



The Mission of Art

Alex Grey (Foreword), Ken Wilber (Foreword by)

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This is an inspirational book about art's power to bring about personal catharsis and spiritual awakening. Alex Grey's reflections combine his extensive knowledge of art history and his own first-hand experiences in creating art on the boundaries of consciousness. Included are practical techniques and exercises that can be used to explore the spiritual dimension of art. Challenging and thought-provoking, *The Mission of Art* will be enjoyed by everyone who has ever contemplated the deeper purpose of artistic expression.

The Mission of Art Details

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Author : Alex Grey (Foreword) , Ken Wilber (Foreword by)

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From Reader Review The Mission of Art for online ebook

Jacob says

[updated with s'more quotes, sorry for any typos] Incredibly inspired and inspiring, and more timely than ever. I started typing some of my favorite passages below, but there are too many to include them all. Alex Grey offers a beautiful and richly woven perspective on art, being, humanity, and the world which insists upon the belief that nihilism is no way to live life.

“Today’s culture of high rationality has been dubbed postmodern, because we have deconstructed reason and language itself, finding that there are always multiple points of view on any subject. Any attempt to comprehend a “whole” or “higher” truth must take the cacophony of individuals, each with his or her own opinion, his or her own “truth,” into account. This fragmented, multiperspectival climate has lead some thinkers to the conclusion that there can be no linguistic basis for truth at all. Postmodern doubt has replaced the confident trajectory of invention and progress which characterized modernism. European and American (mostly male) artists dominated modern art, favoring and reinforcing a belief in their self-importance. An overemphasis on ego-driven artworks has lead to a culture of narcissistic spectacle and nihilist fragmentation. Yet because postmodern pluralism embraces so many maverick points of view it can help generate tolerance toward cultural difference. This is an important step toward a more global understanding and renewal of art.

The current cultural situation is calling for individuals to transcend the fractured vision of postmodernism and awaken to some transpersonal and collective spiritual basis for truth and conscience. At this transitional time it is inevitable that artists will reflect regressions into romantic mythic fantasies and nihilist nightmares. Yet can we use the wisdom gained from each stage of consciousness and artistic epoch and transfigure our minds and our art into a new integral vision, honoring the truths of both objective and subjective worlds, and save the planet while we’re at it?” (15)

“Yet the mission of art cannot be limited or strictly defined with words. It is much as Lao-tzu said of the Tao, “the way” of enlightened wisdom: The Tao that can be put into words is not the real Tao, not the ultimate eternal Tao. The artist’s mission may not ever be reduced to words or rationally understood, but its invisible magnetizing presence will infuse an artist’s work completely. … For each culture, artworks come to embody and communicate insights that help to interpret life and take action in the world.” (10)

“We all organize and interpret life according to a unique psychological filter or lens, our worldview. This psychological context, the way he hold the realities of life, including who we think we are, mostly goes unnoticed. Our mind and body use it somewhat automatically. In order to notice our own worldview, we have to think about the way we think; we have to rise above our habitual thought patterns and notice that they are habits. We have to question who we think we are. This happens only when our worldview is sufficiently challenged, when new visions collide with and unsettle our existing vision of life. If the challenge is great enough, our worldview and sense of self will dissolve and either regress, break down, or transform to a higher and deeper vision. Art history is a record of such breakdowns and breakthroughs.” (10)

“For most adults, reason dictates a level of behavioral conformity within a social group and adoption of common beliefs. For most artists, this means using the conventional approaches of the art world of their culture. Certain individuals evolve beyond the group mind; they excel and develop their own special vision of life. Development of the individual artist can both recapitulate and foretell the evolution of art. An original artistic vision is both acquired from the surrounding culture and attained through a depth of personal experience and introspection. When artists give form to revelation, their art can advance, deepen, and

potentially transform the consciousness of their community.” (8)

“Art and the Evolution of Consciousness

Art spans human history, from prelinguistic cave dweller to postmodern city dweller, and stands as witness to an ongoing creative process, an evolution of worldviews, a historic unfolding vision of nature, humanity, cosmos, and consciousness itself. Every work of art embodies the vision of its creator and reveals a facet of the collective mind. Artists offer the world the pain and beauty of their soul as a gift to open the eyes of and heal the collective.” (8)

