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Cover Page Footnote

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Nothing to Do with Politics, but Only Art?

On Wassily Kandinsky's Work in Paris, from 1934 until the Outbreak of the War

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Abstract

Following his move to Paris at the end of 1933, Wassily Kandinsky clung to his conviction that art must remain free of politics. The purpose of this essay is to consider the limitations and advantages of this position in the polarized political climate of the French capital and to chart the aesthetic path the painter embarked upon after his arrival, with particular reference to the personal ties and artistic alliances that he forged (or not) in this complex cultural terrain. Far from having nothing to do with politics, the transformation his painting underwent in Paris, during the period he dubbed “synthetic,” was the result of both the maturation of his ideas on abstract art and his adaptation to a rocky political and cultural landscape.

Résumé

Après son arrivée à Paris à la fin de 1933, Vassily Kandinsky continua à maintenir que l'art devait rester indépendant de la politique. Le but de cet essai est de considérer les limites et avantages de cette position, dans le climat politique polarisé de la capitale française. L'article retrace l'évolution artistique du peintre après son arrivée, et en particulier les liens personnels et les alliances artistiques qu'il put ou non forger dans ce milieu culturel complexe. Loin de contredire tout lien avec la politique, la transformation que sa peinture subit à Paris, pendant cette période qu'il nomma « synthétique », fut autant le résultat de la maturation de ses idées sur l'art abstrait que de son adaptation à un paysage politique et culturel tortueux.

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Even before the war, I traveled very often...I lived abroad at one time for four consecutive years (in France, Belgium, Tunisia and Italy). Consequently, my near two-year absence [from Germany] has nothing to do with political reasons, but exclusively artistic ones.¹
- Wassily Kandinsky to Alexandre Kojève, c.1935

When Wassily Kandinsky relocated to Paris at the end of 1933, at the age of 67, it was the last, but by no means the first, occasion that the Russian-born artist, a German citizen since 1928, found himself uprooted; the various moves he had undertaken over the course of his life, up until and including this one, ran the gamut of experiences that “migration” comprised in the first half of the twentieth century.² He chose to leave Russia for Munich in 1896 to pursue a career in painting, from where, as he later reminded his nephew, Alexandre Kojève, he freely and frequently traveled. The declaration of war in 1914, however, brought an abrupt end to the watershed period of *Die Blaue Reiter*, when Kandinsky was forcibly repatriated. He returned to Moscow via Switzerland, only to lose his private fortune and the luxury of his financial independence in the Revolution of 1917, but, heeding the call of the Soviet government and the Russian avant-garde, he worked tirelessly within the new proletarian cultural institutions. Once he realized that any spiritual understanding of art was to be sacrificed on the Bolshevik altar of Constructivist utility, he happily embarked on an official visit to Germany at the end of 1921, later accepting Walter Gropius’s offer of a permanent position at the Bauhaus, moving with the school to its new premises in Dessau in 1925, and, less happily, to Berlin in 1933. Here, once again, the state was to play an active role in inducing, if not strictly compelling, his departure. “I was ‘given the cold shoulder,’” he explained to Hilla Rebay. “The

museums placed my paintings in storage...Exhibitions, even in private galleries, became impossible for me. Therefore the art dealers also could no longer represent me energetically. I sat there with my hands tied.”³

As an artist Kandinsky had always been adamant that art must transcend the demands of material reality and “the coarser emotions, such as terror, joy, sorrow,” that it inevitably excited.⁴ Yet dramatic external events had a way of intruding painfully and inconveniently throughout his working life. Both the title and the somber tones of *Entwicklung in Braun* (Fig. 1), the last oil painting Kandinsky finished on German soil, unavoidably evoke the ominous presence of Hitler’s Brownshirts on the streets of the capital, following the rise to power of the National Socialists. Even before completing this work in 1933, while on holiday that summer in France, Kandinsky and his wife Nina had begun to plot their departure from Germany. Once back in the tense atmosphere of Berlin, the prospect of Paris, however unsettling, surely seemed a window of opportunity, the chance to continue to paint as he wished to paint when professional doors around him were closing, much as the dark, overlapping planes in his painting converge upon the luminous center of the canvas. To quote the words of Christian Zervos, the editor who had long supported Kandinsky in the pages of the French review *Cahiers d’Art*, here “in the middle, [was] an opening as clear as hope...[that] which makes us dream of the infinite that our life limits from all sides.”⁵ There is no hint in *Entwicklung in Braun* of the fanciful, writhing biomorphs the artist was to bring into being in Paris, in a newly liberated range of colors, but, seen in light of the changes to come, the sharp triangles and black crescents that retreat through this recessed window bid farewell both to Germany and to the geometric orthodoxies of the Bauhaus.

¹ Kandinsky to Alexandre Kojève, undated, c.1935, in *Vassily Kandinsky. Correspondances avec Zervos et Kojève*, ed. by Christian Derouet, *Les Cahiers du musée national d’art moderne, hors-série/archives* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1992), 173. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

² For more on the complex nature of migration in this period, the blurred lines between forced and voluntary movement, between the artistic migrant and the exile, see Sabine Eckmann, “Considering (and reconsidering) Art and Exile,” in *Exiles and Emigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler*, ed. by Stephanie Barron (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum, 1997), 30-42.

