

## WASSILY KANDINSKY "ON THE PROBLEM OF FORM" (1912)

Influenced by Hegel's view of history as the process of self-realisation by which Spirit (something akin to God, in Hegel's scheme of things) comes to know himself, Kandinsky begins by arguing that "necessities become ripe" ( ) when the "Creative Spirit (which one can also designate as the Abstract Spirit) finds an avenue to the soul, later to other souls, and causes a yearning, an inner urge" ( ) to make itself felt. This "yearning – this *inner* urge" (; my emphasis) begins to "live in the human being. From this moment on, consciously or unconsciously, the human being seeks to find a material form for the new value, which already lives within him in spiritual form" ( ).

This

spiritual value, searching for a form of materialization, finds matter.

Matter is merely a storeroom. It is from this storeroom, that the spirit chooses what is specifically necessary for it to reveal itself – just as a cook chooses what he needs from a pantry. ( )

This "act of choosing, so that the spiritual may take form" ( ) leads to "evolution, to elevation" ( ).

However, Kandinsky argues, the Creative Spirit is not only "hidden behind matter, but also concealed within matter" ( ). The

veiling of the Spirit in the material is often so dense that there are generally few people who can see through to the Spirit (since the eyes of people, generally at such times, cannot see the Spirit). It was so in the nineteenth century and is on the whole still so today. ( )

This "evolution, this movement forward and upward" ( ) is only possible

if no barriers stand in the way. This is the external condition. Then the Abstract Spirit moves the Human Spirit forward and upward on this clear path, which must naturally ring out and be able to be heard within the individual; a summoning must be possible. That is the internal condition. ( )

Obstacles to this progress include: "fear" ( ) and "deafness to the Spirit (which is dull Materialism)" ( ). Some people "regard each new value with hostility; indeed they seek to fight it with ridicule and slander" ( ).

However, Kandinsky contends that that which is new today in turn becomes petrified and an obstacle to further progress:

The joy of life is the irresistible, constant, victory of the new. The victory proceeds slowly. The new value conquers people quite gradually. And when it becomes undeniable in many eyes, this value which was absolutely necessary today, will be turned into a wall – a wall which is erected against tomorrow. The changing of the new value (of the fruit of freedom) into a petrified form (a wall against freedom) is the work of the black hand. ( )

This "whole evolution, *inner development and outer culture*" (; my emphasis) is revealed to be merely a "shifting of the barriers. The barriers are constantly created from new values which have overthrown the old barriers" ( ). From this point of view, the "new value is not the most important thing, but rather the Spirit which has revealed itself in this value. And furthermore, the freedom necessary for the revelation" ( ).

Thus, Kandinsky stresses, the Absolute / Spirit / God is "not to be sought in the form (Materialism)" ( ) for the

form is always bound to its time, and is relative, since it is nothing more than the means necessary today, in which today's revelation manifests itself, and resounds. This resonance is then the soul of the form (which only becomes alive in the act of resonating outwards) and which *works from within to without. The form is the outer expression of the inner content.* (; my emphasis)

Kandinsky stresses that every "creative artist's own means of expression (that is, form) is the best for him, since it most appropriately embodies that which he feels compelled to proclaim" (). From this the conclusion is often falsely drawn, he contends, that this "means of expression is, or ought to be, the best for other artists also" (). Since the "form is only an expression of the content and the content is different with different artists, it is then clear that there can be many different forms at the same time which are equally good" (). This is because "Necessity creates the form" (): "[f]ish which live in great depths of water have no eyes. The elephant has a trunk. The chameleon changes its color, and so forth" (). From this perspective, the

spirit of the individual artist is mirrored in the form. The form bears the stamp of the personality. The personality, however, naturally cannot be conceived as something which stands outside of Time and Space. Rather, it is subject to a certain extent, to Time (epoch) and to Space (people). Just as each individual artist has to make his work known, so does each People, and consequently, also that People to whom this artist belongs. This connection is mirrored in the form and is characterized by the national element in the work. ()

By extension, Kandinsky writes, "each age has its especially assigned task, the revelation possible at a specific age. The reflection of this temporal element is recognized in the work as Style. All these three elements inevitably leave their stamp on a work of art" (). He stresses that it is "superfluous and harmful to want to lay particular stress upon only one of the three elements. Today, too many people concern themselves with the national element in a work of art, still others with the style, and recently great homage has been paid to the cult of the personality (of the individual element)" ().

Kandinsky hastens to explain that the "Abstract Spirit" (), another of Hegel's synonyms for God,

takes possession first of a single Human Spirit; later it governs an ever-increasing number of people. At this moment, individual artists are subjected to the spirit of the time, which forces them to use particular forms which are related to each other and therefore, also possess an external similarity. ()

It is in this way that a "Movement" (), so-called, is formed which is accordingly "completely justified and indispensable to a group of artists (just as the individual form is indispensable for one artist)" (). But just as "no salvation is to be sought in the form of a single artist, it is not to be sought in this group-form. For each group, its own form is best – since it is the form which most effectively embodies that which the group feels duty bound to make known" (). This is why one should not conclude that "this form is, or ought to be the best for all. Here also full freedom shall prevail: one shall consider valid every form, deem correct (artistic) every form, which represents an inner content" ().

This is why Kandinsky comes to the conclusion that the "form (the Material) . . . is not the most important thing, but rather the content" (). The form can have a "pleasant or unpleasant effect without effecting the content" (). It can "appear to be beautiful, ugly, harmonious, disharmonious, skillful, unskillful, fine, coarse – all of which is unimportant" (). The form must "not be accepted or rejected either for the qualities, which are held to be positive, or for the qualities, which are felt to be negative" () for all these "notions are completely relative, as one observes instantly, in the endless, changing, series of forms – which have already existed" (). Like these "changing notions of what is beautiful, what is ugly, the very form itself is just as relative" (). This manner of observation is the way in which the form is to be appreciated and understood for what it is: a "vehicle" (). One must approach a work of art in such a way, Kandinsky argues, that one can espy "through the form, the content (the Spirit, inner resonance). Otherwise one elevates the relative to the absolute" ().

In short, Kandinsky concludes, what truly matters is the spiritual content or

essence which manifests itself through a particular form. It is "not most important whether the form is personal, national, or has style; whether or not it is in accordance with the major contemporary movements; whether or not it is related to many or few other forms; whether or not it stands completely by itself" (). Rather, he contends, the "most important thing in the question of form is whether or not the form has grown out of the inner necessity" (): the "greater the epoch is – that is, the greater (quantitatively and qualitatively) the strivings toward the spiritual are – the richer in number the forms become" ().