

JAN/FEB 2002

ART PAPERS

M A G A Z I N E



COMICS

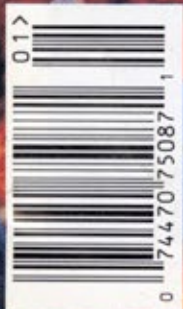
The New Avant-Garde

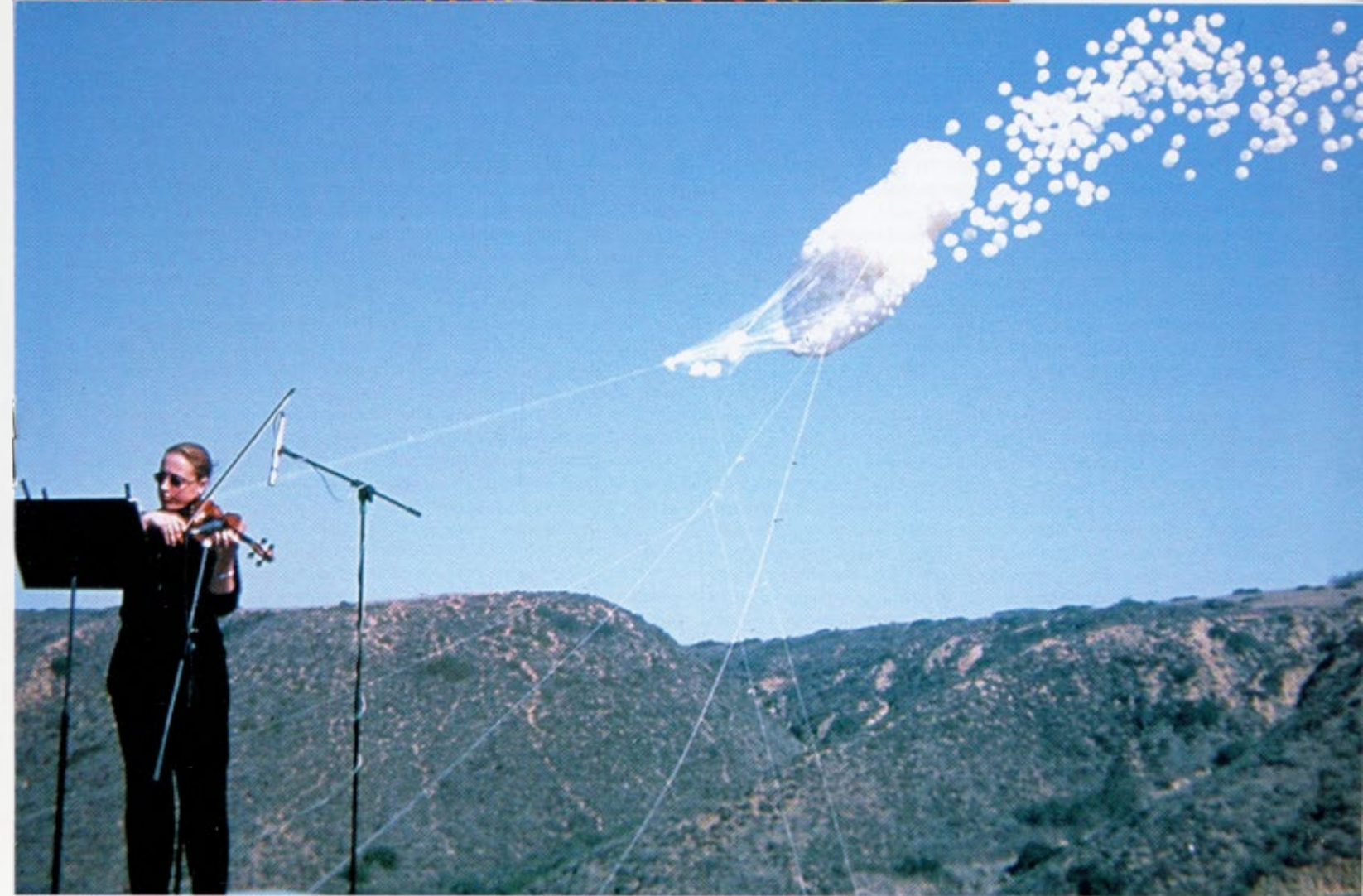
HUMANOID BOOGIE

Can Robots Dance?