“Art seems to be a spark of the eternal coalesced with a distinct historic moment, driving artists to do something that witnesses their depth, that expresses their most personal and universal insights. … They somehow make their mark, and their art asks us to open our senses and take in the world anew, to experience and appreciate the full range of life in all its terror and glory, its strangeness and beauty. Art helps us to maintain our creative excitement about life, and at its best, art can inspire and transform us. the mission of art advances as individual artists express their culture’s view of the world, in a personally hewn collective vision.” (9)

“Scientific reasoning and the subduing of nature have occupied the Western mind for the past few centuries to the point of our current amazing technological conveniences and alarming ecodestruction. Modern materialism has been a destructive ideological force hidden in the Trojan horse of orthodox science. Scientific orthodoxy and the materialist worldview propose that the entire universe and the miraculous biodiversity of our natural world are the result of a series of accidents. The materialist view would state, further, that consciousness is a by-product of the brain, and that when a person dies there is no soul, spirit, or afterlife. In short, the subjective inner experience of meaning is devalued or eliminated. Altered states of consciousness are considered pathological, and primary focus is placed on manipulations of the phenomenal world. An attitude of materialism shuts off a person’s intuition, by which the spiritual world is apprehended, because spirituality is labeled as a delusional belief or dangerous hallucination.” (35)

“Some popular art reflects the spiritually blind zeitgeist of alienated egoism, soulless materialism, moral degradation, violence, and the extremes of artistic absolutism. But I have come to accept even “negative” art as a “positive” gesture because it harnesses the creative fire and describes an aspect, even if an ignorant or vile one, of human character. Some art that appears sick may be a diagnostic tool for social ills.” (53)

“Art and Nihilism

Good leads people toward living spirit and compassionate action. Evil leads people away from life, away from spirit, away from kind and wise action, toward fear, confusion, and emotional and physical violence. A strange form of evil has infected the soul of humanity in the twentieth century, and it bears the name nihilism. Nihilism is the belief that all existence is meaningless and there is no possibility of truth. Nihilism is the hopeless darkness of the spiritually blind. Nihilism blinds us to the interdependence of all beings and concern for their common good. Nihilism leads to greed and sexual predation, and in corporate boardrooms can lead to rape of the environment. Nihilism leads to transgressive and criminal behavior, cynically disregarding the possibility of loving-kindness and heroic action. Nihilism is the attitude of egoic paranoia and amorality that makes murder justifiable. And nihilism has become one of the premier attitudes displayed in popular culture.” (53-4)

“The Nobel Prize-winning scientist Francis Crick has recently stated that the derangement of mystical experience might be explained by a “theotoxin” (God-poison) in the brain. Freud hoped that his psychoanalytic clients would reach a state of functional neurosis. Is this the best we can hope for? What are the higher capacities of human awareness? The field of transpersonal psychology has been mapping these

possibilities for several decades now.” (59)

“By confining itself only to what can be measured with instruments, the materialist point of view becomes a metaphysical flatland allowing no subjective insight into why we are here. Scientists and artists need not limit themselves to such a view. No less a scientific genius than Albert Einstein professed a profound respect for mysticism and the importance of imagination:

The most beautiful and most profound emotion that we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the source of all true science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms— this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illuminable superior who reveals himself in the slightest details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction for the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God.11” (59-60)

“Seeing is also the recognition of meaning.

