**Paths to Absolute Abstraction: Kandinsky**

The three “pioneering abstractionists” – artists who take abstraction to a degree of purity and meaning which will not be equaled until the mid-20th century – are Mondrian, Malevich and Kandinsky. Of these three, Kandinsky’s achievements are probably the most critical to the abstract expressionists (New York artists of the 1940s and 50s) and other developments in the later 20th century. Malevich is the least known of the three, in large part because he was a member of the Russian avant-garde, and Mondrian, whose work was well-known and was significant, probably had a greater significance for the minimalist movement, the movement which follows abstract expressionism. What all three share is a belief in the spiritual properties of abstraction, a belief they arrive at through their interest in theories of the 4th dimension and theosophy. What they do not share is their commitment to or rejection of symbolism.

Interest in the fourth dimension emerged in part as an alternative to Euclidian geometry. Challenges to Euclidean geometry suggested the existence of curved space, rather than linear, and the possibility of change in the shape of forms as they moved through space. These challenges, along with the rise of science fiction, opened the way for philosophical considerations of the idea of the fourth dimension. One of the chief writers to promote a philosophy of the fourth dimension was a Russian, Uspensky, whose writing was dominated by a belief in the evolution of consciousness, an evolution which enabled the eventual comprehension of the fourth dimension. He proposed that art and music were the paths to this evolved consciousness.

According to Uspensky, our consciousness of infinity was the awareness of endless illogicality. Illogicality exists because in the fourth dimension, everything from the third dimension was reversed. Reality and unreality in the third dimension change places in the fourth. Further, in the fourth dimension, time and motion are recognized as illusions. Consequently, the fourth dimension required not only a new logic but a new language. In
this respect, the radically unfamiliar artistic languages of Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich can be seen as direct responses to the philosophy of the fourth dimension and as attempts to get past the third dimension to depict a gravity-free, directionless space. Another fourth dimension concept, and one which leads to the connection with theosophy, is that of monism. Monism referred to the unity of all things, to a spiritual and material unity which could be explained in the fourth dimension and only in the fourth dimension, because in the third dimension, dualities and separations remained.

Theosophy, essentially a spiritual belief system, shared some of the same premises as the fourth dimension with respect to the belief that the dualities of the material world could be united in a different plane of existence. Theosophy also developed some specific beliefs about the role of art with respect to spirituality: one was the belief that color had a vibrating spiritual property which would awaken the dormant spirituality that lies within all human beings; the second was the belief that art should begin in nature and that the apocalypse would lead to the future new world.

These ideas are quite fundamental to the development of abstraction in the work of Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, Severini, Kupka, and other artists. At the end of the 19th century, Kandinsky and others associated representational painting with materialistic values and they associated abstraction with spiritual values. Yet, there was also a recognition by these artists that most people would not understand abstraction. So the problem was to reconcile anti-materialist goals with a style that could be understood by the public. Symbolism had been one attempt in this direction. Symbolism focused attention on the goal of creating an aesthetic that was free of materiality, and to an extent, its aesthetic had been promoted by art nouveau artists such as Endell, Obrist, van de Velde, and others. But there was also a danger that the decorative emphasis of art nouveau was rendering this aesthetic lifeless. The union of symbolism and theosophy fostered a belief in the communicative properties of color separated from form, in the goal of involving the
viewer in a pathway or process of deciphering the meaning of hidden imagery, in the use of apocalyptic imagery, and in the belief that a painting of the confused order of reality would, like the apocalypse, lead to a new spiritual order.

Kandinsky, unlike Mondrian and Malevich, did not reject the importance of symbolism and the role of symbolic meaning. Like Malevich, but unlike Mondrian, he also turned to ethnographic sources, which in his case were based on life experience. Before becoming an artist, he traveled for the purpose of ethnographic research to northern Russia to peasant houses and wooden Russian churches. These journey's taught him, he said, to “move in the painting, to live in the picture.” It was this experience which enabled him to understand the system of two religions or “duoverie” which the northerners lived: devotion to both Christianity and their earlier pagan belief, and it was this experience in which he encountered art as a total environment:

“I shall never forget the great wooden houses covered with carving: They taught me to move within the picture, to live in the picture. I still remember how I entered the living room for the first time and stood rooted to the spot before the unexpected scene. Every object was covered with brightly coloured, elaborate ornaments...The ‘red’ corner, thickly, completely covered with painted and printed pictures of the saints...I felt surrounded on all sides by the painting, into which I had thus penetrated.” (Kandinsky, quoted in Weiss, Kandinsky and Old Russia, pp 82-3).¹

**Paintings on Russian themes (Motley Life)**

Many of these early paintings deal with the “two-religion” theme. Although the visual images of these paintings imply the presence of confrontation between two belief systems, the particular symbols chosen are symbols which generally reflect healing or renewal and which may have ties to both pagan belief and Christian. These symbols are not always
recognized although the paintings are still figural. The decorative qualities often override
the figural, a factor which upset Kandinsky but was also his goal as he spoke of his wish
that people would feel the content of the paintings and arrive at the content, through the
resonance or sound of the colors and forms of the whole painting. The style itself can be
seen as an expression of a “double belief” system: a post-impressionist technique used
with figures and costumes and colors that suggest Russian paintings of myths and fairy
tales.