**Art and
Spirituality**
Closing in on Truth

VOL 26.1 USA \$7 CAN \$9
www.artpapers.org





Opposite page: Alex Grey, *Birth*, 1990, oil on linen, 60 by 44 inches. Above: Alfredo Jaar, *The Cloud*, 2000, Performance, INSite 2000, Playas de Tijuana, Tijuana (photo courtesy the artist and Galerie Lelong, New York).

Beyond Post Modernism: *The Spiritual in Contemporary Art*

BY ANNE MORGAN

I recently found myself in Boulder, Colorado, with art professionals from the visual and literary arts and music discussing issues relating to integrating an awareness of consciousness or the spiritual in their own art practice as well as in art institutions. This first meeting of the Art Branch of the newly formed Integral Institute under the inspiration and leadership of the well-known and prolific thinker Ken Wilber also gave him the opportunity to explain a preliminary version of Integral Art Theory, which deals specifically with the spiritual content of art.

Expressions of the spiritual in the contemporary art world and discussions involving the spiritual in art have been increasing for several reasons. First, our contemporary culture emphasizes a much broader view of the spiritual, welcoming multicultural perspectives, and spirituality no longer tied to specific religions and religious dogmas. New websites such as the popular beliefnet.com point to a growing desire for dialogues between faiths and a renewed interest in the spiritual in a post-post modern society. Second, a young generation of emerging artists is deeply interested in the metaphysical. For example, Amei Wallach, President of the American Section of the

International Association of Art Critics (AICA), wrote in the *New York Times* about the new and hip Miami art scene, describing the work of the young Miami artist Bhakti Baxter as "metaphysical."¹ Third, established artists are allowing their more directly spiritual or religious art to be exhibited. For example, New York artist Tobi Kahn only recently allowed the exhibiting of ceremonial objects that he has been making concurrently to his other art works.

A renewed curatorial interest in the spiritual also has boosted this subject matter's profile.

For example, Mary Jane Jacob, very well known and highly respected for her innovative contemporary exhibitions, is leading the project development for a consortium of people and institutions called AWAKE: Art, Buddhism and the Dimensions of Consciousness.² This multi-dimensional, multi-year umbrella project fosters curated exhibitions, artists' residencies and publications dealing with the implications and manifestations of Buddhism in the arts. The goal is to analyze and present "the common ground between the creative mind, the perceiving mind and the meditative mind."³ Other discussions about the spiritual in art are being encouraged. The topic of the Fifteenth National Conference on Liberal Arts and the Education of the Artists held in New York in October 2001 focused on "The Arts and the Spiritual," with Donald Kuspit as guest speaker. The 135 planned presenters came from such diverse fields as the arts, art history, sociology, psychology, biology, architecture and religion.

As the landmark exhibition organized by Maurice Tuchman for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985," amply demonstrated, the spiritual has preoccupied many modern artists.⁴ Among the eloquent essays in the accompanying book, Donald Kuspit wrote a lucid summary entitled "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art," in which he analyzed the writings of Kandinsky through Ad Reinhardt with references to Roland Barthes and Lucy Lippard. The potential for artwork to manifest some form of mystical communication that transcends our ordinary reality is great. Abstraction lends itself naturally to this goal, since many of the concepts of spirituality are by nature abstract (such as "infinity").

