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Constructing the Total Work of Art: Painting and the Public



For a utopian thinker, involving the public to bring about change is critical. For a messianic utopian artist such as Vasily Kandinsky, no issue was more central to his work. This essay argues that Kandinsky's movement away from conventional easel painting to its construction as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, was intended to provoke the general public to turn away from complacency. A focus on the large 1911 oil *Composition V* [Fig. 1], which was exhibited in the first Blaue Reiter exhibition in Munich, will clarify how early twentieth century anarchist concepts as well as Symbolist and Theosophical crosscurrents prevalent in the years before World War I lent support to this goal.

Composition V is one of three oils completed before World War I that are close to 7 x 8 feet,¹ a size that is taller and wider than any one person. Its musically derived title and number as well as its contrasting veils of bright and dark color applied with brushstrokes of varying density produce a seemingly abstract and chaotic work. Kandinsky was not averse to referring to these first impressions as having an "anarchistic" or a seemingly random or inconsistent order.² However, he was quick to point out that this apparent jumble of contrasts opened "the way for further revelations."³ Just as he explained that the term anarchism could also have "a certain systematic quality and order,"⁴ he also explained that the paintings for which he reserved the name *Composition* (seven major oils completed before 1914) were developed over a "long period of time" so that the careful planning would not seem obvious.⁵

For an artist committed to reaching an audience in order to communicate his utopian hopes, Kandinsky's discussion of an audience's reaction seems quite paradoxical. How did he expect the spectator to become involved in a process that seemed anarchistic or random, especially when he wrote: "The artist must have something to say, for his task is not the mastery of form, but the suitability of that form to its content."⁶ Despite this commitment, some art historians have characterized his work as remote and have questioned his ability to involve the public. Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, especially with the 1984 English translation of Peter Bürger's book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* reiterating many of the comments of the Marxist historian Georg Lukács from the 1930s, a number of art historians have considered the works of Kandinsky too hermetic and not sufficiently anti-institutional to be clearly effective or even relevant.⁷ Yet, as we shall see, by allowing a painting to embrace the stimuli offered by other media in order to become a total work of art, Kandinsky transgressively complicated his work so that its message of transforming values would not be ignored.

1. Vasily Kandinsky, *Composition V*, 1911, oil on canvas. Private Collection. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Scholars have acknowledged that Kandinsky used the term anarchistic to describe his new works in addition to the paintings and music of his contemporaries, but they have primarily viewed his use of the term as an aesthetic choice, as an emphasis of his belief in freedom from stylistic rules unconnected to a concern for audience participation.⁸ Nonetheless, despite contextual investigations into the relationship between anarchism and the practices of Cubism and/or the Russia avant-garde,⁹ the impact of anarchism upon Kandinsky's commitment to public communication, as well as his structural and thematic choices for his paintings, is still not usually discussed.¹⁰

One reason Kandinsky's paintings have not been viewed in relation to anarchist concepts is their visual difference from those of well-known anarchist painters such as the French artist Paul Signac. With the exception of size, Kandinsky's *Composition V* seems to have little in common with Signac's embodiment of anarchist thought in his major work *In the Time of Harmony: The Golden Age has not Yet Passed: It is Still to Come* [Fig. 2]. This large-scaled oil of 1895 included not only the French symbol of anarchism—the rooster—in the lower right but also a peaceful and calm scene of the pleasures that cooperation and mutual aid could bring to the masses.¹¹ In contrast to Signac's work, *Composition V* seems discordant and turbulent, with no obvious references to anarchism. Yet Kandinsky not only referred several times to Signac's 1899 book, which was translated into German in 1910, but also pointed to the role of Neo-Impressionist color as the beginning of his process of abstracting images from the external descriptive world.¹² In addition to admiring Signac's use of color, Kandinsky shared other affinities with this famous French painter. Like Signac, Kandinsky drew support from the communitarian understanding of anarchism, particularly

2.
Paul Signac, *In the Time of Harmony: The Golden Age Has Not Yet Passed: It is Still to Come*, 1893–95, oil on canvas. Mairie de Montreuil, Paris



from the Russian philosopher Peter Kropotkin, who was then living in exile in London, and from the German mystical anarchist Gustav Landauer, who was active in intellectual circles in Munich around the Blaue Reiter. Both provided sustenance for Kandinsky's explanation of freedom from established artistic principles based on the concept of natural law, as well as for his faith in the power of the arts to effectively modify the direction of society.

