

REAL GOOD VIBRATIONS:
THE BEACH BOYS, WASSILY KANDINSKY AND
HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

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What does the word vibration make you think of? Is it a scientific description of an oscillation for you? Does it refer to the sort of atmosphere that can be sensed and is sung about by the Beach Boys in 'Good Vibrations'?¹ Or are you thinking about adult toys? It is the sensed mood or feelings variety of vibration to which Kandinsky refers in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* when he explains in detail his convictions about the spiritual nature of the creative process. This is unfortunately the type given least academic credence. His book may be described as 'monumental' by the author of the preface to its 1977 Dover edition,² but the beliefs expressed within the covers currently receive such criticisms as '...awkward and sometimes even silly' by Virginia Spate in *Spirit and Place: Art in Australia 1861-1996*.³

One of the depreciated beliefs expressed by Kandinsky in his book is that the composition of every work of art originates from a spiritual vibration. His words are that 'It is clear... that the choice of object... must be decided only by a corresponding vibration in the human soul...'⁴.

¹ Wilson, Brian. *Good Vibrations*. 'The Beach Boys'. Rondor Music (Ldn) Ltd, 1966.

² Kandinsky, Wassily, Translated by Sadler, M.T.H. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, New York, Dover Publications, 1977.

³ Spate, Virginia, 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art'. A Sceptical Essay' in Mellick and Waterlow (ed.), *Spirit and Place: Art in Australia 1861-1996*, Sydney, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996, p.77.

⁴ Kandinsky, Wassily. Op. Cit. p.32. Original italics.

Kandinsky gives us as much support for his beliefs as is possible for him. The book provides such a detailed account of his perception of the spiritual side of the creative process that it reads not only like a mission statement but also as a manual rather like a Painting-By-Numbers for an artist's soul. The evidence he uses is now ninety years out of date, as the book was published in 1911. As the data used by him in support of his beliefs becomes increasingly obsolete by the day it is little wonder that his views are currently given such scant academic credibility.

This, however, cannot be the only reason for their dismissal as silly. Artists have been discussing the spirituality in their work for thousands of years. Much traditional Australian Aboriginal art has such profound spiritual significance that the majority of the world is not permitted to see it let alone know of its full meaning. Standing this ancient example next to a contemporary artist such as Bridget Riley who describes her work as 'spiritual,'⁵ the volume of beliefs held in between the two can be estimated. The spiritual nature of Riley's striking Op Art was not guessed at by the fashion industry in the sixties when it leapt on her paintings and adopted them as its own.

The reason for this unfamiliarity with spiritual beliefs of artists regarding their work lies with our culture, biased as it is towards facts and figures. By reassessing the idea that spiritual vibrations play a formative force in art in the light of modern research, the standing of Kandinsky's belief and those of other artists can be challenged.

There are several questions raised by his belief, each of which needs addressing individually. First is the usage of the word vibration out of scientific context and the question of whether this is acceptable. Then comes the question as to whether vibrations can form a part of the human soul,

⁵ Riley, Bridget. *Dialogues on Art*, London, Zwemmer, Philip Wilson Publishers Ltd, 1995, p.16.

whether a person would be able to sense them, and even whether we can assume that there is such a thing as soul. The relationship between vibration and image then has to be examined, with questions such as whether a vibration can correspond to an image, whether a vibration in the soul can correspond to an image, and whether a vibration can be the creative source of an image.

Another of the beliefs expressed by Kandinsky is that any understanding of the creative process can only be gained through direct contact with both scientists and occultists.⁶ In a discussion of one of his beliefs, following his own directions makes a great deal of common sense.

The two sorts of vibration enjoy a close relationship in the Beach Boys' song. They are singing about the spiritual variety the strings on the accompanying guitars are creating. By having two separate definitions the implication is that this is as close as the two can get, and that spiritual vibrations have nothing to do with scientific vibrations. The two need not necessarily be mutually exclusive though. Certainly, spiritual vibrations by their very definition refer to the soul and/or the mind, neither of which lend themselves well to scientific observation and study. The soul describes the non-physical part of someone and is widely believed to survive the death of the body, the mind shares with it properties such as being the source of personality, intellect and emotions. Whilst it sounds reasonable to suggest that scientific vibrations are not necessarily spiritual, that does not have to mean that spiritual vibrations never conform to the scientific definition.