The outpourings of postmodern art have lent urgency to an extreme cynicism. What became hip was the latest critique of "the system," whatever it was. While some artists continued to incorporate the spiritual in their work, their voices were largely unheard in the sea of gigantic installations, aimed to shock rather than inspire. This necessary tearing apart generated a burning desire for something unifying, something new. Suzi Gablik made an eloquent case for renewed meaning in her 1991 book, *The Re-enchantment of Art*.⁵ Critic Michael Brenson stated in 1995 that the spiritual in art is "there in pretty much everything that matters...it inspires a belief in art, and in what art can do, and in what human beings can do."⁶ Critic Eleanor Heartney also expressed her interest in "the spiritual impulse" in 1994, while disliking New Age approaches. She concludes "that art can have something profound to say about the religious impulse."⁷

The pivotal exhibition at the Pompidou Center, "Magiciens de la Terre (Magicians of the Earth)" in 1989 amply demonstrated the richness of visual symbols and meaning used by contemporary artists in so-called third world cultures. Curator Jean-Hubert Martin wove into this exhibition the notion of the artist as shaman or as a mystical transmitter, a theme that was also addressed by numerous presenters for "The Arts and the Spiritual" over a decade later. Sifting through the vast outpourings of postmodern art practice in the West, some exceptional artists have also addressed directly or tangentially the elusive concept of "the spiritual" in their work.

The Human Being: Language, the Body, Life and Death

Central to a renewed appreciation of the spiritual in contemporary art is a renewed focus on the human being and the importance of, and links between, language and the body, the senses, life and death. One of the most remarkable artists in this regard is Ann Hamilton, who received a MacArthur "genius" Fellowship in 1993, and represented the United States at the Venice Biennial in 1999. She has created complex site-specific environments around the world, often working collaboratively with members of the local community. Until recently, her labor-intensive installations not only involved performing repetitious tasks, but also the manual labor of members of the local com-

munity: for example, in gluing of thousands of copper pennies with honey to the concrete floor of the Cap Street Project in San Francisco, or in the sewing together of 60,000 roses at the Miami Art Museum. Recently, she has turned to technical experts for increasingly complex kinetic and video portions of her environments. Hamilton links language with gestures and body movements. Her installations also deal with life, death, the passage of time, and the repetition of movement, all of which she combines to create a somewhat poignant celebration of life and human endeavors and thus of the human spirit.

Hamilton's quiet, meditative re-working of the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennial was a shock to many. Steven Henry Madoff described her rooms of walls inscribed in Braille of tales of American violence, with fuschia powder falling down them, as resembling "church pews amid the roar of Grand Central Terminal."⁸ By referencing our history of violence in text and sound, Hamilton makes a call to our collective spirit, to look at our history of political and social violence. Her title "myein," defined as an abnormal contraction of the pupil, echoes our desire to turn away from these painful occurrences. Even her rippling glass wall built in front of the pavilion spoke of dissolving architecture, so that one began to search for its essence.

Her environments are also not collectible. Her site-specific installations leave behind only dim echoes of being present to witness, to experience her work. This transience reflects a spiritual truth common to many spiritual paths about the importance of direct experience, of being present, of fully experiencing the "now."

The Political and the Spiritual

Another form of spiritual expression in contemporary art is political engagement coupled with a powerful aesthetic voice. The extraordinary artist Alfredo Jaar placed his life in jeopardy to make us more aware of a forgotten people and the atrocities of forgetting the lives of human beings, the victims of the Rwandan genocide. His art is a direct manifestation of the practice of compassion. Jaar, a Chilean artist based in New York, was the only visual artist awarded a MacArthur "genius" Fellowship in 2000. For over four years, his artwork focused on the horrific events that he witnessed. While avoiding the typical photojournalist image of the massacred corpse, Jaar's profoundly moving installations and light boxes with text evoke a sense of foreboding and make one shockingly aware of the callousness of Western nations. With surprisingly poetic grace, these works convey profound compassion for unheard voices.

Jaar's other politically and socially motivated photographic installations deal with refugees, the exploitation of gold miners in Latin America, and the absence of legally sanctioned immigration policies in some Western countries. His critical and political eye combined with his finely tuned sensibilities for space and the power of images made him aptly called an "angel of justice" by Barcelona critic and curator Vicenç Altaió.⁹

Jaar's site-specific performance, "The Cloud," part of INSite 2000, honored the thousands of Mexicans who died during the last decade on land or in the sea attempting to cross the border into the United States. Relatives of the deceased Mexicans stood on the Mexican border in Tijuana, while musicians on either side played, sang or spoke. The performance ended with the giant net holding a thousand white balloons suspended high in the air above the border being cut open, releasing the white balloons into the blue sky. The balloons were carried aloft, and rather than blowing out to sea as expected, the shifting winds blew them back towards Mexico. Now free to move beyond any political or economic border, these white balloons in the blue sky embodied the essence of the human spirit that transcends political and social distinctions. This representation of the soul released in the sky to float free of the no longer existing human body was poetic, metaphorical, and deeply stirring.