“No wonder that once the art of seeing is lost, Meaning is lost, and all life seems ever more meaningless:

“They know not what they do, for they do not see what they look at.” —Frederick Franck” (73)

“Meaning in art is the transmission and reception of symbolic density. Meaning is only possible when a relationship is drawn between two separate subjects. … The function of the conceptual mind is to isolate and distinguish one thing from another…” (104-5)

“The conceptual mind constructs a coded world of meaning by assigning names to things and then comparing them. The everyday functioning of civilizations is completely dependent on the powers of the conceptual mind and its coded world. The downside is that by creating a world of isolated distinct objects, the conceptual mind creates a mental trap of limits and opposites, distinguishing our isolated self from everything else. The ego is the construction of this intellectual self-distinction. The conceptual mind creates a seductively logical prison of words that only spiritual insight can cure by transcending.” (105)

“The mystic artist guides us to an oasis of spiritual truth and clarity within the postmodern desert of false and shrill media information saturating our consciousness. By contemplating a beautiful work of sacred art, one may momentarily remember the silent center of mystery that is our very soul.” (132-3)

“The light of truth beyond external appearances is what artists evoke in their finest works. Here we come to the conjunction of the three harmonies of idealism: beauty, truth, and the good. By absorption into the beauty of sacred art, a person may sense the presence of higher truth and its inherent goodness. Beauty is the visible doorway, the seductive gift of transcendental presence. Beauty is the radiance of spirit.” (148-9)

“Cyberspace luminous forms created on computer screens, seen in such far-out special-effects films as *Altered States*, *Brainstorm*, *Lawnmower Man*, and *Contact*, are some of the closest visual analogs to subtle visionary heaven and hell realms. It’s part of the allure and the glamorous aura of these computer worlds. Fractal geometry, visualized in infinite detail on the computer screen, has been adored and absorbed completely by psychedelic culture because it mirrors the beautiful tapestries woven by the loom of the psychedelic mind.” (159)

“The allure may come partially from the sense of life emanating from each computer-screen pixel. The screen is electronic and glows from within. Each pixel is a scintilla mirroring our own light of consciousness and potentially affecting the subtle energy bodies surrounding our physical body. Because a computer model is a mathematically based form that is protean, infinitely malleable through 3-D modeling and morphing technology, it points to the transformative capacity of form itself. Computer-modeling technology is a

visionary tool. One of the purposes of visionary art is to show the transformative nature of reality. We all want to transform something in our lives or in our world. Any natural process or work of art that demonstrates transformation can be a metaphor that empowers one's own capacity to change. People in a jam, in a trap, in a polluted mess, need to know that there is a way out. Morphing cyberspace technoart offers some psychologically loaded and potentially transformative special effects." (159-160)

"The delights and terrors of the visionary realm are more than amusements and curiosities. If we can access the transcendental realms, our visions and the art flowing from them can become important reminders of our highest nature. The Buddha said that a brief glimpse of the enlightened state is worth many years of scholarly study." (161)

"The visionary, archetypal realms of consciousness have dimensions that seem eternal, dimensions that evolve over millennia, and more dynamic creative terrains. Blake and the Neoplatonists describe the ideal archetypal realms as "eternal" with a permanence that sometimes seems static. I think this was based on the revelation that there is a realm beyond time. The ultimate ground of being is beyond all forms and archetypes, beyond birth and death, beyond time and space, beyond mind and the flow of thoughts. The Tibetan teachings of Dzogchen describe this perfect state as the primordial condition of emptiness, clarity, and pure creative potentiality. It is the context underlying reality, voidness pregnant with the potential to manifest all forms. This absolute primordial condition gives birth to the archetypal realm, a rich profusion of luminous forms perceptible to the visionary eye." (173)

"Mystic art is a window to the transformed view, which reveals all phenomena as inherently sacred. Art is an illusion that can convey the truth. In the same way, the entire world of forms is a magical illusion, an exhibition of transcendental artistry pointing to a greater truth..." (175)

"Some may mistakenly regard this as self-serving egoic hustling for fame and money, but if artists stay rooted in good intentions, their work can be a gift to illuminate and awaken a bewildered world. As Jesus said, If you have a lamp you don't hide it under a basket. Art is the lamp of the soul." (182)

"Art of Delusion

Materialistic desire for power, fame, and money can obscure an artist's higher calling, like clouds covering the sun. Ambitions to dominate, acquire influential friends, produce and sell more, tend to blind artists to the shining source of their own creativity. Conversely, artists who only stare at the sun and paint in their garret expecting the world to beat a path to their door are equally if not more deluded. The problem, once again, is achieving a balance of inner and outer needs. How do we work it out?" (182)

