsky in historical context does much to aid our understanding of his sense of the spiritual. It is clear that at the time Kandinsky was writing Western Europe was experiencing an unprecedented rise in the prevalence of the materialistic worldview (the view that only that which has material embodiment is of value, all else being secondary, derivative, or else altogether non-existent), and the positivist attitude was fast becoming the reigning paradigm in science. At times, Concerning the Spiritual in Art reads as a tirade against this view that Kandinsky clearly saw as a threat to the soul of humanity and a hindrance to humanity's rightful rise toward spiritual greatness. The text begins with a grand exhortation against "the long reign of materialism, the whole nightmare of the materialistic attitude, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game"—and from there goes on to enumerate all the ravages perpetrated by materialism not just on the art of his time but on nearly every domain of cultural activity.

If one reads between the lines a bit—and through some of the author's equivocations on the matter—a curious conflation can be detected that brings Kandinsky's fundamental spirit/matter divide into high relief. Moving through the text, it becomes ever clearer that the antipathy Kandinsky felt toward materialism extended into the material world itself. It seems, in other words, that he did not make the crucial distinction between conception and conceived; both materialism and that which it championed—the world of objects, natural and otherwise—were the opposition. Although Kandinsky does acknowledge in certain places that nature has its own kind of "internal truth" comparable to the "all-important spark of inner life" that constitutes the human spirit, his text is rife with allusions to the fundamental separateness of the natural

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7 Kandinsky, p. 2.
world and the spiritual realm. In his introduction, for example, Kandinsky expresses disdain for historical periods that have venerated spiritual leaders by erecting statues of their bodies: "As if there were any intrinsic value in the bodily existence of such divine martyrs and servants of humanity, who despised the flesh and lived only for the spirit!"\(^8\)

And in numerous places Kandinsky alludes to the spiritual inferiority of any art whose chief concern is naturalism (or the "mere reproduction" of objects in the natural world). Clearly, Kandinsky saw nature as something to which humanity was unjustly bound and from which it had to be released in order to realize its spiritual potential.

Nowhere is this anti-material attitude more evident than when it comes to those passages in which the author lays bare his vision for an art that would some day liberate itself completely from nature and dwell in the higher realm of pure abstraction. No longer dependent on observation or perception, whose objects are material entities, artists would instead use their talents to depict only "internal truth" by way of shapeless color and non-representational form ("the more obvious is the separation from nature, the more likely is the inner meaning to be pure and unhampered")\(^9\). In his vision of the liberated artist, Kandinsky goes further than calling for the end of naturalism, however; even the materiality of the art itself (the paint and canvas) it to be transcended, if not literally then at least metaphorically. In writing about his own paintings, Kandinsky repeatedly insists that it is only the inner meanings embedded in the work that matter, the particularities of the paint on canvas being nothing more than instruments for the "vibrations of the soul." It is little wonder that for Kandinsky music was the purest and highest form of art, independent as it is of any material encumbrance.

In addition to its hostility toward the material world, Kandinsky's conception of the spiritual stood in defiance of a whole host of ideas that he associated with his opposition. Anything having to do with measurement, control, or quantification was, in his scheme, to be regarded as a tool of the technological and scientific materialism that he so detested. By positioning himself against these things, and by laying claim to all that his opposition was not (i.e., the immeasurable, the immaterial, the unquantifiable), Kandinsky saw himself as a leader in a spiritual revolution whose ultimate goal was "the emancipation of the spirit" through transcendence of matter.

Although there is much to admire in Kandinsky's impassioned plea for a kind of spiritual revolution in dark times, his approach bears some fundamental flaws that should be subjected to scrutiny if we are to try to revive any of his ideas for the new century. Setting aside the cynicism with which we today are likely to respond to Kandinsky's idealism (knowing as we do its fate), the most immediately striking problem is indicated by the combative, oppositional, and indeed reactionary tone of his rhetoric. It is not that these qualities—combative, oppositional, etc.—are in themselves wrong; the problem lies in the strange kind of worldview that they imply. Kandinsky's conception of spirit as a force of resistance conjures a model of the world in which the two opposing forces of Spirit and Matter are locked in a dynamic of eternal warfare. In such a configuration, not only is each side defined by that which it opposes (a dangerous enough proposition), but each side is dependent on the other's otherness for its power (indeed, for its very existence), thus ensuring the infinite perpetuation of the "war."