³ Kandinsky to Hilla Rebay, 1 February 1934, reproduced in Joan M. Lukach, *Hilla Rebay: In Search of the Spirit in Art* (New York: George Brazier, 1983), 115.

⁴ Wassily Kandinsky, “On the Spiritual in Art” (1912), in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. by Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vargo (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 128.

⁵ Christian Zervos, “Notes sur Kandinsky: À propos de sa récente exposition à la Galerie des ‘Cahiers d’Art,’” *Cahiers d’Art* 5/8 (1934), 154.



Figure 1. Wassily Kandinsky, *Entwicklung in Braun*, 1933, oil on canvas, 101 x 120.5 cm, musée Cantini, Marseille. Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Jean-Claude Planchet.

Given the rich readings to which *Entwicklung in Braun* lends—and even then lent—itsself, given his account of events to Rebay, for Kandinsky to insist as he did to Kojève that his decision to leave Germany had nothing to do with politics but only art seems, if not disingenuous, then willfully naïve, certainly in the face of a regime that repudiated such distinctions. What he meant, however, was that the move did not reflect any abiding political conviction on his part, beyond, of course, the essential tenet of his own artistic ideology, namely that art, in dreaming of the infinite, must remain free of such worldly concerns. Throughout the 1930s Kandinsky adhered to this article of his creative faith the more sorely it was tested. The

artist must always remain “above the complex political, social and moral-economic problems of the day,” he wrote in 1936, even as the impending political storm gathered momentum across Europe; his task “demands complete inundation in the world of art.”⁶

My intention here is two-fold: to examine some of the limits and limitations, versus the advantages, of this position, especially in the polarized political climate of the Parisian milieu in which Kandinsky had chosen to live; and to chart the aesthetic course he embarked upon from 1934 up until the

⁶ Wassily Kandinsky, reply to a questionnaire in *Gaceta de Arte. Revista internacional de cultura* 38 (1936), 8. Reproduced as “Reply to Gaceta de Arte” (1936), in *Complete Writings on Art*, 791.

outbreak of war, with particular reference to the personal ties and artistic alliances that he forged (or not) in this complex cultural terrain. In so doing, I mean to unravel the way that Kandinsky's apolitical stance, his attempts to find a place for himself in the city's entrenched artistic networks and the uncertainty of his situation, financial and otherwise, were interwoven in the transformation his painting underwent following his arrival in Paris, the period of his career he dubbed "synthetic."⁷ What meaning and significance did Kandinsky give to the idea of "synthesis" and what purchase did the term hold more broadly at this time and place? By examining examples of the canvases he painted in Paris, as well as his written texts and other contemporary sources, I will consider how the artist responded to the different avant-garde idioms then visible in the city and their cultural valence: biomorphism, Surrealism, Futurism's second wave, and, Kandinsky's own *bête-noire*, Cubism. The issue here is not one of simple "influence," but rather the exchange or even melding of multiple artistic currencies, currencies that the artist himself valued in ambiguous and ambivalent ways.

Kandinsky moved to France expecting to find a ready reception for his work, his misplaced confidence fueled partly by Christian Zervos, whose review, *Cahiers d'Art*, had been giving the painter a published presence on the Parisian scene since 1928: Zervos had reproduced Kandinsky's paintings and texts on several occasions; he had issued notices of the artist's exhibitions in France and beyond, including sizable reviews of two shows in Paris that the editor himself orchestrated for the painter, first at the Galerie Zak in 1929 and then again the following year at the Galerie de France; and, in late 1930, he had published Will Grohmann's first monograph on the artist.⁸ Zervos

was perhaps the most important, but certainly not Kandinsky's only point of contact with the city's progressive artists and *cognoscenti*. The painter had lent his support to *Cercle et Carré*, the short-lived international group and review that Michel Seuphor established in Paris in 1930, participating in the group's first and only exhibition in April that year at Galerie 23; at the request of Albert Gleizes and Hans Arp, he had also added his name to *Abstraction-Création*, the association that grew from the ruins of *Cercle et Carré* in 1931, although his links to the group were to remain slight.⁹ André Breton had showed his early appreciation for Kandinsky's "admirable eye" by purchasing two watercolors from the artist's show at the Galerie Zak, and Kandinsky had in turn accepted the poet's invitation to exhibit with the Surrealists at the Salon des Surindépendants in late 1933.¹⁰ From this perspective, the artist's permanent relocation to Paris at the end of that year was not merely the work of the historical moment, but also concluded a period of transition that arguably began when Zervos first traveled to Dessau to meet him in 1927, a passage Kandinsky (unknowingly) plotted in the intervening years as he regularly returned to France on holiday and for work, and as he kept abreast of developments through *Cahiers d'Art* and other forums.¹¹ While still based at the Bauhaus, however, the artist had enjoyed the benefits that distance and a certain air of mystery brought him in the French capital, and he had, as a result, been able to move more or less freely between groups that, in critical terms, assumed antithetical positions, between the Surrealists, on the one hand, and abstract artists on the other, who were united against "the

⁷ In a letter to André Dezarrois, director of the Musée du Jeu de Paume, Kandinsky referred to Paris as his "synthetic period." Kandinsky to André Dezarrois, 15 July 1937, 9200-1514a, Fonds Kandinsky, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre de documentation et de recherche du MNAM, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (hereafter cited Fonds Kandinsky).