"Art need not serve only the confused desires and pathologies of the ego. Art can serve and reflect the condition of the human soul, which includes but transcends pathologies." (182-3)

"The messages of most television programs and corporate advertising revolve around the quest for status, money, and power. Advertising is the art of glamorous deception and bad will, par excellence. All too frequently, the myths and stories given us by popular culture, and even high culture, represent or stimulate greed, lust, cynicism, anxiety, and despair. These negative states are addicting and can excite viewers, but in the absence of an ethical context for violence, these emotions can erode the soul and inspire acts of nihilism." (183)

"The implications of glamorizing such unethical behavior are easy to imagine. Yet many artists, enmeshed in today's culture industry, do not feel responsible for, or perhaps even capable of, "feeding the soul" through their works, which can only be done by serving a cause higher than one's own or the corporate sponsor's

ego.” (183-4)

“The primary political art of America is commercial advertising that extols the benefits of free-market capitalism. Advertising art is our most frequently encountered art form. …” (184)

“…As long as artists remain true to their authentic experience and vision, there is healing value in their creative effort.” (190)

“There is tremendous power in the individual to positively or negatively affect the web of relationships. Art becomes a healing force to the degree that the artist can embrace and integrate the pathological shadow aspects of our collective being and still clearly point to the source of transcendent wellness and radiance that is our constant potential.” (194-5)

“The revelation and acceptance of our identity emerges by the balance of the artistic will between the polarities of light and dark, good and evil, and is the most delicate business of an artist’s life. … Everyone knows that they can become better than they are; in many ways art is founded on this principle. The transformative potential inherent in each person allows art to be a path of self-knowledge and self-transcendence.” (195)

“The artist’s mission is akin to the alchemist’s task. The alchemist’s great work was the transformation of gross material into spiritualized substance. Holding the goal of a soul-nurturing art in our hearts can sustain us through the trials and failures that are inevitable in the process of creation…” (200)

“Conventional art is an expression of the self or world as it is now. Kandinsky referred to such art as a child of its time. Transcendental art expresses something that you are not yet but that you can become. Kandinsky called this art the mother of the future. That’s why you feel better after producing or viewing it. Transformative art expresses something beyond where you are. It demands that you recognize your higher nature and alter your life accordingly.” (226)

“Spiritual art is driven by spiritual insight. All levels and depths of spiritual insight can find corollary expressions in art. The art is a carrier, a medium, a messenger of spiritual truth. In order for art to be sacred, it must refer to a sacred teaching or issue from a passionately realized spiritual truth. Art records the insight, but it is an object, created by mind and body. The seer, the witnessing awareness of all revelatory visions, is always primary. Uncreated presence is the source of all creation. the artist is a microcosm of universal creativity. Sacred artists need penetrating insight into their own true nature and devotional intensity in order to make art a spiritual practice.” (226)

Mariana says

An inspiring book, after reading this book, all I wanted was to meditate and produce something for others. If you know Alex Grey's work, this book will help you understand the "why" and "how" behind everything he has done, and it's truly beautiful.

I personally disagree with the use of hallucinogens in pursuit for enlightenment and although Grey doesn't directly invite people to use them, he does make it sound like they're a must for a spiritual life, but leaving that aside it's truly an amazing book

Brendan says

This is a fantastic exploration of Art and Spirit, the connection between the two, and how to foster it. Brilliant and enlightening.

Forrest says

200 pages of pseudo-spiritual nonsense, two stars for a couple interesting quips about ego death. Obviously terribly full of himself and working hard to solidify his place in the art world, this seems to be written to fool seekers and the uninitiated. A talented artist working too hard to validate his perspective, better to let art speak for itself on an individual basis but I guess everyone has bills to pay.

Justin Heron says

If you aren't familiar with world religion, mysticism, or perrenial theory then this might be a good introduction. Some of the lingo can take some getting used to, as most of the terms regarding spirituality aren't terms you hear every day. The book is also rich in art history, how to view art, and commentary on what art is today. With each read, you could find more and more material to expand upon and research yourself. If you read it with an open heart and an open mind, I find that it brings great value to the table. The feeling upon completing the book is empowering, and encourages us to make art to help evolve human consciousness, if not just our own.