*Motley Life* is the culmination of a series of paintings on Russian themes: it pictures a
carnival-like setting in a location which can be identified as northern Russia. The
monastery on the hilltop was a monastery built by St. Stephen in 1390. The old man with
the green beard is an interesting figure: at first glance he looks as though he is a pilgrim
visiting the holy sites in Russia. On second glance it becomes clear that his green beard
suggests his association with sorcery. Meanwhile, his location almost directly in the center
with his staff pointing up to the monastery sets up a division between the two realms: the
pagan and the Christian. The stick may also be a reference to the “spirit horses” which
shamans rode to the other world. If the relationship is followed, the shaman of the
northern Buriat people in Russia was pictured as an old man and thought of as the “master
of the earth.” Meanwhile, sitting to the left of the old man is an elaborately costumed
woman holding a child in a pose which evokes the orthodox holy mother and child. This
holy mother/child image was another image with double meaning, associated with a
mother earth figure and a goddess of childbirth.

*Composition 2*: Kandinsky himself said that this painting related to the earlier work *Motley
Life*; some generalized resemblances to the figural positions and landscape of the earlier
painting can be made out but the technique in the later painting, of using heavy outlines
with colored areas, flattens the overall composition, making the figures seem more like
pieces of a puzzle than like figures. Yet we recognize the crowded festival-like scene and
we can find some of the figures from the earlier painting. The old man now lies on the ground beneath a willow which may be an allusion to the shamanic custom of burying a shaman in a sacred grove.

At the same time, a comparison between *Joy of Life* and *Composition 2* reveals the extent to which the work of Matisse remained as a model for Kandinsky and the differences between them. Matisse’s color is vivid and unnatural but descriptive: it does not exist independently of the forms which make up the subject of the painting and there is some remote possibility of seeing the colors as local color. In terms of perspective and spatial treatment, *Joy of Life* easily suggests that its compositional logic is rooted in the Renaissance and classical tradition of illusionistic space; even if Matisse has violated that space, he has not rejected it. In contrast, the space of the composition is cataclysmic as it rises up vertically but fans out in a dynamic whirlwind of color and forms at the same time. Although color is largely contained by forms, within those forms colors change in a way that cannot be explained by changes in local color. Thus, the effect of color in this painting is not the effect of description but begins to be an effect in which the color is speaking its own language as a parallel to the language of the forms. Color is becoming content; the form is a more recognizable content. The two are connected but not identical. Finally, the swirling space of *Composition 2* suggests an envelope of space which is contained within the layers of the painting. This envelope is the cosmic and fourth dimensional space which Kandinsky, like the other great abstractionists, is striving for. But whereas Malevich’s paintings seem to imply that the fourth dimension is reached by passing through his paintings, Kandinsky’s painting seems to contain it within the painting.

**Landscapes**

Kandinsky doesn’t arrive at the style of his compositions in a single step. In Paris, he encounters the works of the Parisian fauves and Matisse, artists who were known for their
intense and vivid use of color. Kandinsky’s early landscapes demonstrate a commitment to bright colors, used in dabs and streaks, with the background often sharper and more coherent than foreground; up-close figures may be obscured--color and tipping of the ground plane tend to confuse foreground and background space. The colors quickly assume an independence that is separate from the form they are associated with or the scene and Kandinsky moves to a new stage in which he begins to experiment with what he calls Impressions, the direct impression of something seen in nature. These paintings are also moving toward a more abstracted and lyrical presentation.

**Improvizations and Compositions**

In 1909, Kandinsky began the category of paintings which he called improvisations. Whereas Kandinsky defined the impressions as being direct responses to or impressions of nature, he defined the improvisations as being inspired by spiritual events or experiences. With these paintings, we find a stronger role given to symbolist ideas, in that the landscape source becomes weaker and the inner impulse for the painting becomes stronger. Generally they consist of simple forms with some retention of landscape, but representation is not as important as the creation of ambiguous forms and the exploration of color. Forms tend to be outlined, but colors change within outlines. The colors are not rooted in reality--there is a magical sense of color. By 1910, line and color start to separate, lines become more prominent and dramatic; slashing black lines will frequently appear.

The category of paintings which seem to show the highest degree of interaction among these theories is the category which Kandinsky named compositions, a word chosen to reflect the more deliberate input of the conscious mind. The compositions, in contrast to the impressions and improvisations, were generally preceded by series of studies. The
compositions continue the separation of line and color which had already begun with the improvisations. There is also an effect created of two planes: one is tangible and graphic while the other is colored and imaginary, and there no longer is a ground plane. Although the compositions do appear to be the most complex in terms of this suggestion of layered space, the differences between Kandinsky’s categories are not highly perceptible. Further, they share certain thematic elements. At the same time, Kandinsky seems to be deliberately setting up his paintings to play off against one another, raising the issue of abstraction and hidden symbolism with each one, such that the most abstract paintings may be intended to be understood as highly symbolic while the most symbolic may in fact be the most abstract.