CONTACTS

From the turn of the century to World War I in both Germany and Russia, anarchism had many factions and philosophies that were contradictory, but most adherents, whether oriented toward individual or communal action, believed in an international brotherhood that would work to repair the inequalities created by industrialization. Emphasizing their faith in natural law over parliamentary law, anarchists argued particularly with Socialists, but many considered themselves somewhere between the two groups. Kropotkin and Landauer, who had translated many of Kropotkin's tracts into German,¹³ rejected written law—codified law—in favor of indigenous, communally inspired oral codes, or what today we might call vernacular sayings. Criticizing the middle class, particularly the Socialists, for using these written systems so rigidly that they made the state and capitalism inseparable, Kropotkin called for “mutual aid,” or freely agreed-upon cooperation, which he described as emerging from the “natural law” or the basically ethical morality of early peasant communities.¹⁴ Both Kropotkin and Landauer celebrated these indigenous codes as the truth that lay hidden behind the artificial structures imposed on humanity by established, authoritarian systems, and both cited the Middle Ages as an example of a period when some artisans and farmers worked freely and cooperatively. Although a multitude of intellectuals from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles Darwin, to the Russian Symbolist Vladimir Solovyov referred to the concept of “natural law” in their writings, communally inclined anarchists, (or as Kropotkin termed their philosophy, “anarchist communism”) was predicated on the possibility that change in society could be possible if protest was continuous. Kropotkin's call to artists to use their particular skills, their “impressive pictures,” to portray the “heroic struggles of the people against their oppressors” by unconventional means was particularly significant to those committed to using artistic practice to express utopian goals.¹⁵

Scholars such as Andrew Carlson and others believe that, in Germany, the anarchists “exerted power all out of proportion to their numbers.”¹⁶ Herwarth Walden, whose Sturm gallery gave Kandinsky and his Blaue Reiter group its first exhibition in Berlin in 1912, encouraged anarchist poets such as Paul Scheerbarth and the anarchist architect Bruno Taut to write for his *Sturm* journal.¹⁷ Taut, who had incorporated Kropotkin's concept of mutual aid into his own philosophical justifications, was an admirer of Kandinsky and he praised Kandinsky's incorporation of the principal of freedom—his openness to multiple styles—as a model for architects in a 1914 essay published in Walden's journal.¹⁸ In June of that year, Kandinsky was invited to meet with Gustav Landauer and other anarcho-pacifists to discuss problems preventing world peace.¹⁹ Although he did not attend the conference, the invitation points to his interest in the political events of the day.

Nonetheless, Kandinsky's own writings were so scornful of political parties that few would sense his personal esteem for anarchism as a political, social, and cultural theory. In his 1911–12 manifesto, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, the artist had assigned politicians to a very low level in his mapping of those who enlarged understanding of the world. Likening his schematic representation of affective types to a triangle, he had placed politicians—whom he specified as “elected representatives and their supporters”—on the lowest rung. Significantly, he did not include a range of political representatives, never citing racists or even monarchists, but primarily leftists and Socialists. He even praised Socialists for their economic policies that attempted to kill off, what he termed, “the capitalist hydra” by severing “the head of evil.” Similar to Kropotkin and Landauer, he tried to engage socialists by also critiquing them for being unthinking followers of doctrines and platitudes, and especially for their hatred of anarchism, about which, he claimed, they knew little except for “the terrifying name.”²⁰

In Kandinsky's memoirs, published shortly before World War I, he had discussed the importance of stirring up “a critical attitude toward accustomed phenomena.”²¹ He even praised “activism” as central to freedom by noting the significance student protests had for him when he was at the university in Moscow in the 1880s. Repression, particularly that of student groups, he explained, had led to both individual and collective activism that contributed to undermining the rigid conditions of his time. He guardedly admitted his anti-institutional attitudes in these memoirs by referring to his student days as the time when he had discovered his preference for the internal law or the natural law of the Russian peasant, in contrast to what he called the inflexibility and rigidity of centralized, government rules or what he called Roman law.²² Without flexible critical stimuli, Kandinsky believed change would be difficult, and like Kropotkin and Landauer, he relied on the concept of natural law to provide him with a defense for moving into areas that were uncharted, even disturbing to many.

MULTIPLE STIMULI AND THE TOTAL WORK OF ART

To find the critical stimuli for awakening the public, Kandinsky had to move beyond the conventional easel painting of academically rendered realistic forms to which the public was accustomed. His belief in natural laws assisted his transformation of a nineteenth-century concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* into a twentieth-century total work of art. Instead of relating parallel stimuli such as local colors and forms to produce ordinary, natural shapes, Kandinsky looked to multiple contrasting stimuli of colors and abstracted forms, synthesized from drama, poetry, and music to communicate the chaos and disharmony of his time. If he could prove that confusion led eventually to knowledge, he could deal with the problematics of communicating to the spectator. Accordingly, he used numerous means—writing manifestos, organizing exhibitions, and formulating yearbooks—to both promote and explain the significance of his work to a frequently uncomprehending public.

In his longest and most theoretical essay in the yearbook of the Blaue Reiter, as well as in the slightly earlier manifesto *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky used the concept of

“natural law” in relation to his belief that an underlying law or principle existed for all the arts, calling this principle *Innere Notwendigkeit* (inner or internal necessity). He explained in the almanac essay that three elements—the personal, the period, that is, time and space, including the national, and the universal—made up *Innere Notwendigkeit*, and he stressed that all three had to be exchangeable in order to be forceful.²³ The key word was “exchangeable”—that is—all three were in play in the creation of a new form, which had to be both the “child of its time” and the “mother of the future.”²⁴ Believing that the exchange, the intermingling of different styles—abstraction and realism, as well as different art forms, such as drama, poetry, and music—were strengthened due to their origins in natural law, he and Franz Marc, the co-editor of the *Almanac*, had the confidence not only to break with the dominant styles of the past, but also to emphasize their freedom from all rules. Zealously asserting their intention of striking against “old, established power,” they assured that “everything [is] permitted” in their battle to affect the future.²⁵