⁶ Bowlt, John E. 'Esoteric Culture and Russian Society' in Tuchman, M. *The Spirituality in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, New York, Abbeville Press, 1986, p.165.

Piet Mondrian believed that physical matter was just ‘...a denser variant of the spirit.’⁷ The difference between water, ice and steam illustrates his point, as they are all made up of the same substance, yet steam and ice share few physical properties. Neale Donald Walsch expresses a similar opinion in *Conversations With God* when he says that:

As you undertake to inhabit a new physical body here on Earth your ethereal body...lowers its vibrations – slows itself from a vibration so rapid that it cannot even be seen, to a speed that produces mass and matter.⁸

These two need not be seen as uniquely modern views, as the ancient Taoist text of *Ts'ai-ken t'an* tells us that ‘The stillness in stillness is not the real stillness. Only when there is stillness in movement can the spiritual rhythm appear which pervades heaven and earth.’⁹

Each of these metaphysical views describes spiritual vibrations in keeping with a scientific definition of the word. How then does science respond to this suggestion? Quantum physics appears to support it as explained by Gregg Braden when he says that:

Both the human and planetary matrices express as cells, bone, mineral and ocean. All are dense manifestations of a more subtle and fundamental expression of creation, pure energy expressed as vibration (oscillation or frequency). You may think of these vibrations as *pulsed waves* created by discrete

⁷ Ringbom, Sixten. ‘Transcending the Visible: The Generation of the Abstract Pioneers’ in Tuchman, M. Op. Cit. p.146.

⁸ Walsch, Neale Donald *Conversations with God: an Uncommon Dialogue, Book 1*, London, Hodder and Staughton, 1997, pp.181-182.

⁹ Cited in Capra, Fritjof, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, Second Edition, Revised and Updated. Boston, New Science Library, Shambhala Publications, Inc. 1985, p.194.

bursts of energy, fundamental frequencies often referred to as light. Modern researchers recognize these bursts of energy as *quanta* (brief, rapid pulses of light) and study these phenomena as the science of quantum physics.¹⁰

As this says that everything in the universe is vibrating, logic dictates that the soul would also be vibrating as it would be included in everything. This assumes that the soul exists, which brings a weakness to the argument. Just as there is no conclusive proof for the existence of God there is no conclusive proof for the existence of the soul. There are people who have reported out of body experiences, near death experiences and past life memories, but this is the extent of the evidence in favour. In *The Secrets of Sleep*¹¹ it is documented that there is good reason to believe that out of body experiences are genuine. A high degree of accuracy has also been found by staff in emergency rooms who receive accurate details of which patients can have had no knowledge unless they were floating above their beds whilst unconscious. Past life memory is easier to dismiss as a creation of the imagination, which colours the credibility of the other phenomena. Until these are accepted as sufficient evidence that the soul exists we are left with a simple choice. Do not believe in the soul *because* of a lack of evidence, or believe in the soul *despite* the lack of evidence. We each make that decision of our own accord.

As so many billions of people have believed in the soul it surely cannot be this element of Kandinsky's beliefs which is deemed awkward and silly. Although a fallible premise it perhaps requires the least justification due to its popularity. We have heard quantum physicists concede that if the soul exists then it is vibrating along with everything else in the

¹⁰ Braden, Gregg, *Awakening to Zero Point*, Bellevue, Washington. Radio Bookstore Press, 1997, p.59.

¹¹ Bullman, Joe, *The Secrets of Sleep*, U.K., Twenty Twenty Television, Broadcast on Channel 4, 16th, 23rd and 30th July 1998.

universe, but would we be able to sense a vibration in the soul?

This is answered to some degree by Braden, who explains that emotions are the physical experiences caused by the electrical charges which pulse through the body. We do not recognise them as electrical charges but translate the sensations into emotions.¹² This demonstrates that not only are we made up of vibrations but that sensing them is a distinct possibility. For more direct references to sensing vibrations in the soul we must look towards mysticism.

