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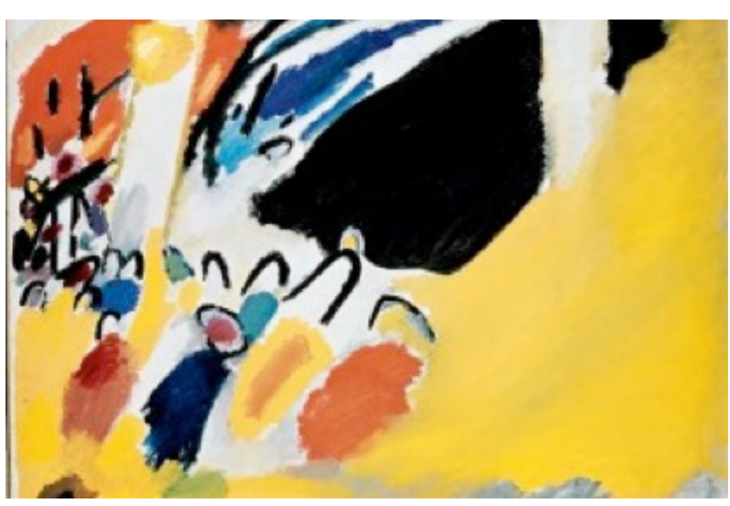
Kandinsky's Futurity

By Marjorie Welish 10/08/09



The imperative of visionary logic goes like this: if the worldliness of the present world be false, then divest yourself of it, and precipitate a future that rings true. Russian-born Vasily Kandinsky (1866-1944) remains one of a few artists whose art is definitive in this sense, and so it is a major event when, as now, we are invited to view a retrospective meant to celebrate his singular art at the 50th anniversary of the museum dedicated to perpetuating Kandinsky's vision of the future. What does his futurity look like in retrospect?

For a start, his is a vision in which ideas are alive. As if to prove the point, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum had to have put all its resources into organizing this vital show, and indeed "Kandinsky" gathers into its own collection the dispersed paintings and drawings that otherwise would take extensive traveling to see. The Museum, now massively refurbished, has opened the interior to outside nature and light, and in so doing has induced some measure of architectural elasticity and new interior vistas within the exhibition space, which originally was conceived with Kandinsky in mind.

Mounting the spiral are about 100 paintings (with drawings in side galleries), the artist's developing vision is proved to be subtly comprehensive and not nearly as dogmatic as it was intellectually intuitive in its quest toward abstract otherworldly worlds. Divesting himself of the visual equivalent of literal copies and empirical facts, Kandinsky rejected naturalism for fantasy, then rejected fantasy for the apocalyptic imagination, then rejected apocalypse.

The exhibition presses the case for Kandinsky's rapid early progress. Sketch for Composition II, 1909-10, is a sort of Stravinskian Firebird spun out in space. Part folktale, part pageant, part imbricated landscape, it shows Kandinsky's fluent mastery of European and non-European decorative arts entirely synthesized. Having traveled from Russia to study art in Munich, by now Kandinsky seemingly learned from the process of painting each painting, advancing quickly, not looking back.

On January 2, 1911 Kandinsky first heard Arnold Schoenberg's music; elated, he produced Impression III (Concert), January 1911, a canvas in analogy with his experience. Blaring color in brushstrokes and spots done in a hurry are nonetheless inscribed by the incisive mentality of someone who has comprehended a significant idea. What Kandinsky comprehended was the art of composing abstractly, made possible by letting color stains and spots resonate optically through a space unspecified and therefore receptive to fluid conception. As he theorized in Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 1912, compositions need no external justification. Tone color may have issued from Wagnerian chromaticism but it culminated in Schoenberg, whose music and paintings Kandinsky so admired that he translated his essays, wrote on his paintings and invited Schoenberg to contribute to the first issue of the Blue Rider Almanac, 1912, co-edited with the

painter Franz Marc, which was to act as a kind of symposium for all the arts. (Recall the Jewish Museum's scholarly "Schoenberg, Kandinsky and The Blue Rider," in 2003, amply demonstrating the synergistic creativity and tensions conducted through this friendship.)