Kandinsky accepted the notion of synesthesia, the concept of the interrelationship between the senses, but he did not advocate for nineteenth-century practices of exact correspondence. He may have believed that sight, sound, smell, and touch were interrelated to such a degree that, when one sense was activated by a stimuli such as color, all the others could also be activated. But unlike the earlier generation of Symbolists, Wagnerites, and even those of his contemporaries such as Scriabin, who attempted to match stimuli like sound with color, Kandinsky maintained that a more dynamic effect could be achieved by contrasting stimuli. He argued against the complete abandonment of parallel stimuli, but stated that it was more reflective of the nineteenth century than his own conflicted and disharmonious period: “clashing discords, loss of equilibrium. . . opposites and contradictions—this is our harmony.”²⁶ Since each of the arts had its own underlying natural law or basic principle, he urged the exchange as well as the incorporation of multiple, contrasting stimuli in one total art work, calling this combination a “truly monumental art,” a form he believed was on the edge of major expansion.²⁷ While he praised music for its extension of time as well as its escape from natural forms, he explained that only painting could be the most permanent and at the same time the most immediate of all the arts, as it conveyed “to the spectator the whole content of the work at one moment.”²⁸

To understand the “peculiar force” in each of the arts, Kandinsky experimented with several of them, composing theatrical pieces as well as poetry; none of these experiments followed traditional narrative and literal conventions. *The Yellow Sound*, his composition for the stage published in the Blaue Reiter yearbook, drew upon elements from mythology, music, poetry, dance, and painting. But his directions indicated that the main figures—Promethean giants—were to move arrhythmically across a stage bathed in colored lights as contrasting music sounded; that is, when the colored lights were to be bright, the music was to subside.²⁹ In the essay “On Stage Compositions,” preceding the text of this multi-dimensional theater piece, Kandinsky specifically argued against a Wagnerian paralleling of sound and color, advocating the use of antithesis.³⁰

For the Blaue Reiter almanac, he and his co-editor Franz Marc interspersed not only illustrations of their own art but also those of marginalized art pieces such as anonymous Bavarian

religious paintings, Gothic woodcuts, Russian *lubki*, and other folk artifacts throughout the anthology both to unsettle but also to educate the onlooker accustomed to established traditions. Wilhelm Worringer, the German art historian and supporter of the Blaue Reiter, believed many Europeans, not just Germans, were filled with “a cultural arrogance” about the superiority of Western Renaissance art, and advocated an examination of alternative art forms that would be unsettling to “educated Europeans.”³¹ It should not be surprising that the editors of the Blaue Reiter would be aware of how discordant the reproductions of these alternative artifacts would be to the popular eye, especially if they were used in essay after essay.

They also selected essayists who could further convey the reasons for their disengagement from the academic requirements (whether of a narrative structure or conventional notions of beauty and harmony) to communicate their utopian message. Because they believed music was the most removed from convention, musical scores by several contemporary composers—Alban Berg, Arnold Schönberg, and Anton von Webern, along with explanatory essays by Schönberg, the composer Thomas de Hartmann, and the theorist Nikolai Kulbin—were included in the yearbook. All the essayists on music were particularly close to Kandinsky and not only supported learning from the various arts but also were engaged in this practice. Schönberg painted as well as composed music. Not only was his musical score for one of Kandinsky’s favorite dramatists and poets, Maurice Maeterlinck, placed in the almanac, but reproductions of the composer’s paintings were included as well. In his essay “The Relationship to the Text,” Schönberg specifically disputed the need for paralleling text and music.³² He insisted that a “delicate” idea in poetry, for example, could become more affective if it was paired with a “fast and vigorous” musical theme, a concept he followed in composing the music for Maeterlinck’s poem *Herzgewaechse*. The Russian music and art theorist Nikolai Kulbin, who read portions of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* to a Russian congress of artists at the end of 1911, also painted. He was even more explicit about oppositions in his essay “Free Music.” Advocating for musical intervals he called “the discord” in order to excite and arouse the observer, he encouraged musicians to study alternative sources such as non-Western musical compositions, citing the concept of natural law to justify the resulting “dissonance.”³³ Affecting the observer was central to Kulbin, and he clearly urged the artist to “provoke the creative imagination of the spectator” so that both would “jointly create the picture.”³⁴

The other composer Thomas de Hartmann, who wrote the music for Kandinsky’s stage composition, not only referred to anarchist ideas, but actually titled his essay “On Anarchy in Music.” De Hartmann is often seen in photographs of the Blaue Reiter group [Fig. 3] next to Kandinsky, who described his warm feelings about the composer and his wife as similar to the closeness he felt with Franz Marc and his wife.³⁵ In his essay, De Hartmann, who met Kandinsky in Munich where he was studying music, urged his readers to “welcome” the anarchistic principles that led composers to use what he called “opposite sounds combinations” to awaken the audience.³⁶ Indeed, he deliberately used the German verb “*erschüttern*” (to shock) to describe the effect he wanted to produce.³⁷ Like Kandinsky, De Hartmann used the term *Innere Notwendigkeit*