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\(^8\) Kandinsky, p. 5.

\(^9\) Kandinsky, p. 50.
But even more suspect than the curious warfare model implicit in Kandinsky's worldview is the very division it presupposes: that between spirit and matter. Why this division to begin with? Can it really be that these two realms are as separate—and indeed as mutually exclusive—as Kandinsky would have us believe? First, we should note that the spirit/matter division is not as antiquated as it may at first appear to be, if we consider that by spirit Kandinsky meant something like what we today call mind. Today's concept of mind generally comprises all the immaterial, insubstantial processes with which life is associated, including everything that constitutes the inner life of a person: all the perceptions, sensations, ideas, emotions, memories, etc. In addition to these separate (or separable) "things," mind includes the whole, seamless reality of subjective experience—what philosophers call qualia—which cannot be perceived by anyone "outside" one's own consciousness. Replacing the older terms with our own, then, the dichotomy upon which Kandinsky's spirituality is based is the mind/matter split, which insists that mind is something categorically separate and distinct from the realm of material things. Although there are still its steadfast proponents, this view is becoming less and less tenable in the light of current scientific research and our increasingly secular conceptions of our relation to the rest of the universe.

(A very convincing refutation of the mind/matter split is provided by the example of the human body, which clearly consists of both tangible matter and intangible electrochemical and mental processes (all the things that used to constitute "the soul")). Not only is it physically impossible to divide a live, functioning body into its material and immaterial components; even conceptually it is clear that neither the material nor the immaterial can exist without the other. Has there ever been a sensation or a perception without a brain to sense or perceive it? Conversely, what is a brain without the cognition it generates? How can any organ even come into being without the intangible electrochemical processes that catalyze its growth and sustain its functioning? With living bodies it is clear that mind and matter are fundamentally interconnected, and indeed it is only by virtue of their interconnectedness that life is possible. If we concede this point, the "otherness" of the material world becomes far more difficult to maintain.)

But what is perhaps more troubling about Kandinsky's worldview than either the erroneous dichotomy or the warfare model it gives rise to is the deeply moralizing nature of the passion fueling the whole enterprise. Clearly there are vestiges of the Christian worldview, with its emphasis on sin and evil, in Kandinsky's antipathy toward his perceived opponent. For while most dualistic worldviews contain implicit value judgments which impute primacy or superiority to one side of the divide over the other, Kandinsky's goes further. For him, the material world is not merely secondary or derivative; it is bad, corrupt, debased. Although his text is largely devoid of explicitly Christian terminology, it is clear from both the teleological nature of his worldview (wherein the spirit strives against adversity toward ultimate perfection) and his passionate hatred of his perceived enemy that Kandinsky fervently believed in the reality of evil, in a force against which the spirit had to strive. And for him, materiality was, if not the very incarnation of evil, then certainly the symbolic representation of it. As with all cases of religious zeal, there is in Kandinsky a conspicuous blindness to the fact that his radical denigration of the material world betrays the very same irrational fanaticism with which

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10 The relatively new field of cognitive neuroscience has done much to erode the age-old mind/matter split, advocating in its stead the notion of the "embodied mind," of one indivisible mind-brain system.
materialism seeks to deny the reality of the spiritual. For how can the material world be bad? Surely both aspects of the world—material and immaterial—are in themselves value-neutral and only become good or "evil" when we endow them with these qualities. That Kandinsky's antipathy toward materialism—a human attitude about the world—extended into a part of the world itself suggests a deep-seated need on his part for a kind of cosmic villain or anti-deity, which places him squarely in the tradition of Christian theism.\footnote{No honest assessment of Kandinsky's thought can be complete without at least a passing reference to his interest in Theosophy and its Germanic offshoot, Rudolf Steiner's school of Anthroposophy. That Kandinsky was deeply immersed in and influenced by Steiner's thought in particular, with its peculiar mixture of occult and Christian ideas, is a matter of historical record, although it is something that most of us in the 21st Century would rather ignore.}

Spirit versus matter, good versus evil, man versus nature: Kandinsky's spirituality is fraught with dualistic premises, each of which has been rendered suspect in the century separating us from him. But if the spiritual experience is fundamentally about transcendence, is it not necessary to begin with a rift? If, in other words, transcendence requires a bifurcated world with both a “here” and a “there,” then some kind of dualistic premise is indeed necessary for the spiritual experience. Without a fundamental rift of some kind, there could be no crossing—no moving from lower to higher, from lesser to greater—and thus no experience of the spiritual. It seems that if we cannot accept dualism, the very notion of transcendence becomes suspect.