Seeking an Understanding of Essence or of Self

Some artists have devoted their entire practice to the discovery of the very essence of our existence, the nature of our being, the source of all creation. Shirazeh Houshiary exemplifies intense mental, physical and emotional devotion put toward creating works of art that depict her search for, and understanding of, that essence. Inspired by Sufi thought, in particular the writings of the 13th

Century Sufi poet Rumi, her sculptures, installations, and drawings are enlightened by Rumi's personal spiritual quest as well as her own. The evolution of her art practice has evolved "from form to formlessness."¹⁰

In recent years she has made ethereal works on canvas with a black or white ground. These labor-intensive pieces are meditations for her in which she sits on the floor and draws directly onto the canvas. They address the direct experience of presence, or being-ness, and embody her search for formlessness or nothingness, and manifest an enfolding of the mysteries of the universe. Through making her work, she has come to see that "death is pure illusion."¹¹ Although the lines of these intricate works are made by writing abstract Arabic script over and over again, she purposefully does not want the viewer to understand the words. In each piece the word loses its meaning, revealing its vibration or energy. As with her sculptures, she intends to convey a direct experience of essence to the viewer.

The power of light to capture spiritual essence intrigues a number of artists. The drawings and installations of James Turrell make viewers question their own perceptions, engendering a search for self-understanding, the light within each person, and the light outside of the body. As in Houshiary's work, Turrell's art requires direct cognition.

Spiritual Environments

Other contemporary artists have focused their efforts on designing and creating environments for spiritual reflection and healing, such as meditation rooms or rooms for worship. Stephen Antonakos, for example, created a room for meditation called "The Blue Line Room" for the Harn Museum in Gainesville, Florida, in 1997. This 25-foot in diameter circular meditation room inside a square structure was built within the museum's rotunda. It was accessed by a long covered entry and illuminated by green and yellow neon around the entrance. This site-specific installation was meant to be "emotional, inviting, quieting and yet intense."¹² The space was lit by a line of blue color neon light and the walls were painted blue. On axis to the entrance was a square "altar" backlit by red neon. Viewers could sit on one of three cubes in the space and observe the light and stillness. The altar resembled the shape of his well-known wall works, in which neon reflections illuminate surfaces covered with gold leaf.

Antonakos has also produced models for sanctuaries such as his maquette for "Chapel of the Heavenly Ladder" of 1995. This follows the desire of a number of modern artists to build spaces of devotion. Mark Rothko understood his paintings as the main components of his chapel. And the Austrian sculptor Fritz Wotruba viewed the structure of his modern Catholic Church built in the 1970s in the south of Vienna as his artwork.

Art and healing have made an increasingly happy marriage, with artists creating both indoor and outdoor environments.¹³ Recently, Tobi Kahn designed a meditation room for the HealthCare Chaplaincy, a quiet space for sitting alone or in a small group.

Probably the most ambitious project in scale to date is James Turrell's "Roden Crater Project" in Arizona. Turrell's enormous project deals more with our relationship to the stars and planets, to light and to an existence with a vast universe, than to any specific religion. The "Roden Crater Project" is a sort of celestial observatory. In the eight viewing rooms, he wants to capture the light waves, which he describes as "older than our solar system,"¹⁴ so that viewers can feel their manifestation. In the north space, light from the planets and the moon and the pattern of clouds are projected onto the floor in a white chamber. Another chamber allows viewers to see the pole star Polaris, other spaces make the alignments of the sun and the earth and the moon visible, or even the north polar alignment.

Accepting Religious References

The new emphasis on multiculturalism in the United States has created a greater openness toward religions outside the Judeo-Christian paradigm. It also has meant a greater interest in artwork embracing diverse religious symbols.