As with past life memory, accounts of mystic experiences are easily dismissed as creations of the imagination. It is worth remembering in this instance that cognitive psychology studies introspective reports even though they are so open to interpretation. In order to learn about the mind they have to be given credence, otherwise there would be no data to go on. Similarly, unless the accounts of those reporting mystic experiences are listened to, there is no way of knowing that science validates what is said.

Hildegard of Bingen had what could be described as either psychic or mystic visions in her monastic cell. Her visions were turned into illuminations, depicting such religious subjects as the nine choirs of angels arranged in a mandala of concentric circles. Among the beliefs she held was a 'web of the universe' which describes '...the interconnectivity of all being and of divinity with creation and humanity.'¹³

Although she was also a woman of science and the author of botanical and medical encyclopaedias, she can have had no knowledge of the minutiae of particle physics on which to base her wisdom, yet modern research confirms her

¹² Braden, Gregg, *Op. Cit.* p.191.

¹³ Fox, Matthew, *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*, Santa Fe, New Mexico, Bear and Company, 1985, p.23.

insight as accurate. Fritjof Capra explains that 'Quantum theory forces us to see the universe not as a collection of physical objects, but rather as a complicated web of relations between the various parts of a unified whole.'¹⁴

This web of vibrations lends itself well to an explanation of how mystic experiences manifest themselves. Psychic ability can be likened under this model to a 'language' of vibrations. Daniel Goleman explains in *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* that children have to learn to recognise their emotions through practice.¹⁵ Braden adds that recognising emotions involves sensing vibrations. If everything is vibrating and we are all linked in a web of vibrations, it becomes easier to understand how psychic ability could work.

We know that it is possible to sense vibrations emanating from outside the body as is demonstrated by standing next to an exploding firework and feeling the bang through the frame of the body. A clairsentient person simply senses vibrations and recognises them as emotions or feelings. The only difference between this and naming one's own emotions is that the vibrations do not appear to originate from within the body.

Clairvoyance and clairaudience function in the same way, the information is merely translated into visions or voices instead of feelings. Any person has the ability for the vibrations to enter their body, and all that distinguishes between people who have psychic experiences and people who do not is the ability to recognise them for what they are, or understand the 'language'. This explains why such people are sometimes referred to as 'sensitives'.

¹⁴ Capra, Fritjof, Op. Cit. p.138

¹⁵ Goleman, Daniel, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can Matter More than IQ*. London, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 1996.

Georgiana Houghton conformed to this category. As she was painting watercolours in Australia in the 1860s she would write disclaimers on the reverse of her works which stated that she was not their true artist. Instead, she reported that as she was painting her hand would be moved by the spirit of someone who was long since dead.¹⁶ From this experiential base of knowledge it can be assumed that if vibrations from another person's soul can be sensed then it is possible to sense them from one's own.

A more scientifically acceptable source of support comes from a machine called a Holographic Spectrum Analyzer™. It uses non-invasive scanners to 'listen' to a body's radiant frequencies and then maps them with precision. In a study of the interspecies communication of the dolphin family it has been found that they 'talk' to each other by sensing the vibrations that they each give off. The same machine has also confirmed that the chakras of the human body both exist and function just as described from intuitive insight thousands of years ago.¹⁷

The Holographic Spectrum Analyzer™ is a working example of translating vibrations into an alternative form of information. How possible is it for a vibration to correspond to an image though? Aura photography does this exactly, picking up the electromagnetic impulses from a person's hand and then mapping them onto photographic film. The information picked up from metal plates is printed onto the film in the areas corresponding to those of the aura over a traditional photograph of the subject.

With the variation in results from person to person and sitting to sitting due to the constantly changing state of the aura, a frame of reference had to be constructed with the creation of the aura camera. The only way to establish

¹⁶ Mellick, Ross, 'Spirit and Place: Art in Australia 1861-1996' in Mellick and Waterlow (ed.) Op. Cit. p.29.