But perhaps the viability of the idea of transcendence depends on the viability of the particular kind of dichotomy it operates on, on the nature of the division one perceives in or imposes on the world. Surely there are dualisms that would be more palatable to our contemporary tastes than the ones on which Kandinsky's revolution was based. One contemporary dichotomy that comes immediately to mind is the self/world or self/other split, which has been a foundational concept in fields such as psychology and sociology for much of the modern era. Or, in keeping with many age-old approaches to transcendence, we could focus on time (so-called “clock time,” which is the awareness of past, present, and future), and take a kind of timeless, atemporal dimension as the state to be striven toward. In keeping with our current working model, the perceived rift between self and other, or time and timelessness, could serve as the premise for transcendence—as a kind of spiritual springboard—where the object would be to move beyond the narrow confines of the first of the terms to become identified with the other.

The idea seems plausible enough, until we remember that with Kandinsky's various dualisms, the problem lay not only in the particular divisions they made on the world but, more significantly, in the implicit value systems they arranged, sustained, and helped to propagate. For in moving from one side of a divide to another one is always leaving something behind, rejecting some state or condition in favor of another that is regarded as both categorically separate from the first and superior to it. When sufficiently internalized, both the separateness of the two parts of the dualism and their respective ranks in the value system are taken to be basic realities to which one can only submit. Can we really accept the categorical separateness of self and world, of time and the atemporal dimension? And what of the value system that would have self be experienced
as inferior to world and time be experienced as inherently bad? The value judgment seems arbitrary, misleading, and indeed potentially pernicious.12

Again, the dualistic premise leaves us unsatisfied. It appears that whatever the terms one chooses as constructs for the split, the split itself has implications that we cannot accept. Does this make spiritual transcendence untenable for our times? Or is there another way of conceiving it, a way of adjusting our conception of the dualism necessary for transcendence without losing what it is we want to retain—namely, a vehicle for spiritual experience?

A viable way forward might be found in the following possibility. Thus far we have made the tacit assumption that the terms constituting the various dualisms refer somehow to "objective" states of affairs, to the very order or structure of the world. What if, instead, we were to turn the focus inward and consider how these external structures come to acquire their status as realities? Clearly the act of conceiving has a structure or an order of its own which is created, albeit unconsciously, in the mind of the conceiever. By shifting the focus from the metaphysical to the epistemological, it becomes possible to see that the act of imposing divisions onto the world is the product of a specific cognitive style, or a specific kind of thinking: dualistic thinking. And since we have found this approach to be problematic, what if the approach itself were to be considered the state of affairs to be transcended in favor of something superior? If this were to be the case, then the dichotomy at the root of the transcendent experience could be defined as dualistic thinking/non-dualistic thinking, with non-dualistic thinking being the superior state to be striven toward and ultimately entered into. With this model, the "divide" separating the two states, lesser and greater, ceases to be a real divide, because the two are no longer diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive, as separate plateaus on either side of a canyon. Now they are more akin to two spheres, one large and one small, with the smaller sphere enveloped inside the larger. Here the crossing that is so central to spiritual experience would consist not in moving from one plateau to another but in moving outward, in expanding from part to whole, from a small, singular "here" to a broader, all-inclusive "everywhere."