Tobi Kahn creates painted wood wall works and large outdoor sculptures that reference the spiritual, revealing the timelessness and sacredness of nature. His large outdoor sculpture *Shalev* of 1993 was commissioned by Jane Blaffer Owen for New Harmony, Indiana.

The embracing lovers in a timeless framework of granite reflect aspirations of peace, tranquility and an open heart. His wall works begin with a drawing that is transferred onto a surface built up of layers of gesso on plywood or canvas, and result in archetypal landscapes or dreamscapes.

Kahn has also created very personal and hitherto private works for Jewish rituals. After his major exhibition *Metamorphosis* curated by Peter Selz, Kahn finally agreed to show these ritual pieces on a touring exhibition entitled "Avoda: Objects of the Spirit." His *Orah* of 1997 is one example. Many of these ritual objects were made for family festivities. While intensely personal, they also share aesthetic similarities with his better-known wall works and sculptures.

Shirazeh Houshiary took a more overt direction in the early 1990s when she placed quotes from Rumi next to her drawings so that each would illuminate the other. While devoid of specific Islamic references, her drawings, sculptures and more recent two-dimensional work embody patterns based on her own spiritual insights.

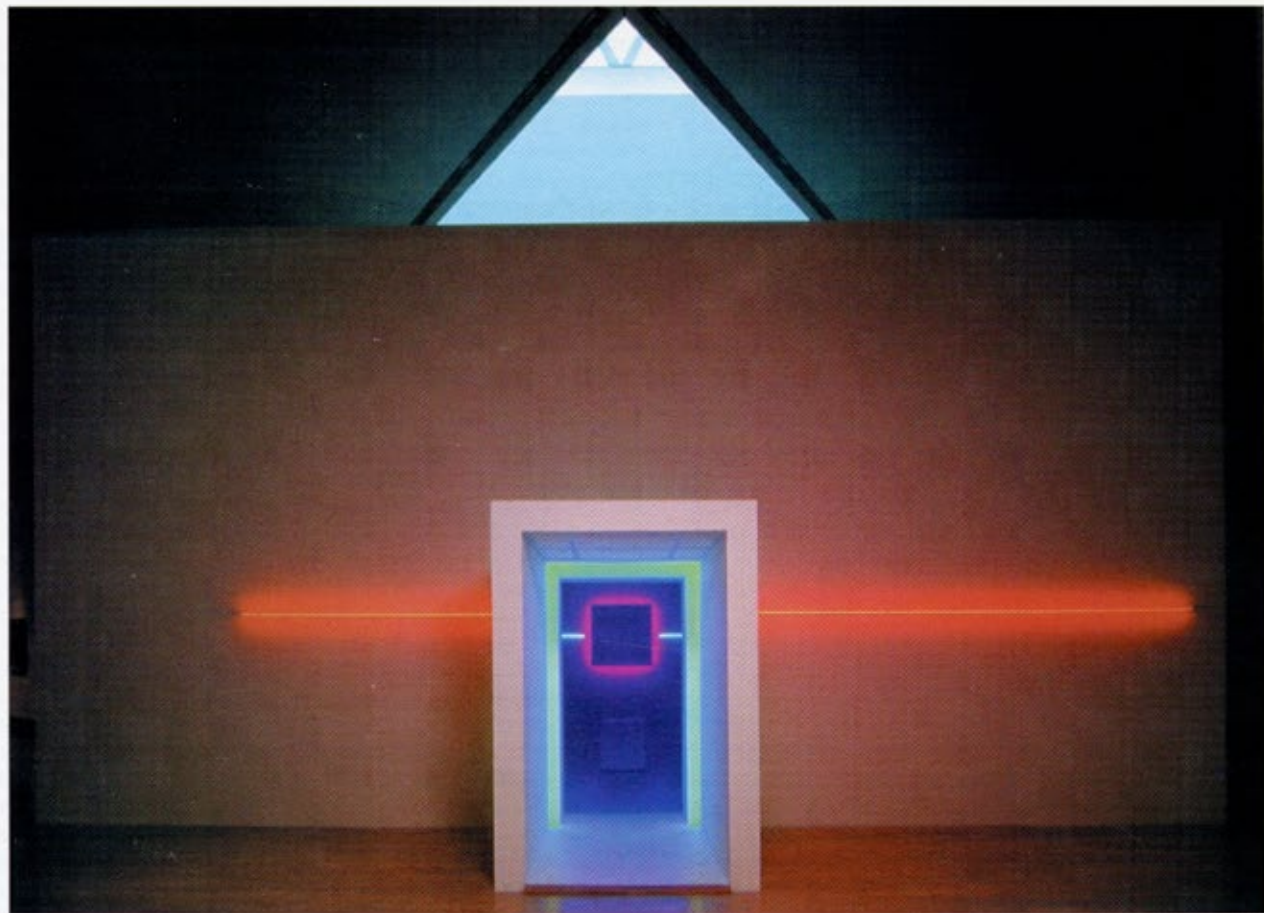
Although Alex Grey's body of work addresses all people, the symbols in his paintings, their massive frames and his sculptures derive predominantly from Christian, Judaic and Buddhist traditions.¹⁵ In *Cosmic Christ* of 1999-2000, he created a contemporary version of stained glass in paint, by depicting within the body of Christ small vignettes of the evolutionary path of humanity and the universe in various dimensions.