Jacob says

Incredibly inspired and inspiring, and more timely than ever. I started typing some of my favorite passages below, but there are too many to include them all. Alex Grey offers a beautiful and richly woven perspective on art, being, humanity, and the world which insists upon the belief that nihilism is no way to live life.

"Today's culture of high rationality has been dubbed postmodern, because we have deconstructed reason and language itself, finding that there are always multiple points of view on any subject. Any attempt to comprehend a "whole" or "higher" truth must take the cacophony of individuals, each with his or her own opinion, his or her own "truth," into account. This fragmented, multiperspectival climate has lead some thinkers to the conclusion that there can be no linguistic basis for truth at all. Postmodern doubt has replaced the confident trajectory of invention and progress which characterized modernism. European and American (mostly male) artists dominated modern art, favoring and reinforcing a belief in their self-importance. An overemphasis on ego-driven artworks has lead to a culture of narcissistic spectacle and nihilist fragmentation. Yet because postmodern pluralism embraces so many maverick points of view it can help generate tolerance toward cultural difference. This is an important step toward a more global understanding and renewal of art.

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minds and our art into a new integral vision, honoring the truths of both objective and subjective worlds, and save the planet while we're at it?" (15)

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Kaalomai says

A truly unique, in depth, heartening, inspiring and extremely informative text exploring the purpose of art. A great read for anyone interested in gaining perspective on the history and mission of art and the potential for it to serve the highest purpose of elevating humanity to harmonious coexistence with ourselves and our natural world.

Kaalomai is an artist, writer & art therapist and the owner & resident guide at JoyHouse8.

JoyHouse8 is a Retreat Center for Personal Growth & Transformation. It is located in Woodland Hills California, in the beautiful Santa Monica Mountains w spectacular views of the San Fernando Valley below.

To inquire about JoyHouse8 & Kaalomai's Workshops, retreats and actualization services. Write to:
@kaalomai
facebook.hotmail.etsy.youtube.linkedin.twitter

Ken says

Excellent book that I highly recommend for every artist. Alex Grey traces the evolution of human consciousness along side of the evolution of art. He gracefully asks and answers the question, "Why do we make art?"

I've read this book twice so far, in 2003 and 2006 and was delighted at the increased depth of understanding I experienced with just three years of personal growth since the first amazing read.

Julian says

I loved the art of Alex Grey while I was growing up, his work partially inspired me to take art classes at my high school which eventually led me to major in art while attending college. Back then I loved Grey's use of symbolism and his unique artistic vision which led me to other highly symbolic contemporary artists like Anselm Kiefer. I found this book on a bargain shelf and decided to give it a go because, lets face it, most artists aren't able to articulate their vision in words and I always find it interesting when they try. Kandinsky laid the foundations for this book in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (originally published in 1914) when he wrote of his desire to liberate art from its materialistic bonds and move toward abstraction. He railed against what he saw as a pervading attitude of indifference and materialism that threatened to make art (and life) meaningless. Kandinsky thought that art could offer much more than simple material satisfaction to viewers – it could provide what Robert Hughes would later call “coherent experiences” of its own. If you've read *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* then the pervading attitude of this book might become entirely redundant (specifically Kandinsky's first essays and the “pyramid” idea of how art progresses). Grey goes to great lengths to link these ideas to New Age philosophy. His parallel between art and chakra leading from

materialism at the bottom to spiritual realization at the top is the direct descendant of Kandinsky's pyramid (with materialism at the bottom and the spiritual avant garde at the top). Grey also draws from the work of Jean Delville, as he states in the acknowledgment section.