*Composition 6, Improvisation 30 and 31, and Improvisation Deluge* are related to the same theme, a theme which persisted in many of Kandinsky’s paintings. Whereas *Improvisation Number 30* seems to be depicting a land battle, *Improvisation 31*, from the same year, more clearly reveals two boats in combat with clouds of smoke and fire arising around them and has greater bearing on *composition 6*. The improvisation is both more and less abstract than the final composition, an odd combination which is largely the result of the denser, more congested space. The greater use of blacks and whites in the final composition create a sense of spatial layers in which the dark space of the battle or deluge seems to give way to the space of a spiritual new world. We don’t actually see it in this painting, but the suggestion of its existence is given by the clearer undulations of space. *Improvisation 31, 1913*, as with the previous examples, was completed when his most of his paintings were dominated by landscape imagery, images related to the Last Judgement, to upheaval, and the emergence of a new age. The prevailing analysis of this painting identifies it as showing two boats in combat. Long rectangular strokes represent guns pointed at each other. We see smoke in yellow and grey, and black zigzagging lines to depict waves. At the top of the painting we can make out a walled city with tall white
towers. One of the two figures who cannot be seen clearly may represent St. John. Not all scholars agree with this interpretation but the notion of hidden imagery is one that Kandinsky himself expressed. In addition, later paintings of his use a similar triangular composition but with more clearly defined forms representing the churches and towers at the top of the painting and replacing the ships of Sea Battle. The point would seem to be the idea of turmoil and warfare, whether the turmoil of an explosive city or an explosive ocean. The use of red in the upper right and lower left corners of Improvisation 31 creates the sense of flames underneath the surface of the painting which will soon ignite and explode.

Compositions 7 and 8 and 9: The last of his pre-war compositions, Composition 7 is also his largest painting (6 x 10'). Motifs relating to earlier paintings such as the deluge, the last judgement, the garden of love, can be found; in fact, so many can be found that they seem to cancel each other out. If anything, this painting seems to be about the apocalypse as the promise of a better world. A key change in the post-war works is the increased role given to “silence” in the painting; his interest in a proliferation of shapes continues although the shapes become more informed by science and geometry. This change is influenced by his encounter with Malevich’s suprematist white paintings and with the constructivists’ seemingly rationalized explorations of space and form. The space of Kandinsky’s paintings continues to be an enveloping space, although it becomes, at the same time, a space which exists apart from the viewer. Rather than enfolding the viewer in it, it reaches out to the viewer and continues to suggest the existence of an infinite space, which now lies behind and in front, rather than within.

In Kandinsky’s writing, the space or world of the painting is an equivalent space or world to that of nature. His continued interest in this natural world is one of the links he always has to the nineteenth century, just as his belief in music as the supreme art form continues to tie him to the nineteenth century. At the same time, his complete liberation
of color from line and his creation of a form of space which rejects perspective and rejects
the materiality of the real world places his work in the position of being central and
formative to the great abstractions of the 1950s.

Kandinsky was always interested in the ideas of the gesamtkunstwerk, or the total
work of art. He believed that painting could in fact be this total work of art, if the painting
were to involve the viewer in deciphering hidden images, because such an act involved the
viewer in the creation of the art work. Another motive for hidden images was the belief
that Kandinsky shared with his contemporaries--the belief that reality was a state of
confusion, and that the only way to reflect this confusion in painting would be through
hidden imagery.

Kandinsky's assessment of reality as confusion was derived from first, his loss of
faith in the scientific method, and subsequently, in the ability of rational thought to
comprehend reality, and second, with the disintegration of the atom by scientists,
Kandinsky was led to believe that art must also be dematerialized if it is to express truth.
But while Kandinsky arrived at the rejection of representation of objects in painting, he did
not arrive at a belief that the formal properties of the painting were most important.
Kandinsky never lost the belief that a painting should have content; the issue was how to
express this content--through a "great realism," which was primitive and childlike, or
through a "great abstraction" or a non-objective form of art. And working from these
premises, Kandinsky arrived at the position of believing that in essence, realism and
abstraction were equal. How could this be? In utter realism, the removal of the abstract
(or the artistic) leaves the essence of the object, its soul. In abstraction, the removal of
the object, the real, again leaves its "inner resonance." Thus, the greatest external
difference turns into the greatest internal equality because both realism and abstraction, in
Kandinsky's argument, could serve to convey the ultimate content of painting: the life of
the spirit, embodied by a triangular materiality and pulsating with the spiritual vibrations of

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colors. Kandinsky later wrote, in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, that the purpose of art was the “expression of mystery in terms of mystery,” and the goal of the artist was to create works that have a life of their own as “purely pictorial beings.” These pictorial beings, because they were spiritual beings, would then lead the viewer to a higher plane of spirituality in his or her life.

The idea of inner necessity is fundamental to his book. There are three layers to this inner necessity: the first is in the personality of the artist: every artist has something within the self that demands expression. The second lies in the spirit of the age, and is expressed more or less as style. But the third, which is the quintessence of art, is the necessity or compulsion to help the cause of art. And it is this quality in which the greatness of a work of art lies.