In the landmark exhibition of "Sacred Mirrors" at the New Museum in New York in 1989, Grey showed a series of life-size vertical paintings depicting various bodily systems, such as the nervous, cardiovascular and lymphatic systems, including the psychic and spiritual energy systems.¹⁶ In depicting the challenging concept of the "void," he incorporated the Tibetan Buddhist symbol of the Kalachakra representing the 84,000 teachings of Buddha and the transmutation of the elements by the principle of emptiness in "Void/Clear Light." This was followed by his paintings of the Buddha of Active Compassion, Christ, Sophia, and the spiritual world.

A New Art Theory that integrates the Spiritual

Over the course of his career, Ken Wilber has focused on defining an inclusive theory that would embrace important ideas from diverse disciplines, as well as matter, body, mind, soul and spirit. His book *A Theory of Everything* defines that vision, which is being applied to the creation of the Integral Institute, by bringing together experts in medicine, politics, business and psychology, as well as the arts.¹⁷ At the first meeting of the Integral Institute's Art Branch in November 2000, Wilber defined a preliminary model of Integral Art Theory, which not only includes existing art theories of modern and post-modern thought, but also goes one step further by incorporating "consciousness" or a spiritual dimension. With the development of Integral Art Theory, it can now be more acceptable to discuss works of art in terms of the spiritual they embrace as well as the essence they emanate.

For Wilber, a working definition of an integral artist is someone who makes works of art in any medium, referencing directly or obliquely the existence of connections between matter, body, mind and spirit. Using his model for a Theory of Everything, Wilber differentiates between four realms or quadrants of a rectangle.¹⁸ The upper left quadrant concerns the "I," and is the realm of inspiration, intention and impulse, whether unconscious, conscious or trans-personal. The upper right quadrant is defined as "It," which includes physiological influences on behavior, thinking and making or viewing art, such as gender differences or a physiological condition such as epilepsy. The lower left-hand corner is defined as "We," with a range of expression from the magical and mythic to the rational. The lower right hand quadrant defined as "Its" embraces the type of society in which we operate, from foraging, to the industrial, to the current Information Age. An artist or group of artists (or the people viewing it) may operate (or perceive) through the work of art, whether the product is an art object or performance, from any point in each quadrant. As Wilber carefully elucidates, "not all art has to transform us."¹⁹ Integral Art Theory is inclusive rather than exclusive, so Warhol's oeuvre can be discussed within this model as well as Rothko or, for that matter, all the artists mentioned in this article.



Top: Stephen Antonakos, *Blue Line Room*, 1997, site specific installation at Ham Museum of Art, University of Florida, Gainesville, (photo by Raymond Martinot). Above: Shirazeh Houshiary, *Horizon*, 1997, cast lead and gold leaf, 47 by 47 by 6 inches (photo courtesy Lisson Gallery).