⁸ Will Grohmann, *Kandinsky* (Paris, Cahiers d'Art, 1930). See also Grohmann's earlier article in the review, which featured 16 reproductions of the artist's paintings, "Wassily Kandinsky," *Cahiers d'Art* 7 (1929), 322-329, as well as Kandinsky's own "Réponse à l'enquête sur l'art abstrait," *Cahiers d'Art* 7-8 (1931), 350-353. Two small

catalogues were produced for his exhibitions in Paris: the first, *Exposition d'aquarelles de Wassily Kandinsky: Galerie Zak, Paris, du 15 au 31 janvier 1929* (Paris: Galerie Zak, 1929) included a short preface by Tériade; the second, *Exposition Kandinsky, du 14 au 31 mars 1930* (Paris: Galerie de France, 1930), included texts by Tériade, Zervos, Fannina Halle and Maurice Raynal.

⁹ Marie Gispert thoroughly details the artist's different engagements in the French capital leading up to his move in "Kandinsky et le 'label parisien,'" *Les Cahiers du MNAM* 125 (2013), 82-110.

¹⁰ See André Breton, *La beauté convulsive* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1991), 209. Breton congratulated himself on having been the first to welcome Kandinsky upon his arrival in the city at the end of 1933.

¹¹ Vivian Endicott Barnett, "Kandinsky and Science: The Introduction of Biological Images in the Paris Period," in *Kandinsky in Paris: 1934-1944* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1985), 61.

Surrealist depravation.”¹² Once resident in the city, finally privy to the “dirty intrigues around every one of its street corners,”¹³ the terms of this engagement changed and Kandinsky faced the proverbial contempt that proximity bred on a number of fronts: his relationship with Zervos deteriorated; he negotiated awkwardly among different artistic factions and émigré groups; and he struggled to find the sort of critical audience or market for his work that he had been anticipating.

In her memoirs, Nina Kandinsky implicitly blamed Zervos for the false hopes she and her husband had shared upon moving, although the editor had always been entirely frank about the collapse of the art market, the closure of galleries, the demise of reviews, and his own financial distress.¹⁴ Despite these difficulties, he and his wife Yvonne were the first to exhibit the new direction Kandinsky had begun to pursue following his arrival in Paris, mounting a show of the artist’s work in the small gallery they ran alongside the review’s editorial offices in late May 1934, which, according to Nina herself, attracted a “gratifyingly strong response.”¹⁵ Since the new year, Kandinsky had been happily ensconced in a bright new apartment with uninterrupted views of the river in Neuilly-sur-Seine, but, overwhelmed by the light and natural surroundings of his new home, he had stopped painting for nearly two months in order to “manage [his impressions].” When he picked up his brushes again in early March, as he later explained to Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, “Paris, with its marvelous light (both strong and soft), had expanded my palette. Other colors appeared, other forms, radically new, or that I had not used for

years. All of this, of course, in an unconscious fashion.”¹⁶ The exhibition at the Galerie des Cahiers d’Art, *Kandinsky, peintures de toutes les époques, aquarelles et dessins*, which opened on 23 May, included some 45 of the artist’s works dating from 1921-1934, a selection that showed, as Zervos enthused in his own, contemporary account, the way “the atmosphere of the Ile-de-France, its light, the lightness of its skies, [was] totally transforming the expressiveness of his oeuvre.”¹⁷ Seen alongside canvases from Kandinsky’s years in Germany, like *Entwicklung in Braun*, the new works on display and reproduced in Zervos’s “Notes,” including *Entre Deux* and *Chacun pour soi* (Fig. 2), certainly illustrated the way in which the strong, primary colors and geometric syntaxes of the Bauhaus era—its circles, squares and triangles—were ceding to what Vivian Endicott Barnett documents as the artist’s “new iconography,” capricious and whimsical shapes that conjured the world of biology, painted in more nuanced, pastel hues.¹⁸ In the first work, twin embryonic forms, one light, one dark, float in the upper half of the canvas, as small circles multiply in the red space between them, like so many new cells of life springing from the encounter of two beings. In the second, nine different amoebic and geometric shapes are compartmentalized within a three-by-three grid, each form encapsulated within its own ovum or uterine sac, further isolated from the others by the straight white lines dividing each specimen. “Never before,” wrote Zervos, in response to these new paintings, “[had] the influence of nature on his work been as evident as it was in the canvases painted in Paris.”¹⁹

¹² Maurice Raynal attributes this description and motive to the “apostles” of *Cerle et Carré* in his review of the exhibition in 1930, “On expose,” *L’Intransigeant*, 30 April 1930, 7.