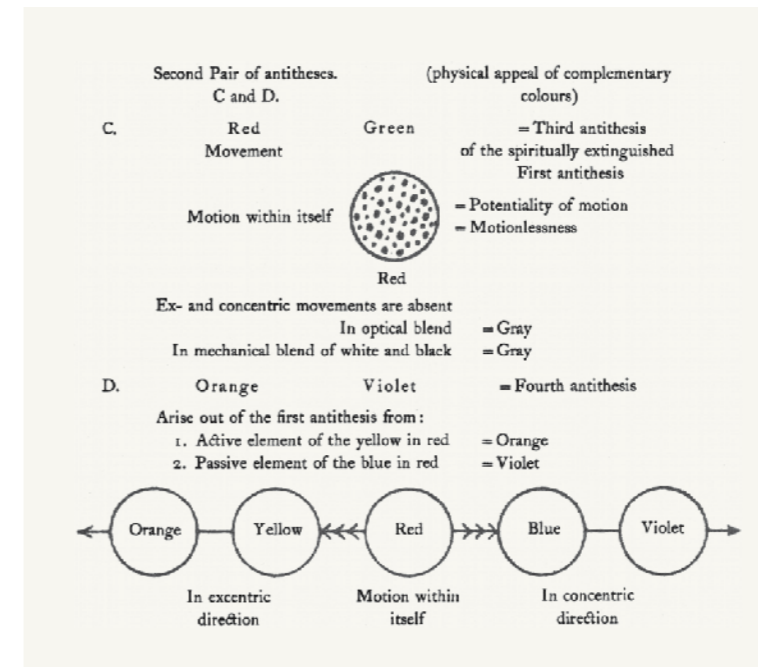
to justify his use of disharmonious sounds. He also did not advocate one singular style or source, arguing for the combination of both conscious and unconscious intuitive choices to produce the strongest direction for future creativity.

Similar to the invited composers, Kandinsky argued for contrasting or alternative stimuli from multiple sources to explain how he would startle his audience. Building on color and form—the basic elements of the painter—and appropriating concepts from music, poetry, dance, and drama, he demonstrated the possibility of making his oils into a total work of art. While stating that individual colors such as red and individual forms such as a triangle could convey moods, he used charts in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* to point out how color opposites could create a sensation of dance-like motion by advancing and then receding from the spectator [Fig. 4]. He also discussed how adding different tones of another color could enhance or reduce these effects and could even produce an illusion of opening the canvas into infinite space. To insist that primarily color and form rather than images delineated by traditional linear perspective could convey the illusion of space was an unsettling idea. But like his composer friends, he used the concept of *Innere Notwendigkeit* not just to point out the evocative potential of color and form but more importantly to justify the pairing of color and forms previously thought to be disjunctive, stating, “The incompatibility of certain forms and certain colors should be regarded not as something disharmonious, but conversely, as offering new possibilities.”³⁸

To emphasize the potential destabilizing power of repetition,³⁹ he cited experiments from the poetry of Maeterlinck, whom Schönberg also admired. Describing how Maeterlinck used the same word over and over again to loosen its external signification so that its sound could create a mood, he also referred to a production of a play by this dramatist in St. Petersburg where the



3. Photo of Blaue Reiter members taken by Gabriele Münter on the balcony of Kandinsky and Münter’s apartment at no. 36 Ainmillerstrasse, Munich 1911–12. From left to right: Maria and Franz Marc, Bernhard Koehler, Heinrich Campendonk, Thomas von Hartmann (in bowler hat), and Vasily Kandinsky (seated in front). Gabriele Münter- und Johannes Eichner-Stiftung, Munich



4. Vasily Kandinsky, Chart on the effects of color from *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 1914

playwright used a plain piece of canvas to suggest a tower rather than imitate explicit natural form. Kandinsky, who had been in St. Petersburg at about the time of that production by a group called the “mystical anarchists,” praised this approach for being able “to arouse the imagination of the audience.”⁴⁰ Although he explained the importance of abstracting from the natural, corporal image, he also discussed the importance of retaining some portion of it to add to the resonance of his works, writing that the “choice of object” in addition to the choice of color and form had to grow out of the “*Prinzip der inneren Notwendigkeit*.”⁴¹ Fearing accusations of ornamentalism, Kandinsky emphasized that the repetition of increasingly hidden imagery could also be a weapon for involving the spectator. Similar to Kulbin and De Hartmann, Kandinsky also mentioned that some of these stimuli might be subliminal or “subconscious” but that they could “exert just as lively and creative an effect.”⁴²

To emphasize that he was not prescribing absolute laws, Kandinsky often warned that his equations of stimuli were “extremely provisional and clumsy.”⁴³ Rigid rules would not have been appropriate for an artist committed to freedom from established, conventional ideas. But the potential of “different elements” in “different forms” or the “different arts” to synthesize into one “monumental art” was the challenge for him before World War I.⁴⁴

In *Composition V*, painted during the months that he was completing *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and the *Blaue Reiter* almanac, Kandinsky combined many of the multiple dissonant stimuli about which he had been writing to produce a total work of art in one monumental oil. He gave the largest oil study [Fig. 5] to De Hartmann and his wife. The very title is, of course, meant to suggest the abstract, non-material quality of music. On first impression, a dominant black shape startles as it contrasts with the multiple colors of the other parts of the canvas. Beginning as a



5.
Vasily Kandinsky, Study for *Composition V*, 1911, oil on canvas. State Museum of New Western Art, Moscow

narrow line at the top right of the canvas, it runs toward the upper left, and then thickens considerably as it curves toward the center. Aside from a few patches of red and yellow at the top of the oil, the rest of the canvas appears to have amorphous washes of light yellows, blues, greens, and whites surrounded by beige, browns, and muddy blues, and greens.