Even at first glance, this new approach bears several advantages over the others. First and foremost, it grants human beings a more active role in the world by beginning with the admission that we are participating in how it is perceived and conceived. Instead of passive perception and unconscious conception, it endows us with the agency to create concepts and to decide how we want to participate in the world. Second, the new model rid us of the burden of having to position ourselves against an opponent; instead of encouraging a constant rigidification and vigilance against an alien "other," it advocates the perpetual recognition of a larger unity of which both "sides" are parts. And finally, by focusing on worldview rather than world, the new approach does away once and for all

12 Even in the admittedly more subtle case of the time/timelessness dichotomy, it seems profoundly misguided to consider time an inferior, less valuable dimension. There are innumerable examples in spiritual literature of yogis and other "enlightened" beings who claim to have wholly transcended time and to have achieved a state of consciousness that put them somehow above the dimension in which the rest of us abide. One wonders in these cases just how their accounts of these higher states could have come down to us, since surely the use of language is a tool only accessible to time-dwellers. It seems clear that if it weren’t for time, we would have no accounts of anything at all, for we would be utterly without language (and, by extension, culture). To suggest that this would make us “more spiritual” seems little more than a romantic notion on a par with that of the “noble savage.”
with the grand metaphysical narratives (e.g., Good versus Evil) that plague so much spiritual rhetoric. Much more humbly, this model asks only that if we want spiritual transcendence we first examine our own minds—and then that we change them.

Of course, this approach to the problem of transcendence carries with it one sweeping assumption on whose validity the entire model stands or falls. This is the assumption that even one hundred years after Kandinsky, in a world so seemingly advanced from the one that fueled Kandinsky's divisive rhetoric, we still habitually live and function according to a native epistemology based on dualistic thinking. If this is not the case, then transcendence is unnecessary, a moot point—the implication being that we have come to abide in an unbroken awareness of the larger whole in which we as parts participate. If, on the other hand, it is the case that we do habitually see things through the prism of a dichotomous worldview laden with either/or oppositions, then the proposed approach is vindicated.

In fact, evidence of the dualistic norm abounds across all strata of culture. One need barely scratch beneath surface appearances to find that the conventional epistemology—the collection of attitudes and assumptions we hold about the nature of the world and our place in it—is deeply rooted in the Cartesian dualism, the mind/matter split that is the centerpiece of our Western philosophical inheritance. Beginning with the broad division between mind and matter (or mind and body), the Cartesian dualism extends, largely unbeknownst to its carriers, into popularly-held notions about the self and its relations to others and to the environment. The most basic premise of the Cartesian epistemology—the notion that the self (or mind) resides in and is limited to conscious thought—is not difficult to recognize in today's notions of selfhood; it is the tendency that we have to identify exclusively with the thinking process, thereby excluding from the self all that is not thought (i.e., the physical body, the somatic processes, the autonomic processes, the entirety of the unconscious, etc.)

13 In the Cartesian epistemology, the "I" that is identified with conscious thought is experienced as a separate, higher function which presides over the rest of the person and on whose authority the "lower" functions carry out their orders. Operating on the assumption that it is master of its own house, the Cartesian self goes out to meet the world in exactly the manner one would expect of a master. Confronting the external world as one would an opponent, it considers itself a solo agent who must navigate through foreign (and therefore hostile) territory. All that it encounters, of course, it classifies as "not-self," and it attempts to deal with these external "others" in the same manner as it deals with those internal to it (i.e., by striving for domination and control). As solo agent navigating in a world of others, there is little reason indeed to feel any sense of belonging, any sense of rightness about things. And this basic unease, perpetually reinforced by the Cartesian self, only further fuels the struggle toward mastery and control, which in turn only further reinforces the perception of separateness. Without knowing why or how—or indeed even that—we live inside the vicious circle of a profoundly dualistic mindset.

13 If asked to point to a place in one's self where the self "resides," most of us would without hesitation point to our head. If asked about the origin of some irritating craving or impulse, most of us would just as unhesitatingly blame it on the body, on the body's wayward physiology whose petulant demands are the head's job to control.
But the most striking piece of evidence for the persistence of the Cartesian dualism lies in the urgent issue of our environmental crisis. It seems indisputable that such a near-catastrophic exploitation of the natural world can only have been achieved by a people who saw themselves as separate from—and superior to—their environment. Few people today would fail to recognize the profundity of the error that has led to this crisis. Indeed, it has become a platitude to say that in mistreating the environment we have injured ourselves. But the error persists, and that it does—in spite of our knowledge of it—is a testament to the limitedness of the Cartesian "I," which is by definition unconscious of its own epistemology. And partial selves lead to partial insights, the full insight being deeper than the rational, thinking self can go. The full insight—the knowledge of the whole in which we exist as participants—is something that can only be achieved on the very deepest level of selfhood, at the level of the total self-system, which includes all the parts of the self that the Cartesian self casts off as "other." Achieving the whole insight requires that we become whole ourselves.