¹³ Kandinsky to Bernese collector Hermann Rupf, cited by Nina Kandinsky, *Kandinsky und ich* (Munich: Kindler, 1976), 184.

¹⁴ Nina Kandinsky, *Kandinsky und ich*, 161. In blaming Zervos, she also glossed over the fact that Kandinsky had first contemplated traveling to America, only to be dissuaded from undertaking the long, expensive journey by his friend and patroness Galka Scheyer, who had yet to find a steady demand for the artist’s work on the American market. Galka Scheyer to Kandinsky, 2 August 1933, reproduced in *Galka E. Scheyer and the Blue Four: Correspondence, 1924-1945*, ed. by Isabel Wünsche (Wabern: Benteli, 2006), 217. Furthermore, from the outset Kandinsky had hoped to return to Germany, where his roots, as he explained to his confidant, Grohmann, went too deep to consider leaving for good. Kandinsky to Will Grohmann, 4 December 1933, cited in Grohmann, *Wassily Kandinsky: Life and Work* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1959), 221.

¹⁵ Nina Kandinsky, *Kandinsky und ich*, 181.

¹⁶ Kandinsky to Alfred H. Barr, 16 July 1936, 9200-1501, Fonds Kandinsky.

¹⁷ Zervos, “Notes sur Kandinsky,” 154.

¹⁸ Endicott Barnett, “Kandinsky and Science,” 63.

¹⁹ Zervos, “Notes sur Kandinsky,” 154.

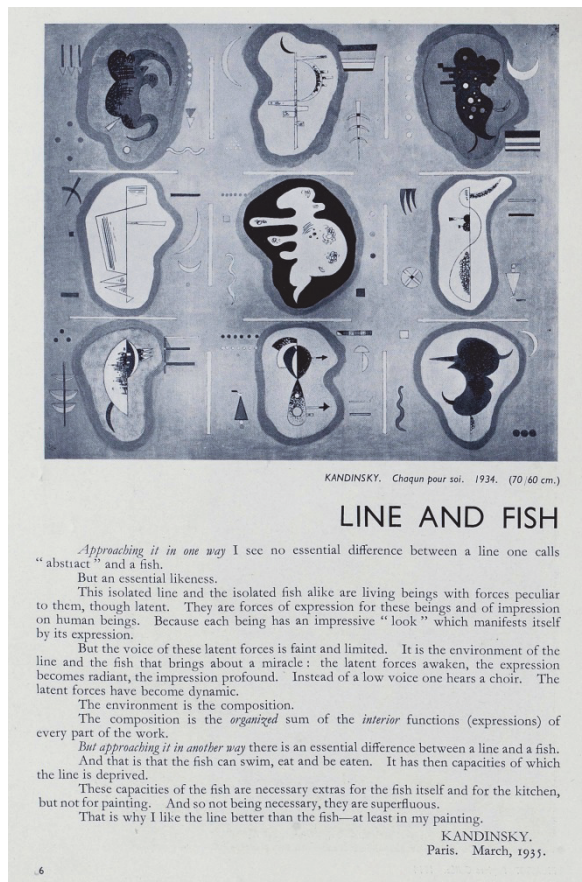


Figure 2. Wassily Kandinsky, *Chacun pour soi*, 1934, oil and tempera on canvas, 60 x 71 cm, private collection. Reproduced as an illustration to Wassily Kandinsky, "Line and Fish," *Axis*, no. 2 (1935), 6.

For both Zervos and Kandinsky, the environs of the city itself were the clear impetus for change: "I did not want to see," Kandinsky insisted, "one image foreign to its light and natural setting," words that struck a defensive note precisely because the artist had lit upon a formal path already well-trodden in the French capital.²⁰ Biomorphism, with its plastic vocabulary of supple, organic forms, elaborated by analogy with biology, cosmology, intuition and the unconscious, was, by this time, a recognizably Parisian idiom, one associated especially with the work of Hans Arp and Joan Miró.²¹ While Kandinsky had known Arp personally since 1912, he met Miró for the

²⁰ Kandinsky to Alfred H. Barr, 16 July 1936, 9200-1501, Fonds Kandinsky.

