*Vasily Kandinsky: Around the Circle*

By Ekin Erkan

Abstractionism—think Kandinsky—denied representation altogether, but assumed all the conventions of pictorial space, hence the nonrepresentational use of color, line, form, and so on.

* J.M. Bernstein, "Freedom From Nature" in *Hegel and the Arts*, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 220.

Approaching it in one way I see no essential difference between a line one calls “abstract” and a fish. But an essential likeness. This isolated line and the isolated fish alike are living beings with forces peculiar to them, though latent. They are forces of expression for these beings and of impression on human beings. Because each being has an impressive “look” which manifests itself by its expression. But the voice of these latent forces is faint and limited. It is the environment of the line and the fish that brings about a miracle: the latent forces awaken, the expression becomes radiant, the impression profound […]The fish can swim, eat and be eaten. It has then capacities of which the line is deprived. These capacities of the fish are necessary extras for the fish itself and for the kitchen, but not for painting. And so not being necessary, they are superfluous. That is why I like the line better than the fish—at least in my painting.

* Wassily Kandinsky, “Line and Fish” (1935) in *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Nebraska-Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 273.

The Guggenheim exhibition of Kandinsky’s oeuvre is expansive and quite impressive, covering the entirety of Kandinsky’s career. One of the most curious and illuminating facets of such an exhibition, which treks all the periods that make up an artist’s cannon, is that the viewer becomes aware of certain continuities and points of breakage. In turn, such an exhibition proffers a visual genealogy which helps the viewer understanding a given artistic phenomena and its associated concepts but, more importantly, also exposes how those phenomena/associated concepts unspool and transform over time. Genealogy as a visual technique thus renders what we take to be an artist’s mode of meaning-making—e.g., abstraction, geometric experimentation, etc.—as historically mutable, as something that is contingent, produced and open to transformation, revision, abandonment and challenge over time.

This is particularly clear in the Kandinsky exhibition, if one begins at the top of the rotundra spiral ramp and walks downwards, tracing Kandinsky’s works chronologically. Admittedly, this is contra the curatorial design, as Kandinsky’s works are displayed in the rotunda’s spiral ramp in reverse order. However, my partner and I found this somewhat problematic, particularly given that few of Kandinskys’ late works are available for display in the exhibition. We had trekked across Central Park to the Guggenheim on a brisk New York winter day with a very specific idea of Kandinsky in mind—Kandinsky the pioneer of abstraction. This is, indeed, the Kandinsky whom we think of most readily. Yet, as Kandinsky’s early paintings demonstrate, the young Kandinsky—a student of Franz von Stuck at Munich Academy who was simultaneously swept under the awe of Wagner's lyricism and Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical teachings—held great command of impressionism and pointillism. This is evident in works that span *Munich* (1901-2), *Amsterdam—View from the Window* (1904), *Fishing Boats*, *Sestri* (1905), *Pond in the Park* (1906), *Blue Mountain* (1908), *Group in Crinolines* (1909), and *Landscape near Murnau with Locomotive* (1909). When presented with the Blue Rider Period (1911–14), the Return to Russia Period (1914-21), the Bauhaus Period (1922-33), and the Great Synthesis Period (1934-44), the viewer is able to appreciate that the motifs implored by the early Kandinsky did not simply dissipate like some youthful smolder, unripe and juvenile, fit for abandoning. Instead, this period marks out Kandinsky’s sustained interest in color separated from form—i.e., in discerning form from content.

And is this not precisely what impressionism does—separating form from content? Is that which characterizes Monet's water lilies or the pointillism of Seurat's Eiffel tower not the verdant greens or warm copper-metal hues that bleed past their borders? That the mode of viewing--i.e., the broken, bleak, sun-bleached, and sometimes wary-cum-dreamy way that we manifestly perceive the world--take precedent over the putative accurate, measured realism of the scientific image of man? The separation of form from content is certainly what the history of modernism, from Manet’s *Olympia* (1865)thus forwards sought to engage and what Kandinsky remained interested in, both in his more figurative early period and his geometrically-poised later works.