But on second impression, images—trumpets, walled cities with bent towers—appear to emerge from within the colors. Since Kandinsky had explained that the theme of the Last Judgment was the starting point for this oil as well as for a number of other works,⁴⁵ it should not be surprising that these types of images, with their evocation of conflict and struggle, might appear in other 1911 works such as a smaller oil *All Saints' Day* [Fig. 6] and a watercolor *Sound of Trumpets* [Fig. 7], both based on Russian folk imagery [Fig. 8]. But when compared to those smaller works and even to the large oil study [Fig. 5], only the arrangement of a walled city with bent towers atop a mountain peak in the top center of the final composition is clearly visible. In the large oil study, the colors are noticeably brighter especially the red around the white towers of the clearly outlined walled city. Not only are these motifs distinct in the watercolor and the smaller oil but also the the angels with trumpets in either corner, St. John viewing his apocalyptic vision in the lower right, the person about to retrieve his head at the sound of the trumpet, and the rowboat struggling in the tumultuous waters are readily identifiable. But in the final composition Kandinsky simplified their corporality into a skeletal line and/or veiled these motifs with amorphous colors.⁴⁶

In the large oil study and in the final oil, the trumpets in the upper corners are not only hard to perceive due to their illusory transparency (the background colors are visible within their black outline), but also because Kandinsky multiplied their number to a total of five. Slightly easier to discern in the large study, nonetheless, in both the third trumpet comes forth from the lower left, its brown and white color outlined in black; this section becomes transparent before it is touched with gold as it merges with the large black, curved form, thickened in the final work. Suddenly an awareness grows that this dark, ominous, threatening shape that seems to increase in size as it moves toward the spectator may be an attempt to represent the terrible sound of the trumpet on Judgment Day. Others had tried to represent sound visually through color and line— for example in a nineteenth century *lubok* [Fig. 9], the stream of sound is represented by a widening rectangular shape positioned diagonally across the print—but no other artist (to my mind) has been so successful in conveying the blasting sound of judgment. Kandinsky did not want to simulate past renditions of Judgment Day, but rather to evoke the disturbing mood and anxiety of the chaos of the present. By using the discord of contrasting colors and the disjunction of barely visible motifs, he aimed to startle and then involve the viewer.

Since this canvas is over six feet in height, the center of the canvas where the trumpet and the dark curving shapes appears to merge meets the eye of the spectator. Using very thin, curving black lines and pale colors at the bottom corners of the canvas, Kandinsky produced a very destabilizing, immaterial quality. By employing “the overriding of one color by another, or of many colors by a single color. . . . the very thinness or thickness of a line, the positioning of the form



6. Vasily Kandinsky, *All Saints' Day II*, 1911, oil on canvas. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP

7. Vasily Kandinsky, *Sound of Trumpets*, 1911, colored woodcut on Japanese paper. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris



8. Vasily Koren, scene from Revelation VIII: 10–13, 1696, colored woodcut. Reproduced in Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Rovinskii, *Kartiny iz Biblii i Apokalipsisa, raboty mastera Korenia* (Paintings from the Bible and the Apocalypse, made by the Master of Korenia), St. Petersburg, 1881. Slavic and Baltic Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

upon the surface," he created an illusion of expanded space that appears to "turn the painting into a being hovering in mid-air."⁴⁷ Here the traditional canvas could become an entity such as a stage, upon which the struggle for a contemporary revelation could be waged.

Kandinsky had begun *Composition V* (and a number of other works) with the theme of struggle from the biblical narrative of the Last Judgment, a theme which had much resonance in the indigenous Russian and German peasant cultures of the middle ages from which Kropotkin and Landauer believed the concept of mutual aid evolved. The subliminal power of the images derived from this theme to suggest struggle and then resolution was so strong that Kandinsky used it for the cover of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* [Fig. 10]. Moreover, at that time, Worringer was advocating for appreciation of artifacts from the Middle Ages—a time often referred to as the Gothic period and marginalized in relation to Renaissance art, in the same way that contemporary art groups were marginalized in relation to the academic. Worringer supported his defense of the Blaue Reiter and other contemporary art groups by asking the spectator to study the underlying similarities between the modern and the Gothic, as well as other deviations from the Renaissance norm. Plates from his 1912 book *Die Altdeutsche Buchillustration* were borrowed for use in the Blaue Reiter Almanac. Kandinsky may have begun with illustrations of widely accepted themes from the so-called medieval past, but his use of imagery, hidden by multiple and contrasting stimuli, allowed him to interpret the past with a new vitality and urgency.