²¹ The term "biomorphism," as Jennifer Mundy points out, sits awkwardly in the lexicon of modernism, and emerged at a distance from the personalities and "traditions of the Parisian avant-garde it sought to label," but I employ the expression here, in her words, as "a useful way of describing the fluid, organic shapes in the art of such diverse figures as...Hans Arp...[and] Joan Miró." Jennifer Mundy, "The Naming of Biomorphism," in *Biocentrism and Modernism*, ed. by Oliver A. I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 61.

first time in Paris, when, serendipitously, Miró exhibited at the Galerie des Cahiers d'Art in March, right before Kandinsky, and Zervos dedicated the review's first issue of 1934 to the Catalan painter. Even prior to this encounter, however, Kandinsky was familiar with the work of both these artists, which Zervos had reproduced extensively in the pages of *Cahiers d'Art*.²² The two contrasting, embryonic shapes of the aforementioned *Entre Deux* closely resemble the undulating, wooden reliefs that Arp had produced throughout the 1920s. And in Kandinsky's *Rayé* (Fig. 3), from November 1934, two fine, swirling white lines, reminiscent of Arp's *ficelles collées* from the turn of the decade, weave their way among the marine-like beings—quixotic seahorses, urchins and tentacled anemones—that call to mind the work of Miró, an artist whom Kandinsky openly grew to admire. "This little man who always paints large canvases is a real little volcano, constantly erupting paintings. Fabulous strength and energy."²³ Kandinsky's arrangement of these undeniably Miroèsque forms was nevertheless striking and novel because he offset their subaqueous explosion across the canvas with the sharp black and white stripes of the title, playing the free against the fixed to dramatic effect. In his 1926 treatise *Point and Line to Plane*, Kandinsky had already set forth the way in which the artist might exploit tensions between individual forms and the picture plane in order to create spatial ambiguities, and in this painting the fanciful, brightly colored shapes nudge forward as if suspended in front of the positive-negative bands that divide the painting's field.²⁴ This suggestion of "space" is heightened by the artist's use of sand, which gives his aquatic biomorphs a perceptible texture even as it also draws attention to the surface of the canvas; he further manipulates this relationship of figure to ground by incorporating sand into the black (negative) stripes while leaving the white (positive) areas flat.

²² Zervos, for example, reproduced eight of Arp's works, as well as seven by Miró and four by Kandinsky, to accompany part four of Tériade's "Documentaire sur la jeune peinture," *Cahiers d'Art* 2 (1930), 69-84.

²³ Kandinsky to Grohmann, 2 December 1935, cited in *Life and Work*, 222.

²⁴ Wassily Kandinsky, "Point and Line to Plane" (1926), in *Complete Writings in Art*, 670-672.



Figure 3. Wassily Kandinsky, *Rayé*, 1934, oil with sand on canvas, 81 x 100 cm, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, 46.1022. Photo © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

Kandinsky had long ago accepted the inevitability of “experiencing” others’ work, which, far from undesirable, rendered one’s soul more sensitive, refined. “Experiencing the works of others, in this sense, is *the same as experiencing nature*.”²⁵ Yet when the artist wrote to Alfred Barr to stress the unconscious fashion in which the light and *natural* setting of Paris had transformed his work, it was precisely to refute the director’s unsurprising observation that “in the last few years [Kandinsky] has turned to more organic forms, perhaps under the influence of the younger Parisians Miró and Arp, to whom he pointed the way twenty years

before.”²⁶ The painter’s objection to Barr’s “dangerous” use of the expression “under the influence” did not stem from the charge of “influence” per se, but rather from the stated direction—or reversal—of its flow.²⁷ Kandinsky, however, must have been disappointed that Barr failed to give any serious consideration to the aesthetic complexity of his recent work, particularly when his own pedagogical texts had helped to lay the theoretical foundations of an artistic path he was now described only as

²⁵ Wassily Kandinsky, “Reminiscences” (1913), in *Complete Writings on Art*, 380 (my emphasis).

²⁶ Alfred H. Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 68.

²⁷ Kandinsky to Barr, 22 June 1936, 9200-1500, Fonds Kandinsky. Kandinsky followed this first missive with a second on 16 July 1936, 9200-1501, Fonds Kandinsky. He was no doubt irked that Barr employed the phrase not once, but twice in the catalogue, also suggesting that during the artist’s years in the Soviet Union, “his style changed, apparently under the influence of the Suprematists.”

following.²⁸ The artist had long copied and clipped images of nascent life, of microscopic organisms and geological formations from scientific journals and encyclopedic volumes, reproducing a number of illustrations drawn from the study of astronomy and biology in *Point and Line to Plane*, where he had also written that abstract art was subject to its own “natural laws” and would progress from modest “to increasingly complex organisms.”²⁹ Lisa Florman invokes this reference to argue that if Kandinsky was painting according to the dynamist principle he had described, then the free-flowing shapes of his Parisian works functioned in a similarly analogical mode, as so many diverse parts that, by means of their coordinated interaction, sustained a larger system, the “‘organic’ totality” of his composition.³⁰ Zervos intuitively articulated the systemic nature of the artist’s painting when, in describing *Chacun pour soi* to his readers in 1934, he emphasized the way Kandinsky had succeeded in giving these “nine, different entities—each living its own life—a unity, in order to create the painting...using signs and tones that bring his canvas into perfect balance.”³¹ The contrast, however, between the free form of Kandinsky’s amoebas and their constraint or segregation within a structural grid also seemed to cast doubt upon this equilibrium, lending the work a friction—the free set against the fixed—that increasingly typified his Parisian canvases, heightened here by the painter’s suggestive title, the true sense of which remained elusive. As a pictorial metaphor, these (self-) contained, irregular forms accommodate multiple interpretations, from the sanctity of the artist’s autonomy to his lamentable isolation in a

materialistic society in which it was “every man for himself.”³²

When Kandinsky replied to an inquiry in *Cahiers d’Art* about the state of contemporary “Art Today” at the beginning of 1935, he in fact expressed his confident hope that this “nightmare of materialistic ideas that turn cosmic life into a sorry and aimless game” was slowly yielding what he nominated as “the beginnings of a *synthesis*.”³³ Kandinsky was to put forward this idea with increasing frequency in his written texts in Paris, both to conceptualize the “direction” of his work and explain “its double-meaning”:

1. It opens up and develops the “internal view” and thereby makes possible:
2. The experience of the small and great, the micro- and macrocosmic, coherence.

*Synthesis.*³⁴

Kandinsky’s calls for a new synthesis explicitly drew upon the artist’s own spiritual ideas about art: in refining his artistic methods, he was seeking new pictorial means capable of arousing emotion and restoring a coherent, but multidimensional vision of man and the universe, the microcosm and the macrocosm. As he wrote in Zervos’s *enquête*, “Modern man” worked to create synthesis in order “to rediscover the forgotten relationships between individual phenomena and between those phenomena and greater principles,” the one sure path to reclaiming “a feeling of the cosmos.”³⁵ In deploying the term, however, the artist also, deliberately or otherwise, linked his practice to a specific moment of the modern movement, one that several scholars have identified according to its “post-avant-gardist and synthetic conscience,” in pursuit of art-making that meaningfully united pure plastic form and subjective, intuitive, or even

²⁸ See Guitemie Maldonado’s discussion in *Le cercle et l’amibe. Le biomorphisme dans l’art des années 1930* (Paris: INHA/CTHS, 2006), 120-126. Maldonado mines a wealth of historical material pertaining to the proliferation of biomorphic forms in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

²⁹ Wassily Kandinsky, “Point and Line to Plane” (1926), in *Complete Writings on Art*, 628.

³⁰ Lisa Florman, *Concerning the Spiritual and the Concrete in Kandinsky’s Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 133. Florman questions Endicott Barnett’s use of the term “iconography,” and the idea that Kandinsky “depicted” identifiably biological—rather than evocatively biomorphic—forms. In this way she echoes Will Grohmann’s earlier suggestion that “[t]here is no relation to the completed forms of nature, but there are definite analogies to their laws of growth and organization.” Grohmann, *Life and Work*, 234.

³¹ Zervos, “Notes sur Kandinsky,” 154.

³² Keith Holz, for example, argues that the different “political and social implications of these abstract visualizations of individual units, subordinated to a pre-existing order” are hard to ignore, particularly at a time when “the choice between individual and collective endeavor became more urgent.” See “Scenes from Exile in Western Europe: the Politics of Individual and Collective Endeavor Among German Artists,” in *Exiles and Emigrés*, 46.

³³ Wassily Kandinsky, reply to the questionnaire “L’art aujourd’hui est plus vivant que jamais,” *Cahiers d’Art* 1-4 (1935), 53.

³⁴ Wassily Kandinsky, “To retninger,” *Konkretion*, 15 September 1935, 8, reproduced as “Two Directions” (1935), in *Complete Writings on Art*, 778.

³⁵ Kandinsky, reply to “L’art aujourd’hui,” 53.

unconscious feeling.³⁶ In late February the same year, six of Kandinsky's paintings, including three recent examples from 1934, *Monde Bleu*, *Violet dominant*, and *Deux entourages*, appeared at an exhibition of (mainly) Paris-based artists at the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne, the very title of which assuredly spoke to this new consciousness: *These—Antithese—Synthese* (Fig. 4).

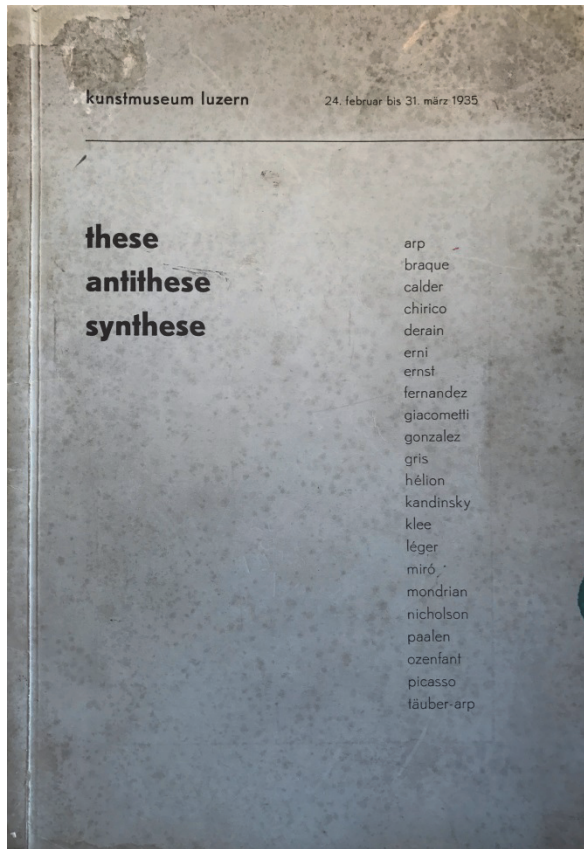


Figure 4. Cover, *These—Antithese—Synthese*, exhibition catalogue, Kunstmuseum, Lucerne, 1935.