Kandinsky, as a spiritualist, had an interest in synesthesia. For with synesthesia, one’s senses do not process and translate modes of information by streamlining their content but vis-à-vis a transmogrification. That is, synesthesia is an act in which one’s sense express, in their own form, the quality of a disparately given perception. Indeed, yellow may resound like the call of a trumpet, or the olfactory perception of mint may “sound” like wind howling through chilled glass panes. The deracination of form—i.e., that which gives order and shape to perceived data—from content—i.e., that which is taken up pre-categorically—presents us with a different visual worldview. This is particularly clear in a painting like *Extended* (1926); on the one hand, this is a work that has clear grounds in architecture, which is rather sensible since Kandinsky was, at this time, at the Bauhaus (note: Kandinsky worked at the Bauhaus from 1922 until 1933, when the Nazis closed it). However, this is not the architecture of familiar metropolis cityscapes as we are accustomed to taking them up via our everyday visual mode. Rather, this is an alien architecture—an architecture of foreign forms, incongruous peaks, and estranged plains. A mossy-olive background sky is populated by, on the top-left corner, a dark pine fingernail moon sliver. This moon is one of the few directly representational indices in the painting. Below it is a small crimson circle with a fiery yellow ring ensnaring it, perhaps a sun. To the right is yet another circle, this one much larger and filled in with Stygian black and lemon-yellow flecks, framed by a coral ring; this, too, could be a moon, albeit one in full bloom. Several identical ink black circles can be found to the left of what appears to be a tower; this is a triangular tower, protruding upwards to the height of the sun and moon. Geometric designs--reminiscent of De Stijl blocks, albeit in more muted greens, yellows, pinks, and orange--bisect the top and the center of this pyramidal tower. Several floating figures might indicate further buildings in the distance, but the flattened negative space evades any direct interpretation. Then, there is the stirring, curious field below the tower. This field below this triangular tower sees further triangular shapes, almost arrow-like, breaking into one another, a mixed array where one set of concentric circles finds itself settling into an eggshell yellow. This could well be a lone streetlight or a cackling lamp, but one estranged not only from our familiar sidewalks of gaslamps and mailboxes but also from any possible world that we might be able to picture in our mind’s eyes. For there is nothing familiar or of our world to even balance or settle into in Kandinsky’s painting. This is lyricism run amuck, slipping and seeping beyond its standard forms, which are razed and forgotten.

But why even tether Kandinsky's painting to a representational framework at all? I would perhaps resist any such temptation, if such a temptation even *were* to come to mind, had Kandinsky not made it blatantly obvious in both his personal statements and in his career-wide interest in representationalism. But this representationalism is not the kind we are familiar with from figurative painting; rather it is the representationalism of the synesthetic, whose crossed and crazed translation manual *does* translate some sense-data x (viz., some represent*ing*) into some object (viz., some represent*ed*), yet the senses find themselves negotiated and prattling with new maps of meaning. Hence, we who are unfamiliar with the synesthetic mode of being and sensing must rescind ourselves to something alien in Kandinsky’s work and retire from any one-to-one graphic translation.

In turn, *Extended* is devoid of our quotidian objects—there are no men, women, or children that dash across cracked sidewalk or twist flower stems in between dirt-caked fingernails. Yet, we do have shapes arrayed together in three-dimensional space, distributed and arranged in a mode that suggest a logic. What this logic is, exactly, or how it operates seems impenetrable; like hearing a foreign melody in an alien key with unfamiliar exotic instruments but recognizing that what one hears *is* music. Kandinsky himself often noted that to veridically understand his practice of transmogrification one must familiarize themselves with the Theosophy from which he drew. Without entertaining the diversion that would be a proper study of Rudolf Steiner's theosophical journal, *Luzifer-Gnosis*, and its occultist-cum-esoteric teachings, one useful tenet to keep in mind is the notion of an “internal truth.” This concept is also something that Kandinsky expressed in his manifesto, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), which proffers a teaching that, broadly speaking, Theosophy affirms. The idea is that spiritual practioners—a category which includes the artist—ought confer solely internal truths, and in doing so renounce considerations of “external form.” Thus, music was the medium par excellence for Kandinsky, as, in continuity with Theosophy's critique of materialism, Kandinsky found in music an internal truth distinct from its materiality—neither music theory, nor the weight of a wood violin, nor the scientific study of reverberations and vibrations could capture this logic, and hence the internal truth to art lay outside of its material. Specifically, this materialism is that which contemporary philosophers might call physicalism, a philosophical position which, broadly speaking, stakes that some future fundamental physics will be ultimately able to provide us with the final, comprehensive story of causation, consciousness, emotion, and all else which makes up our world and all other worlds.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is here helpful to recall Kandinsky’s widespread interest in lyricism. For in works like *Yellow Painting* (1938) and *Moderation* (1940) we see internal truths run rampant. In *Yellow Painting*, the De Stijl-esque box pattern of black, white, purple, yellow, green and orange comprises strips that are reminiscent of legs; yet these legs do not bolster a human figure, but a boxy shape, disparate from the realm of man. In *Moderation*, a number of purple, coral, and cerulean-azure figures that appear to be instruments (perhaps even string instruments) are set into a haphazard dance, and more unfamiliar figures lay below. The following remark by philosopher of art Susan Langer, one of the great thinkers to dovetail both art and mind, is particularly prescient:

There are, in the main, two methods of “ translating” works of art into another medium: one is to ply the materials of the second art while enjoying the piece to be translated—painting without preconceived plan while listening to music, dancing under the same conditions, or improvising music while watching a dance, etc. The “translations” made by this method of personal exposure are usually amorphous products, because the structural virtues of the piece used as a stimulus object are not preserved in the emotional response that records itself directly in the expressive reaction. What the reaction expresses is not the nature of the presented piece but of the mood it induces, which at that point is unformulated, so there is no structure to reflect—let alone rendering that of the original work. The other method is the one adopted by Dr. Pratt in regard to poetry and by several people similarly in regard to music: namely, to find elements in the given work which may be represented by comparable elements of another sensory order. That means, of course, that a parallelism of elements must either be found to exist, or must be conventionally established [….] they serve to abstract one structural factor—the syllabic pattern […] showing the verbal skeleton, […] no pretense of being anything but a projection of the word pattern of the sonnets [….] But most of the translators are more ambitious; their hope is to reproduce the work itself in another medium. This hope has never been realized, even in serious efforts to take many structural elements into consideration, as for instance Kandinsky’s proposals for a graphic translation of musical works in terms of dots to express rhythmic groupings, lines for melodic direction, their varying thicknesses for differences of timbre, their sharpness or “brilliance” for degrees of loudness.[[2]](#footnote-2)

What this extended passage brings to bear is that Kandinsky’s translation manual is one whose engine is inertia—that is, when it comes to works like *Extended*, any representationalism that a viewer may find is identifiable because of how the work prods itself along via grouping. A lone triangular tower may recollect a pyramid or even a skyscraper, but not by itself a cityscape. For this, we need concentric circles spliced together by strips of multi-colored patchwork. Such is the case, despite no such patchwork populates our familiar metropolises. But what this exhibition at the Guggenheim makes abundantly clear is that Kandinsky did began with cityscapes, but began seeking out an internal logic to them throughout his career. For the palettes of *Houses in Munich* (1908) and *Murnau – Houses in the Obermarkt* (1908), two rather representational works that clearly pick our city squares, are not altogether disparate from *Extended*, *Yellow Painting*, and *Moderation*. What is distinct in the later paintings is an interest in abstracting from the specifics of visual phenomena, plucking our familiar forms and discarding them, designating them as “external.” What then remains is a riverbed of color schemas that are grouped together. Genealogically set, we see that Kandinsky’s “internal logic” is one of separating content from form, and letting content find a new form internal and separate from our familiar, everyday modes of perceiving. Regardless of whether Kandinsky ever was successful in this pursuit—and, clearly, those like Langer think he was not (I, for one, think Kandinsky was more successful than Langer lets on)—that these works fascinate and can even haunt us to this day indicates that the logic that Kandinsky prodded forth is one that we can identify with, even if we do not know why.

1. Note: this should be understood as distinct from Marxian materialism, i.e., dialectical materialism, albeit the two are not entirely unrelated. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Susanna Langer, “A Chapter on Abstraction,” in *An Essay on Human Feeling* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 185. Also see: Wassily Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane* (Mineola: Dover Publication, 1979), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)