This is a very easy book to read and Grey provides wonderful illustrations every few pages. The fact that the book is divided into little topics makes it fun to read and very understandable - especially for people with little to no knowledge of contemporary art or art history. The sad thing is that so much of the material comes from Grey's personal biases. For instance, Grey puts de Kooning at the low end of his artistic hierarchy because he feels de Kooning's paintings relate to "pleasure and passion" whereas higher levels relate to love. Beyond the fact that this is assuming the artist's intent (probably dangerous territory), it is generally accepted that de Kooning made his paintings because of his own conflicted feelings and that his work was an attempt to resolve them. How could such an attempt be devoid of love and compassion? Because the emotion behind the effort is conflicted and love can never be conflicted? This just seems silly. Andy Warhol is listed one level above de Kooning in Grey's hierarchy because Warhol's art is based on "intellect and reason" yet it is entirely arguable that Warhol belongs on the lowest level of Grey's hierarchy because he created art for the sake of money (as many art historians and critics would reiterate).

There are plenty of examples like this throughout The Mission of Art and I just wish that Grey had left his hand out of the process and let the reader apply his ideas on their own instead of telling us which artists are "good" and which are "bad".

Grey doesn't stop there, he includes New Age-y pseudoscientific examples to support his artistic outlook. We get passages about how everything is "vibrating energy" and how sending out thoughts can change the material world (ala The Secret and The Intention Experiment) which is why good art should send out good vibes. Furthermore, his constant mentioning of various drugs and how they assist the artistic process is, in my mind, opposed to his message of improvement. I have seen too many art students (well, not just art students) debilitated by drugs to think that somehow it will eventually lead them to some form of universal love and kindness. Much of the time drug use is a foundation for the destructive attitudes that Grey says his art is trying to combat, regardless of the user's intent.

If you're into New Age philosophy (I'm not) and have applied those ideas to your artistic process (I haven't) this book will just be a rehash of your personal beliefs. If you want a contemporary take on Kandinsky's artistic outlook (which is still incredibly relevant) look elsewhere unless you don't mind layers and layers of mysticism.

Abe Fabella says

An inspiring book for creative academics striving to shed conventional ways of thinking about art and returning to one's voice and authoritative power. The overarching thread for Mr. Grey is that one's power is linked to one's community and for a special few, linked to all of humanity. Although couched amidst catch-phrases of the current New Age/Conspiratorial movement (e.g. shamanism, chakras), the book can be read as a thorough exposition of an artist's spiritual trajectory. Recommended highly.

Chelsea says

Alex Grey, one the greatest living artists of our time, extols the virtues of art in this work that should be required reading for every Art History major and soul-searching Artist. Grey follows his journey of transformation from an angry alienated corporate artist into a conscious-raising visionary who believes strongly in the healing power of art. He also incorporates the work of other great artists in history. Great reminder on the role of art in society and easily applied to any discipline (visual, lit, music, craft). This text is very inspiring and sure to get The Muses back on your side....

Stephen says

2007 wrote: A very talented man, Grey writes as well as he paints. After visiting his gallery in NYC this summer with Stacy, I became curious to know more about the artist. His immersion into art since his teens makes spiritual quest through art compelling and encompassing. From his first tendencies to shock the art world with sensationalist art in the 80's to his quest to show reverence to the energies and celestial beings that run through this world beneath our senses, his personal journey is a great read. The book quotes many great works about art and spirit, many that furthered Grey in some way. A turning point in my attitude towards my work.

2009- brought me a reaffirmation that art is entirely a spiritual activity for me and a connection to a greater realm.

Terhi Tuulia says

I found the most interesting the parts where he was talking about his own works and experiences but I got bored when he started to talk about chakras and which artist represents which chakra. Maybe little too much new ageish stuff mixed with art talk.

Jorge Rubén says

I enjoyed this book by focusing on the subject and kind words/soul of Alex Gray. Maybe you won't agree with him in a lot of things, specially because he has a really unique and mystic way of looking at life. But!, his call for a visionary kind of art which embodies the past positive-trascendental art towards a better humanity and its possible application in the postmodern landscape is exquisite. Humankind seems to have fallen into a nihilistic approach as a general rule of thumb, but art, as Alex Gary intends to portrait in this book, may start to heal the psyche of the people.

Nicholas Dewart says

Alex Grey mixes: One part memoir, one part art critique and one part art history in a glass of spirituality. He gives his honest assessment of how art and spirituality intersect having the effect of compelling the reader to consider the mission of his or her art. It was as truthful as it was inspiring to read.