It is exactly toward this becoming whole that the present model of spiritual transcendence is geared. For it is not just the habit of dualistic thinking that stands to be transcended but its much more significant experiential consequence: the living inside of the divisions one has created. Here, it is the condition of being divided, of being falsely separated from that to which one ultimately belongs, that constitutes the state to be transcended. Here, the crossing so crucial to spiritual experience is not so much a crossing as an inner turning, an inner revolution which begins with the Cartesian "I" and ends in the re-cognition—literally, the knowing again—of everything that "I" has disowned or disavowed. This movement is spiritual not because it involves any "higher" or more perfect realm than the one we already inhabit but because it returns us to a wholeness that is more primary, more fundamental, than the divisions our thinking imposes on it.

The concern with ultimate unity is, of course, nothing new; the desire to merge with some kind of totality (however it is conceived) has been the basis of many varieties of mysticism across time and cultures. But whereas the mystic's union with totality is achieved through contact with a transcendent, trans-sensory realm which hovers somewhere above and beyond the mundane world, the emphasis here is on recognizing the interconnections (of mind and matter, of psyche and soma, of self and world, etc.) in this realm. In the present conception, there is no other realm, for to posit one would be to impose a division, and divisiveness is the very thing we want to transcend.

Rather than in the various mystical traditions with their eternal pursuit of unitive consciousness, a more apt precedent for our current model can be found in the systems theory movement that arose in the late 20th century, particularly in the pioneering work of Gregory Bateson. For systems theory—or cybernetics—is the study of whole systems and their total ecologies, where no part of the system is seen as operating in isolation from all the others. Since in this view parts can only be known in the context of all other parts,

14 Two concise definitions of mysticism make the distinction between its position and ours clear: (1) Mysticism is “a consciousness of a beyond, of something which, though it is interwoven with it, is not of the external world of material phenomena, of an unseen over and above the seen.” [F.C. Happold, Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p.19]; (2) Mysticism is “the apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things, a oneness or one to which neither the senses nor the reason can penetrate…it entirely transcends our sensory-intellectual consciousness.” [Walter T. Stace, The Teachings of the Mystics, (New York: New American Library, 1960)]
systems theory is essentially a theory of relations, and as such it can be considered the antithesis of the divisive worldviews inherent in the various dualisms we have been considering.

"Mind" and "spirit" being essentially synonymous, Bateson's theory of mind is of particular interest here. The perennial question with regard to mind—and one that is implicitly answered by both Kandinsky’s dualism and the Cartesian—is whether mind is transcendent (i.e., separable from the body and from matter in general) or immanent (i.e., strictly a function of the grey matter and brute mechanics). What Bateson’s cybernetic model suggests is that rather than coming down on either side of the divide, we instead consider the phenomenon of mind as one that emerges from the interactions between the two. For Bateson, mind is a function of the total system, which consists in the dynamic processes between the body and its environment, between self and world, between interior and exterior. Mind—or spirit, or self—is neither “in here” nor “out there,” neither primary nor secondary, neither lesser nor greater; it is a phenomenon born of the relations between the parts and as such is inseparable from the totality that gives rise to it.

In light of the relational, non-divisive worldview advocated by the systems approach, it becomes possible to conceive of a kind of spirituality devoid of the loathsome divisions that have plagued the spiritual enterprise from the start. No longer bound by the notion of separate realms which one must traverse in order to achieve the spiritual, the transformation at the core of spirituality can be experienced as a kind of expansion. From the narrow point that constitutes one’s ordinary consciousness—limited as it is by the various conceptual divisions by which one navigates through the world—one’s awareness expands to include the total ecology of which one’s mind is made. Concomitant with this shift in awareness is a shift in identity; no longer identified exclusively with conscious thought—or with feeling or with one’s body—the self expands both inwardly and outwardly, not in order to lay claim to further territory, as the narcissism of the Cartesian self would have it do, but rather in a kind of sympathetic identification. The self diffuses, becoming unlocatable in any given part of its total ecology, as the “I” is released from the need for a controlled “here.” Seen this way, the spiritual experience can be defined as one of entering into a situation of unbounded trust; with the dissolution of self-versus-world, there is no longer a need to be situated against anything, be it an imagined opponent or merely the ground against which one is figure. Defenses down, one becomes for a time the entire field: both figure and ground, self and world, mind and matter.