We know that Kandinsky learned about the physical power of color from many other painters; Matisse was among those who helped Kandinsky strengthen and intensify Neo-Impressionist color and brushstrokes. But Matisse, like Signac, wanted a harmonious balance of color and



9. Detail from the Last Judgment, etching, first half of the nineteenth century. Reproduced in Dmitrii Aleksandrovich, *Kartiny iz Biblii i Apokalipsisa, raboty mastera Korenia* (Paintings from the Bible and the Apocalypse, made by the Master of Korenia), St. Petersburg, 1881.



10.
Vasily Kandinsky, Cover of *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*), 1912, woodcut and photogravure. Published by Piper & Co., Munich. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

composition that could soothe and not alarm the spectator. While contemporary musicians such as Schönberg and De Hartmann could provide support for the use of dissonance, anarchist concepts that lambasted institutional thinking by emphasizing indigenous natural codes provided a basic philosophy for the belief that freedom of expression could serve public communication. Kandinsky appropriated all of these supports to transform a canvas into a total work of art that could figuratively slay “the capitalist hydra” and other materialistic evils that were poisoning his epoch. By synthesizing multiple discordant stimuli, he believed he could consciously or unconsciously involve his audience to participate in the struggle for change.

Before World War I began, Kandinsky had produced two more *Compositions* that were not only larger than *Composition V*, but whose apocalyptic imagery was less important to the sensation of conflict than were the overlays of strident amorphous color shapes with contrasting irregular lines. While composers such as De Hartmann and Schönberg supported the idea of dissonance as a new sound of the period, it was the anarchist philosophy of embracing natural law that allowed Kandinsky to believe that the shock of the unconventional could have the power to bring about change. Only then could he transform a canvas into a mythical stage in which color and line could enact the struggle that would bring revelation—higher knowledge—to his audience.

However, the communal anarchists' embrace of rural, peasant life rather than that of the urban laborer has led Stalinist Communists, Frankfurt School theoreticians, as well as French Post-Structuralists, to insist that these anarchist groups were romantic and nostalgic. Georg Lukács, for example, writing in the 1930s, long after the Soviet Communists had moved toward enforcing a centralized and bureaucratic state, linked anarchism with bohemian confusion and an inability to comprehend the economic difficulties of the proletariat. As the Soviet state began to eliminate its political opponents,⁴⁸ scholars have chronicled how Stalinist Communists massacred anarchists. Nonetheless, the collective critiques of anarchism repeated throughout the twentieth century have obscured the tremendous appeal of communitarian anarchists to “progressive utopians” before World War I. The impact of their call for continuous protest through opposition to established forces should be viewed as integral to Kandinsky's development of abstraction and its vibrant embodiment in a total work of art.

Although Signac wanted to challenge conventional ways of thinking by depicting a golden age brought about by the natural law of mutual assistance, his peaceful, calm work could only be the beginning, as Kandinsky stated. It could not suggest continuous protest. Across Europe, overlapping circles of intellectuals, including Theosophists, Symbolists, Bergsonists, Nietzschean followers, as well as anarchists, were all committed to exploring new processes of thought to bring about change in the world order.⁴⁹ But the contribution of the communal anarchists, particularly their commitment to freedom from rules and their embrace of the concept of mutual aid should not be neglected as we try to re-examine the achievement of Kandinsky. While several groups gave support to Kandinsky's interest in alternative approaches to the visual, the attitudes of the communal anarchists especially contributed to Kandinsky's anti-institutional commitment

to freedom of choice, an attitude that allowed him to embrace the discordant and dissonant to awaken the unaware dormant masses. Although his idea of incorporating multiple stimuli into one total work of art to reach the viewer may not always be interpreted as activist, perhaps we in the twenty-first century should enlarge our understanding of what we mean by activism. Altering our perception of the dominant system through visual and aural dissonance is central to the critical discourse about performance art and multi-media presentations today. This paper argues that Kandinsky addressed issues of spectatorship under the guise of early twentieth-century anarchism to form questions about how the general public was to be lifted from its complacency. These issues were not just relevant at the beginning of the twentieth century but are still of crucial importance today.

1 *Compositions 6 and 7* are larger, 195 x 300 and 200 x 300 cm respectively.

2 Kandinsky, "On the Question of Form," *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac* (1912), English translation in *Kandinsky. Complete Writings on Art*, eds. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, vol. 1 (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), pp. 242.

3 Ibid.

4 Kandinsky, "On the Question of Form," in *Complete Writings on Art*, p. 242.

5 Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* (1912), English translation in *Complete Writings on Art*, p. 218.

6 Ibid., p. 213.

7 Although Jochen Schulte-Sasse, who wrote the introduction to Bürger's well-known book, emphasized that Bürger was qualifying Lukács, Bürger continued the Hungarian's over-simplified critique of Expressionism and abstraction as aestheticizing; see 'Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde,' in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxxiii–iv. For reflections of some of these concepts in treatments of Kandinsky, see Richard Sheppard, who characterized Kandinsky's work as representing conservative longings for the past, 'Kandinsky's oeuvre 1900–1914: The avant-garde as rear-guard,' in *Word & Image*, 6, no. 1 (January–March 1990), 42. The title of Margarita Tupitsyn's *Gegen Kandinsky/Against Kandinsky* (Munich: Villa Stuck/ Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006) reflects her view of Kandinsky's abstraction as dream-like and removed from the material, concrete world especially when compared to Soviet artists such as Rodchenko, see 33–34/142. Valery Turchin, *Kandinsky in Russia* (Moscow: Society of Admirers of the Art of Wassily Kandinsky, 2005), also does not believe that Kandinsky was "political." Most recently, the 2012 Museum of Modern Art exhibition catalogue, *Inventing Abstraction 1910–1935: How a Radial Idea Changes Modern Art* (ed. Leah Dickerman) does not refer to contextual issues such as the impact of Theosophy, Symbolism, or anarchism upon Kandinsky or other pioneering abstractionists.