Top: Anne Hamilton, *Myein*, 1999, mixed media installation, Venice Biennial. Above: Installation view, *Sanctuaries: Recovering the Holy in Contemporary Art*, Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, Saint Louis University.

The term "Integral Artist" seems preferable to "Visionary Artist" or "Spiritual Artist," since these terms can be limited by the viewer's expectations of what a visionary or spiritual artist should be making. Alex Grey's paintings fit the definition of both visionary and spiritual artist for some people. For others, however, a more abstract or conceptual work of art may have a far greater impact on their spiritual lives, such as Alfredo Jaar's conceptual works based on his personal experience of the Rwandan genocide.

New Audiences

Reaching a new audience with artwork that focuses on a spiritual dialogue has been quite successful. Tobi Kahn's recent exhibition "Avoda: Objects of the Spirit" inspired high school students to make their own ceremonial objects.²⁰ Alex Grey reaches audiences of young people filled with spiritual longing. His work moves them; they recognize it. Grey's paintings act in the manner of stained glass windows and medieval tapestries, i.e., they inform, teach, and convey stories and metaphors. In his representation of death, for example, the dying body breathes out its last breath and the soul leaves the body surrounded by hundreds of eyes; Grey depicts both this physical reality in exact detail, and the world of spirit beyond human life, as he perceived it in a vision. Doctors and healers have also used his works to demonstrate the existence of energy systems. His works have been published in books, and as posters and cards, CD and book covers, even in *Newsweek*, reaching a broad audience of non-art-museum goers. In addition to his inspirational book *The Mission of Art*, his audiotapes include exercises on exploring artistic visionary expression.²¹ By teaching seminars at Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York and Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, he reaches those specifically wanting to explore art and spirituality.

Curatorial approaches also create new ways of seeing. Alex Grey's triptych *Journey of the Wounded Healer* (1984-85), which graphically depicts how a human being undergoes a dismemberment in order to become a healer (the typical path of becoming a shaman) was hung in an almost shocking juxtaposition of aesthetic means next to Alfredo Jaar's installation dealing with the exploitation in Latin American gold mines, as part of a touring exhibition of the permanent collection of the San Diego Art Museum.

New institutions also reach new audiences. Under the leadership of Terrence Dempsey, a Jesuit priest whose doctoral thesis dealt with the spiritual in contemporary art, the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art (MOCRA) was opened in 1993 at Saint Louis University in Missouri. To date, this is the only interfaith museum devoted to contemporary art. With 5000 square feet of exhibition space in a former chapel, the museum alternates its permanent collection with group shows on topics such as AIDS. Dempsey's plans for future exhibits include the sacred garden, and the use of the animal in sacred art. Recently on view was Lewis deSoto's *Paramirvana* of 1999, a 25 foot long deflatable reclining Buddha.²²

Another way to reach new audiences is through books and other media. Planned for publication in 2004, *AWAKE: Essays on Art and Buddhism* will include essays by curators, museum directors, artists and writers. Other books planned for publication in 2004 are *The UnBuddha Book: Unseen Influences of Buddhism in Western Art* by Program Director Jacquelynn Baas and *ARTISTS TALK About Buddhism in America*, documenting the artist residencies.

Summary

The search for rendering spiritual essence includes experiments with media. Bill Viola's single channel videos and video installations have a profoundly meditative quality. By slowing down time, his works distill an essence, allowing us to see the beauty in short fragments of time, which are repeated very slowly. In another example, the abstract painter Ron Janowich uses paint on photographs to render the transient nature of and essence of water in his most recent body of work. Among the numerous other artists whose work addresses the spiritual are Marina Abramovic and Wolfgang Laib. Many, however, exist outside the fine art world, painting mandalas, making labyrinths, and expressing their own spiritual insights in their regional communities. When Terence Dempsey, Director of MOCRA, researched the spiritual in contemporary art in the late 1980s, he found over 800 artists. In this new millennium, many artists are cre-

ating such works within the art world or on the fringes. However, most of this work happens outside the art world.

While some artists I mentioned reference spirituality directly (Shirazeh Houshiary, Tobi Kahn), others do not (Ann Hamilton, Alfredo Jaar). Any discussion about the spiritual in contemporary art must include those that make their art practice and expression of their own spiritual beliefs, and those that call our attention to spiritual values, such as compassion and releasing judgements of others before looking closely at ourselves.