Thus conceived, “the spiritual” comes to refer in every sense to a state of mind. Not only is one’s own mind altered in the move toward increased awareness of the whole in which it participates, but the very concept of mind is changed. When used in the spiritual sense, the idea of mind expands to encompass the whole network of relations of which any one individual “I” is composed (including inanimate objects and immaterial processes) and to which it is generally oblivious. To become spiritual, then, is to become intensely aware, and with this intensification of awareness comes an intensification of meaning.

From parts to wholes; from dualistic divisions to integration; from separateness to unity: the general direction of the thrust is manifesting itself in many areas of our culture in what is coming to be widely known as the ecological movement. Not only are people becoming more and more aware of the fallacy at the root of the environmental crisis (i.e.,
that we and the environment are two separate things), but this same kind of revision of thought is spreading into other formerly-unquestioned divisions as well. It is becoming increasingly evident, for example, that the age-old separation between the sciences and the humanities as realms of discourse is slowly being eroded—as is, in some progressive quarters, the chasm separating science from religion. Within art, the separate disciplines of painting, sculpture, photography, etc., which have long seen themselves as competing and often mutually hostile camps, are slowly opening their doors to each other, and approaches that are unabashedly mixed-, inter-, or multi-media are on the rise\(^\text{15}\). This dissolution of boundaries is also announcing itself within academia; in art schools and university art departments both here and abroad, the new major designated “interdisciplinary studies” is being incorporated into many curricula. It seems only fitting in this general climate of increasing integration that spirituality should rid itself of the divisions that bind it to the past and threaten to condemn it to irrelevance.

In one significant sense, the ecological movement (here broadly defined as the general trend toward holism and integration) is itself a spiritual movement. The identity is to be found in the etymology, for the “eco” in ecology, coming from the Greek οίκος, means household, or home. Can there be anything more spiritual than a sense of home? Community, relationship, belonging, a sense of being firmly embedded in the matrix—or the net of relations—that is the world: these are emphatically spiritual values. Seen in this light, the new sense of the spiritual to which we have been pointing can be conceptualized as a move away from one kind of logic—the self-oriented logic of the Cartesian mind, or what we might call ego-logic—to a new kind of logic, an eco-logic, which orients itself toward the larger whole under which all partial realities are subsumed. Whereas in the old logic of the ego the only legitimate household is the fortress of one’s own I and its possessions, in eco-logical terms it is the whole domain of reality—from one’s community to the culture at large to the whole geo-political landscape to the entire planet and beyond—that is the household. With the larger sense of home implicit in this new logic, household management (the literal meaning of economics) takes on an entirely new meaning, wherein the sovereign value currently assigned to personal profit-making is rendered somewhat absurd. (Is there a sane person alive who would consider stealing from his own right pocket to enrich his left?) If the new logic were ever to fully supplant the old, perhaps “going home,” that most abiding and mournful of all spiritual yearnings, could be replaced by another preoccupation: that of being home. For in the new sense, we are all very much already here.

The looming question that remains is: Given the new sense of the spiritual outlined above, what kind of art can be considered spiritual? While it is certainly neither possible nor desirable to be prescriptive about art—to say exactly what this or any art ought to be—it seems that some general ideas can be put forth. First, having parted ways with Kandinsky’s spirit/matter dichotomy, we can no longer accept as spiritually inclined any art that deems inferior either its material embodiment or its “immaterial” content (i.e., its “inner meaning”\(^\text{.}\)). By holding neither aspect to be superior to the other and by vigorously affirming both, spiritual art in the new sense will achieve such a solid fusion

\(^{15}\) Perhaps more significantly, it is becoming less of a standard practice for an artist to identify him/herself with any one medium. The self-identification as “artist” rather than as, say, “painter,” has the welcome effect of shifting the emphasis from one’s craft or whatever specific practice one has to the larger artistic vision that informs the life of the artist.
of interior and exterior that the age-old form/content dichotomy will be rendered irrelevant. Next, we can regard as spiritual any art that is fundamentally experiential and orients itself toward the kind of turn of mind we have identified as being the core of spiritual experience. By appealing to the whole person—to the intellect, the senses, and the emotions, to the natural rhythms of the body, to the entire wealth of experience that constitutes one’s memory (both conscious and otherwise)—this kind of art naturally begins to erode the compartmentalization that is the antithesis of the spiritual. Being drawn into an experience in which the whole self is engaged—an experience which will necessarily involve great complexity, contradiction, and ambiguity—the narrow, one-point self that directs ordinary awareness is slowly dislodged, giving way to a wider sense of self that is relational and participatory.