8 Reinhard Zimmermann refers briefly to Kandinsky's association of anarchism with freedom but does not explore this connection,

see *Die Kunsttheorie von Kandinsky*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2002), p. 658. The cultural historian, Peter Jalevich, is one of the few who wrote about the possibility of anarchism's impact on Kandinsky, particularly his theater pieces; see *Munich and Theatrical Modernism: Politics, Playwriting, and Performance, 1890–1914*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 217–235. Following the lead of German cultural historians such as Ulrich Linse and Janos Frecot who examined the immersion of intellectuals in Germany at the turn of the century in anarchist theories, as well as art historians and historians such as Robert and Eugenia Herbert, and Donald Drew Egbert, I posited in a 1987 essay that Kandinsky's awareness of Russian and German anarchist theories along with other alternatives to established institutions such as Theosophy were critical for Kandinsky's development of abstraction; see Rose-Carol Washton Long, "Occultism, Anarchism, and Abstraction: Kandinsky's Art of the Future," *Art Journal*, 46, no. 1 (Spring 1987): pp. 38–45.

9 See for example, Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, 'Introduction,' in their anthology, *A Cubism Reader: Documents and Criticism, 1906–1914*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008, 9), as well as their other books and essays, Alan Antliff, *Anarchy and Art: From the Paris Commune to the Fall of the Berlin Wall* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007); and most recently, Nina Gurianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). These contextual results have often been challenged or ignored by other scholars focusing on Cubism; see for example, Rosalind Krauss, "The Circulation of the Sign" (1992) in *The Picasso Papers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998, 25–85) or Anne Umland, *Picasso: Guitars 1912–1914* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011, 16–27, 33–39) who makes no reference to the possible impact of anarchism upon Picasso.

10 Although the catalogue for a 2011 exhibition, *Kandinsky and the Harmony of Silence: Painting with White Border*, ed. Elsa Smithgall (Washington, D. C., The Phillips Collection in

association with Yale University Press, 2011), discusses the impact of Theosophy and Symbolism, it does not mention anarchism.

11 For analysis of the relation of Signac's painting to anarchist concepts see *Signac 1863–1935*, ed. Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon et al (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), pp. 195–200; and also Robin Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Ashgate, UK and Burlington, VT: 2007), pp. 126–132, 141–162, 186–192.

12 Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* in *Complete Writings 1*, p. 149; Kandinsky cites the German edition of Signac's work published by Axel Juncker, Charlottenburg, 1910.

13 Landauer translated, for example, Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* into German in 1904. For a discussion of the impact of Kropotkin, as well as Proudhon, and Tolstoy upon Landauer, see Eugene Lunn, *Prophet of Community: the Romantic Socialism of Gustav Landauer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) esp. p. 213ff. Lunn explains that Landauer's reference to his approach as anarcho-socialist was, most likely, an attempt to unite both groups, see pp. 104–5 and 190–4.

14 See the collection of Kropotkin's essays, especially "Anarchist Communism" (1880) in *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*, ed. Roger N. Baldwin (New York/London: Benjamin Blom, 1968; also see Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 26–33.

15 See Kropotkin, "An Appeal to the Young" (1880) in Baldwin, esp. p. 278.

16 Andrew Carlson, *Anarchism in Germany, Vol. 1 The Early Movement* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1972), p. 7.

17 Walden knew Landauer as well as the anarchist and later revolutionist Erich Mühsam from the Berlin Neue Gemeinschaft circle, see Frecot, pp. 337–38; also see accounts about Walden's wife Else Lasker-Schüler by Erika Klüsener (Reinbek bei Hamburg: xxx, 1980), pp. 44–68.

18 Bruno Taut, 'Eine Notwendigkeit,' *Der Sturm* 4, nos. 196–7 (February 1914) in English translation in *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*, ed. Rose-Carol Washton Long (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp.123–6.

19 For a discussion of this conference, see Lunn, p. 245. Letters from the Serbian writer Dimitri Mitrinović to Kandinsky discuss the forthcoming peace conference, see Mitrinović to Kandinsky, June 25, 1914, June 30, 1914, and undated in Gabriele Münter–Johannes Eichner Stiftung, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich. See also a letter to Kandinsky dated June (?), 1914, in which Mitrinović mentioned that Landauer had introduced him to the writings of Kropotkin. See in addition, Shulamith Behr, 'Wassily Kandinsky and Dimitrije Mitrinović: Pan-Christian Universalism and the Yearbook "Towards the Mankind of the Future through Aryan Europe,"' in *The Oxford Art Journal* 15, 1 (1992), pp. 81–8.