¹⁷ Braden, Gregg, Op. Cit. p.100.

which vibrations tally with which areas and colours of the aura was to consult with people who could see them for themselves.¹⁸ This referral makes the end result no less accurate than a bar graph or pie chart since they also need someone to decide on the colour scheme. That the colours are those seen by sensitives does not diminish their validity as what remains true is that the resulting picture is a translation of vibrations into an image.

Still a more spiritual example of vibrations corresponding to an image is that of *yantras*. They are used in meditation in the Buddhist, Tantric and Vedic traditions, each of which place upon them their own metaphysical ideas. A yantra represents the vibration of whichever deity or divine truth is to be conveyed in meditation. Every yantra is paired with a mantra which represents the same vibration, and the two together are considered to form a unit.

To create a yantra, the artist must chant a mantra, saying the vibration out loud so that the deity or divine truth is invoked and the vibration is felt. Only then can a visual representation of the vibration be drawn or painted. The effect is passed on to any person who uses the yantra in ritual worship, the principle being that whilst meditating on the image, chanting the corresponding mantra brings movement to the process and brings it into reality.¹⁹

This is an example of a spiritual vibration corresponding to an image. It is believed to be the image's source, subject and result. The yantra *is* the vibration, but just how possible is it for a vibration to be the creative source of an image? For a scientific answer rather than a belief we can turn to the work of Hans Jenny. He devoted his time to the study

¹⁸ www.winternet.com/~lcklund/aura.html accessed 27th April, 2000 and 23rd August, 2000.

¹⁹ Khanna, Madhu, *Yantra: the Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1974.

of the causal relationship between vibration and form and called his work *cymatics*.

Jenny passed vibrations through powders and liquids, recording the exact frequencies and volumes with their results each time. What he documents is that there is a predictable relationship between vibration and pattern. When electrical vibrations were passed directly through a circular plate strewn with sand, he found that the resultant forms increased in complexity with the simultaneous increase in frequency of vibration. The higher frequencies produce concentric circles which progress in detail the higher they go and are visually similar in structure to mandalas such as Hildegard of Bingen's illumination of the angelic hierarchy.

Jenny found that similar predictable effects could be produced with different sources of vibrations such as the human voice and with alternative media such as water, mercury and kaolin paste. The plate's material could also be exchanged for glass, copper, wood or earthenware and maintain consistent results.²⁰ The forms created are a direct result of the vibrations. There is no translation involved, it is simply the effect of the vibrations on the substance which causes it to form into repeatable patterns. This demonstrates that it is possible for vibrations to exert a clear influence on image or form and differs only from spiritual examples of the same in the perceived source of the vibrations.

The questions raised by Kandinsky's belief that spiritual vibrations are the creative force behind works of art have all now been answered. The research of quantum physicists gives an account of the universe's vibrations that is similar to spiritual descriptions of the same, validating the use of the term out of purely scientific context. The sheer number

²⁰ Jenny, Hans *Cymatics: The Structure and Dynamics of Waves and Vibrations*, Basel, Basilius Press AG. 1974, p.36.

of people who believe in the soul denotes that this can not be what reduces the plausibility of Kandinsky's beliefs. That vibrations can be sensed is also confirmed within the scientific domain in the forms of human emotions and the communication of dolphins. Aura photography, yantras and cymatics illustrate that vibrations can not only correspond to images, but that the vibrations can be spiritual and be the sole creative force of images and forms.

Kandinsky's beliefs, along with those of many other artists, are given little academic credence because of the lack of evidence provided in their support. A lack of evidence does not however prove something to be untrue, as illustrated by the world being round long before Galileo figured it out. It is also worth remembering that Galileo was condemned a heretic by the Catholic church for his view, and received a pardon as recently as within the last decade.²¹ In the light of the support provided by modern research it can be seen that Kandinsky's opinion need not be as implausible as it might at first seem and certainly does not deserve to be called silly.

²¹ Sobel, Dava, *Galileo's Daughter: A Historical Memoir of Science, Faith, and Love*, New York, Walker and Co., 1999.