As Paul Hilber, the museum's curator, plainly articulated in the catalogue, the dialectic viewpoint of the show was an attempt to draw clear distinctions between the different creative forces that drove modern art: "thesis (conscious plasticity: Purism, Constructivism, abstraction) and antithesis (dissolution in the unconscious:

³⁶ Tomás Llorens Serra, "Le mouvement moderne au moment de la synthèse," in *Années 30 en Europe. Le temps menaçant, 1929-1939* (Paris: Paris musées/Flammarion, 1997), 27. See also Gladys Fabre's essay in the same volume, "L'art abstrait-concret à la recherche d'une synthèse," 71-76; and John Elderfield's essay, "Geometric Abstract Painting and Paris in the Thirties" in *Artforum* 8, part I (May 1970), 54-58, and part II (June 1970), 70-75.

Dadaism, Surrealism), from which the elements of a new art are being *synthetically* derived."³⁷ Yet synthesis, in the terms that Hilber described, all too easily slipped into syncretism, begging the question: To what extent did the works that Kandinsky painted in Paris also reflect a more worldly, if idiosyncratic, response to the different "isms" competing for visibility in the city, especially Surrealism, Futurism, and Cubism?

Since the artist's first exhibition at the Galerie Zak in 1929, a number of French critics had linked Kandinsky's more nebulous abstractions to automatism and Surrealism,³⁸ an association the artist himself perpetuated by exhibiting with the group in 1933, where, according to Arp, his "painting hung very beautifully [and he] led the Surrealist procession."³⁹ Yet Kandinsky himself assumed an equivocal position in relation to the movement, both before and after his move to Paris. Writing in the Parisian daily *L'Intransigeant* in 1929, he had distinguished the Surrealist from the abstract painter by suggesting that whereas "one puts alongside nature a nature that is surreal, [t]he other considers nature and art as two worlds existing in a parallel fashion."⁴⁰ Conversely, he maintained that both abstraction and surrealism, each in their own way, were "carriers of the fantastic," and that seen from this aspect, "abstract painting and surrealist painting [were] natural sisters."⁴¹ While still in Dessau, he was clearly attracted to the amorphous possibilities that Surrealist painting offered, openly appreciating the work of Yves Tanguy and Max Ernst and including reproductions of Salvador Dalí's works from Surrealist publications in his teaching materials at the Bauhaus.⁴² The egg-like stones of Dalí's 1929 *Accommodation of Desire* certainly bear a resemblance to the nine ova that Kandinsky

³⁷ Paul Hilber, "Vorwort," *These—Antithese—Synthese* (Lucerne: Kunstmuseum, 1935), 3 (my emphasis). There were texts in the catalogue by Kandinsky, Sigfried Giedion, Jean Hélion, Anatole Jakovski, Fernand Léger, and James Johnson Sweeney. See also Hans Erni's account of "The Lucerne Exhibition" in *Axis* 2 (1935), 27-28.

³⁸ See for example Tériade's description of the artist as the "leader of...pictorial surrealism" in "Exposition Kandinsky (Galerie Zak)," *L'Intransigeant*, 22 January 1929, 5; and George Charensol's reference to "this precursor of surrealist art" in his compte-rendu for *L'Art Vivant*, 1st February 1929.

³⁹ Hans Arp to Kandinsky, 11 November 1933, 9200-39, Fonds Kandinsky.

⁴⁰ Wassily Kandinsky, "Enquête: 1830-1930," *L'Intransigeant*, 2 December 1929, 5.

⁴¹ Unpublished text titled "Sachlich-Romantisch (Für 'L'Intransigeant)," dated Dessau, June 1930, 9200 (P 2177), Fonds Kandinsky.

⁴² Christian Derouet, "Kandinsky in Paris," in *Kandinsky in Paris: 1934-1944*, 34-36.

carefully arranged, each fertilized with its own fantastic or geometric form, in *Chacun pour soi*, one of his first Parisian works. Once he took up residence in the city, Kandinsky tended to limit the merits of Surrealism to its literary achievements, preferring to believe that painters whose work he admired such as Arp and Miró had been involuntarily “harnessed” to the group’s “wagon” due to its lack of painterly talent.⁴³ Proximity undoubtedly brought with it greater misgivings about the Surrealists’ “hot enthusiasm for sex and politics,” but Kandinsky’s well-documented disdain for their “frivolity,” sexual preoccupations, and “fashionable” Communism too often overshadows his keen awareness and admiration of the group’s enterprise.⁴⁴ “It is astonishing how much publicity they generate and in how many countries. And with such aplomb.”⁴⁵ His own developing biomorphism cannot be divorced from the movement’s dominance of the Parisian art scene in the mid-1930s. From the moment he arrived, Kandinsky began to populate his parallel world with newly life-like beings that struck the contemporary eye as marvelous. Indeed, within the dialectic scheme of the exhibition in Lucerne in 1935, for at least one Swiss critic, the artist’s “purely surrealistic” Parisian canvases, which hung alongside works by Ernst and Wolfgang Paalen, formed the antithesis to Piet Mondrian’s plastically constructed *Compositions* opposite.⁴⁶