Being expansive and synthesizing in orientation, art that is spiritual in the new sense will have an unlimited range of subject matter at its disposal and will by no means be restricted to any one mode, method, or medium. Certain artistic domains, however, seem particularly lacking in integrative tendencies, and it is in these that we might expect to see the greatest benefit from an infusion of the spiritual. In the domain of socio-political art, for example, so long now the exclusive province of those using art to enact battles over identity politics, the synthesizing factor might emphasize relations and connections rather than the divisions that pit one group against another. In the realm of abstract art, which has since its inception been associated with elitist tendencies and esoteric knowledge, the spiritual might manifest itself in a work’s power to provide an atmosphere of contemplation—that rarest of openings in 21st century life—in which, most significantly, there is no fixed or final meaning, no secret message accessible only to the initiated. Because of its unique propensity for infinitely varied readings, or its inherent multivalence, abstraction seems particularly well suited to invoke the kind of consciousness that the spiritual asks of us. Rather than pointing elsewhere, to the higher realms and other dimensions to which much of modernism’s spiritually-inclined abstraction has aspired, abstraction could invoke the spiritual simply by virtue of this quality. In fact, any kind of art, whether representational or abstract, object-bound or ephemeral, could be an expression of the spiritual impulse in very much the same way. Instead of “content” or “subject matter,” the very process by which meaning is generated in the mind of the beholder—and the key role that the structure of one’s thinking plays in this process—might become the central concern. Whatever its formal manifestations or thematic particularities, spiritual art in the new sense will aim steadfastly to address the core of experience—one’s way of thinking, knowing, and being in the world—and will, at its best, always imply the possibility of transformation. And because it is

16 Some art movements that are decidedly anti-spiritual according to this definition are Pop art, Minimalism, and strict Conceptual art. Both Pop and Minimalism are paragons of materialist art, since each in its own way rejects the inner life, while in the case of much Conceptual art it is only the intellect that is engaged by the work to the exclusion of the senses, the emotions, the unconscious, etc.
17 Paul Chan’s productions of Waiting for Godot in post-Katrina New Orleans, which were staged outdoors in several of the worst flood-ravaged neighborhoods, come to mind.
18 By this criterion, French Symbolism, often considered the paragon of spiritual art, could not be considered spiritual in the new sense. With its heavy reliance on an esoteric sign language and cryptic codes only legible to insiders, Symbolism implies that spiritual transcendence is only accessible to members of its own exclusive club.
fundamentally predicated on the human capacity for great internal change, spiritual art in the new sense is profoundly optimistic.

Perhaps it is this quiet but radical optimism that is the most promising feature of a new spiritual art for the new century. For just as Kandinsky’s greatest concern was the deadly materialism he saw as closing in all around him, the art of our time finds its gravest threat in the rank defeatism that lies at the heart of the all-pervasive obsessions with cynicism, irony, superficiality, and meaninglessness. A century after Kandinsky, it seems that popular culture has all but capitulated to the machine of materialism that Kandinsky tried (and ultimately failed) to take down. It is as if, feeling unable to stop the juggernaut of materialism, we have let go of any expectations for the inner life altogether, settling instead for surfaces, appearances, and all things external. But rather than taking Kandinsky’s failure as further evidence of the inevitability of materialism, another view suggests itself. Perhaps instead we can take Kandinsky’s failure as evidence of an error of approach, of an epistemological error far more formidable than any kind of external opponent imaginable. Reframed in this way, it was not Kandinsky’s opponent that proved too strong but rather the mindset that conceives of opposition to begin with. And minds being infinitely mutable, it seems there is every reason to resurrect hope for the inner life.