From the miraculous year of 1913 came the inspired Black Lines, December 1913: stain passing through plangent color struck by quick calligraphic lines that keep recharging this most revolutionary of centripetal visuality. Another canvas also painted in 1913 provoked this comment from the critic Roger Fry, who, at great critical risk, had just introduced the art of Cézanne to a hostile British public: …one finds that after a time, the improvisations become more definite, more logical, more closely knit in structure, more surprisingly beautiful in their color oppositions, more exact in their equilibrium. They are pure visual music… Indeed, by now Kandinsky has done many an equivalent to free jazz compositions that dare to relate expressively elemental painterly materials to each other and each other alone. Well, if not literally free jazz, then something of the sort, "Free music" (the title of an essay contributed by N. Kublin to the Blue Rider Almanac), already having advocated "New harmonies with new chords. New dissonances with new resolutions."

In 1914, just days after the declaration of World War I, Kandinsky was expelled from Germany for being an enemy national. The Great War changed his life and art forever, as the retropective glance across futurity does demonstrate. For Kandinsky, the futurity of his own initiative ends and a collectively initiated futurity begins. Even though Kandinsky survived once back in Russia, and helped advance the new radical cause to which art was put, he soon came to be displaced by a productivist program tough on individual imagination, and for which art as such was suspect. Meanwhile there were other repercussions. Were it not for the efforts of the painter Gabriele Münter to preserve the art he created while they lived together in Munich and Murnau, the most significant phase of Kandinsky's production might well have been lost

Art between the Wars is a touchy subject. Since war is traumatic for everyone, event for those who survive, it is no wonder that the art of the modern masters reflect hesitancies and missteps as the artists sought at once to retain their avant-garde stature while adapting to permanently altered cultural circumstances. Like Matisse, Picasso and Braque, Kandinsky's art after World War I is patchy, not only because his being an arts administrator disrupted creative life but because the new cultural outlook demanded a new objectivity and, so, new artistic adjustment. White Cross, January-June 1922, reflects a stylistic shift indebted to Malevich and Suprematism, as if to reintegrate into Russian modernity—perhaps to create a rapprochment among the modernities of post War Europe now that, ousted from his leadership in the U.S.S.R. he was now back in Germany to teach at the progressive Bauhaus. A product of his new situation, Point, Line and Plane, written in 1923, shows Kandinsky's creative energy channeled into pedagogical thought, in diagrams meant to construct a rational basis for the expressive elements and their composition for art. In 1933 the Nazis shut down the Bauhaus: again Kandinsky was dislocated.

Once in Paris, Kandinsky started painting again: but how to paint? Joining the charivari of postwar Dada disturbances was not an option, although the Dadaists had admired him; in any event, that moment had largely passed. Increasingly pronounced and in the spirit of the age, Kandinsky's work from the 1920s on shows his tenacious research into signs and sign systems. Lines curvilinear or jagged, and horizontal, vertical or diagonal still carry differentiated expressive value when in conjunction with color, stained or daubed, brilliant or drab, nebulous or motley. These structural oppositions and conjunctions now welcome the iconic symbol into the mix, as though to reintegrate a sense of the semantic without reverting to the syntax of illustrative space. The example of his friend Paul Klee has left its mark. So has Surrealism, with its avidity for the leitmotif. Not like the Wagnerian love-death, the surrealist motifs that populate Kandinsky's art toward the end of his life are ludic, absurdist and yet deliberatively elusive, so as to avoid being stigmatized by name. Imaginary worlds have resurfaced, this time transmuted to image.

Still revolutionary, Kandinsky astonishes with an intelligence keen to reject the idiosyncratic and complacent solutions that tickle the surface of much art since. For his is a mentality at work, a mentality that is comprehensive in scope yet scruples to make every mark count as he accomplishes a fully sustained free fall in compositions improvisational and inevitable at once.

"Kandinsky," is now on view at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, through January 13, 2010.

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