20 See Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* in *Complete Writings 1*, p. 139. However, the English words "republicans or democrats" in that translation of the German "Volksvertretungsanhänger oder Republikaner" would be better served by the translation "elected representatives and their followers or Republicans"; see W. Kandinsky, *Über des Geistige in der Kunst*, 7th ed. (Bern-Bümpliz: Benteli, 1963), p. 36.

21 Kandinsky, *Reminiscences* (1913) in *Complete Writings 1*, pp. 361–2. Turchin's emphasis that the Reminiscences were filtered through Kandinsky's attempt to publicize himself further reminds us of the importance of his choosing to mention activism in 1913.

22 Kandinsky, *Reminiscences* in *Collected Writings 1*, p. 362.

23 Kandinsky, "On the Question of Form" in *Collected Writings 1*, pp. 240–42.

24 Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* in *Collected Writings 1*, pp. 131.

25 Quotations from Franz Marc, "The 'Savages' of Germany" in *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* (1912), documentary edition, ed. Klaus Lankheit (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), p. 61 and Kandinsky, "On the Question of Form" in *Collected Writings 1*, p. 241.

26 Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* in *Collected Writings 1*, p. 193.

27 The clearest statement for this possibility is in *On the Spiritual in Art* in *Collected Writings 1*, p. 155.

28 Ibid. p. 154.

29 See Kandinsky, *Yellow Sound* in *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*, English translation in *Complete Writings on Art 1*, pp. 269–83.

30 Kandinsky, "On Stage Composition" in *Collected Writings 1*, pp. 260–2. His lithographic designs for his collection of free verse called *Klange*, published in 1913, were not meant to illustrate the text.

31 Worringer, "The Historical Development of Modern Art" (1911) in English translation in *German Expressionism*, pp.10–13.

32 Arnold Schönberg, "The Relationship to the Text" in 1974 London doc. ed., pp. 90–102, esp. 102.

33 N [Nikolai] Kulbin, 'Free Music' in 1974 London doc. ed., pp. 141–146. Kulbin's essay is an abridged version of one that appeared in 1910 in the St. Petersburg publication *Studiia Impressionistov*; an English excerpt appears in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934*, ed. John E. Bowlt (New York: 1976, pp. 11–17).

34 Kulbin, 'Svobodnaia muzyka' (Free art as the Basis of Life), *Studiia Impressionistov* (1910), p. 26. Kandinsky letters to Kulbin from the end of 1911 and the beginning of 1912 indicate that the Russian theorist sent Kandinsky a *lubok* of the Last Judgment; see E. F. Kovtun's editing of Kandinsky's letters to Kulbin in *Monuments of Culture, New Discoveries* (Leningrad: Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1981).

35 Kandinsky unpublished letter to Gabriele Münter, August 10, 1911, in Gabriele Münter-und Johannes Eichner-Stiftung, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich. Jelena Hahl-Koch noted that Kandinsky used the more private 'Du' rather than the more formal 'Sie' when communicating with De Hartmann; see *Arnold Schoenberg-Wassily Kandinsky: Letters, Pictures and Documents*, ed. Jelena Hahl-Koch (London/Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 138–9, and 157–9. [In the 1981/83 German edition, Hartmut Zelinsky refers to the impact of the ego anarchist Max Stirner but does not discuss communal anarchists].

36 In two interviews (June 18, 1965 and Sept. 8, 1965) with De Hartmann's wife Olga in New York, she recalled how both men would experiment with writing to friends in Russia and receiving answers although the letters

were not mailed. She also described their shared interest in extra sensory phenomena and in Theosophical literature.

37 For the German edition used, see Th. v. De Hartmann, "Über Anarchie in der Musik," *Der Blaue Reiter*, documentary edition, ed. Klaus Lankheit (Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1965), p. 90; for the English version, see 1974 London doc. ed., p. 114.

38 Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* in *Collected Writings 1*, p.163. He indicated that a geometric form such as a triangle could communicate a mood of say stability or peacefulness but its placement in relation to its position of the canvas could change that perception.

39 Ibid. p. 192.

40 Ibid. p. 146. For a discussion of this St. Petersburg groups, see Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, "Theater as Church: The Vision of the Mystical Anarchists," *Russian History* 4, pt. 2 (1977), pp. 122–141.

41 Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, in *Collected Writings 1*, pp. 168.

42 Ibid. pp. 168–169

43 Ibid. p. 189.

44 Ibid. p. 192.

45 Kandinsky, manuscript prepared for lecture at the *Kreis der Kunst* exhibition, Cologne, Jan. 30, 1914, published in J. Eichner, *Kandinsky und Münter* (Munich, 1957), pp. 109–16, and discussed in Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 108 ff.

46 For a specific discussion of these motifs in a number of Kandinsky's other works between 1910–1912, see Long, *Kandinsky*, pp. 75–107.

47 Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* in *Collected Writings 1*, pp. 194–5.

48 For Lukács' dismissal of anarchism, see "Grösse und Verfall" des Expressionismus," *Internationale Literatur* 1 (1934) in English translation in *German Expressionism*, pp. 313–17. For a discussion of Kropotkin's critique of Lenin and others before he died in 1921 in Russia, see Avrich, pp. 225–8.

49 For further discussion of the impact of Symbolism and Theosophy upon Kandinsky, see Long, *Kandinsky*, pp. 13–51.