Artists may struggle with the inherent contradiction between creating an art object, even one embodying spiritual truths, and spiritual teachings about impermanence and the importance of focusing attention on the unseen world of the spirit. A work of art can seem like one more piece in an already cluttered material world, albeit imbued with creative energies. Ephemeral works, such as Alfredo Jaar's performance or site-specific works such as the environments of Ann Hamilton present option for resolving that contradiction. Another way is to create spiritual and healing environments. A further way is to focus on artwork as guideposts for oneself and others.

Creating new approaches to the spiritual in art forms new dialogues and communities. The AWAKE consortium and the Art Branch of the Integral Institute are but two examples. These and other similar projects bring together artwork and artists from inside and outside the art world.

Similarly, the spiritual in contemporary art can represent the middle way between two extremes. Cynicism and deconstruction can become so vehement that destruction is all that remains. At the other extreme, faith can become so blind as to be uncritical and therefore naively intolerant of "the other." Between two extremes is a middle way that meanders through all creative forms of expression and media, focusing on rebuilding after deconstruction while maintaining the necessity for critical voices.

In light of the tragedies of September 11 and ensuing traumas, war, and chaos, the spiritual will undoubtedly become an even more sorely needed source of creativity for artists and of healing and inspiration for viewers. As a way of dealing with chaos and terror, the spiritual content in art is becoming a necessity to the human soul. The metaphysical in art is becoming hip again. ☞

Notes. 1. Amei Wallach, Arts Section, *The New York Times*, September 16, 2001. 2. See art and buddhism.org. Project Director Jacquelynn Baas is the former Director of Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. 3. Project summary, www.artandbuddhism.org 4. *The Spiritual in Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1986. 5. Suzi Gablik, *The Rechantment of Art*, Thames and Hudson, New York 1991. 6. Anne Barclay Morgan, "Imagining Criticism: Interview with Michael Brenson" in *Art Papers* 19, no. 4 (July / August 1995), p. 15. 7. Anne Barclay Morgan, "Interview: Eleanor Heartney" in *Art Papers* 18, no. 4 (July / August 1994), p. 32. 8. Steven Henry Madoff, "Codes and Whispers," *Time*, July 12, 1999, p. 75. 9. Vicenç Altaió, "L'àngel justicier," *El Mundo*, Barcelona, May 1997. 10. Anne Barclay Morgan, "From Form to Formlessness: A Conversation with Shirazeh Houshiary" in *Sculpture* 19, no.6 (July/August 2000), pp. 25. 11. *Ibid.*, p.28. 12. Stephen Antonakos, Catalogue for the exhibition, Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, 1997. 13. Anne Barclay Morgan, "Getting Better: Art and Healing" in *Sculpture* 13, no. 5 (September / October 1994), pp. 26-31. 14. Jeffrey Hogrefe, "In Pursuit of God's Light," *Metropolis*, August/September 2000, p. 82. 15. *Sacred Mirrors, The Visionary Art of Alex Grey*, Inner Traditions International, Rochester, Vermont. 16. *Sacred Mirrors, The Visionary Art of Alex Grey*, Inner Traditions International, Rochester, Vermont, 1990. 17. Ken Wilber, *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality*, Shambhala Press, Boston, 2000. 18. Ken Wilber, *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality*, Shambhala Press, Boston, 2000. 19. *Art and Integral Vision: A Conversation with Ken Wilber, Alex Grey and Stuart Davis*, Boulder, Colorado, October 1999 (with additions in November 2000). 20. Susan Kleinman, "Blending Modern Art with Objects of the Spirit," *The New York Times*, April 26, 2000. 21. Alex Grey, *The Mission of Art*, Shambhala Publications, Boston, Massachusetts, 1988. Alex Grey, *The Visionary Artist, Visualizations for Creative Explorations*, Sounds True, Boulder, Colorado, 2000. 22. Ann Wilson Lloyd, "Art under the Arch," *Art in America*, July 2001, p.43.