While Kandinsky certainly privileged the notion of subjectivity, according to which the painter transformed “external impressions (external life)...within his soul (inner life), reality and dream,” his artistic practice differed from Surrealism’s creative methods: he showed no

interest in Freudian psychoanalysis or mythology, and his free-flowing, ludic forms were the result of a meticulous care and painterly control at odds with the spontaneous and arbitrary nature of automatism. As he further clarified in response to the questionnaire on “Art Today” in *Cahiers d’Art* in 1935, if the “painter never worries about [his] aim, or, to put it better, he is not aware of it while he paints a canvas, [it is because] his attention is focused *exclusively on form*. The goal remains in the subconscious and guides his hand.”⁴⁷ What this text and others also demonstrate, however, is the way Kandinsky noticeably borrowed from Surrealism’s discourse of the unconscious to (re)frame his own painting during this period, even as he sought to distinguish his formal aims and approach. In the very next issue of Zervos’s review, which was entirely devoted to Surrealism, the painter contrasted the “cold period” of his Bauhaus work to his desire today for “polyphony”:

a liaison between ‘fairy tales’ and ‘reality.’ Not outer reality...but the ‘material’ reality of pictorial methods, tools that demand a complete change of *all* means of expression as well as technique itself. A painting is the synthetic unity of all its parts. To make a ‘dream’ come true, one does not need fairy tales...nor even phantasms...but the purely pictorial fairy tales of someone who knows how to “tell the story” of painting, uniquely and exclusively through its “reality.”⁴⁸

The same year, in the English review *Axis*, preceding a reproduction of *Chacun pour soi* (Fig. 2), he wrote of the peculiar, “though latent” force of the isolated line, latent forces that, in concert, “become dynamic” within the miracle of the composition, defined as “the *organized* sum of the *interior* functions (expressions) of every part of the work.”⁴⁹ Lastly, in an interview published in July in *Il Lavoro Fascista*, presenting the painter and his ideas on art to the Italian public, Kandinsky emphasized that “the essential for me is to be able to say what I want to say, *to recount my*

⁴³ Kandinsky to Josef Albers, 15 November 1936, reproduced in *Josef Albers and Wassily Kandinsky: Friends in Exile. A Decade of Correspondence, 1929-1940*, ed. by Nicholas Fox Weber and Jessica Boissel (Manchester and New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2010), 99.

⁴⁴ Kandinsky to Albers, 19 December 1935, in *Friends in Exile*, 77. Scholars frequently cite Kandinsky’s earlier letter to Albers, dated 6 September 1934, in which he lamented that the “only thing that is really terrible is so-called erotic art, which is very successful nowadays. The word ‘erotic’ can be translated as ‘obscene.’” *Friends in Exile*, 43.

⁴⁵ Kandinsky to Albers, 15 November 1936, *Friends in Exile*, 99. His growing criticisms were clearly tinged by his resentment of the ease with which the Surrealists secured international attention for their work, when, increasingly, he struggled. In July 1936 he warned his fellow Blue Four member Alexej von Jawlensky that “We’ve got fresh competition from abroad, the Surrealists. They’re chic, cheap, and have snob-appeal...In America, where ‘sex-appeal’ counts for a lot, they’ll probably score an even bigger hit. Long live Freud and his followers!” Cited in Jelena Hahl-Koch, *Kandinsky* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 322.

⁴⁶ Max A. Wyss, “These, Antithese, Synthese,” *Das Werk* 4 (1935), 18.

⁴⁷ Wassily Kandinsky, “L’art aujourd’hui est plus vivant que jamais,” 54 (my emphasis).

⁴⁸ Wassily Kandinsky, “Toile vide, etc.,” *Cahiers d’Art* 5-6 (1935), 117. In the same issue there were contributions by, among others, André Breton, Paul Eluard, David Gascoyne, Man Ray, Salvador Dalí, René Magritte and Benjamin Péret.

⁴⁹ Wassily Kandinsky, “Line and Fish,” *Axis* 2 (1935), 6.

dream. I look at technique and form itself as simple instruments to express myself, and besides, my stories are not of the narrative or historic type, but purely pictorial.”⁵⁰

Kandinsky’s very appearance in this particular newspaper also attests to the contacts he maintained from Paris with the Italian avant-garde, the result both of an historic connection to Filippo Marinetti’s Futurist movement and his growing friendship with two Italian artists based in the city, Alberto Magnelli and Enrico Prampolini. The personal tribute from Kandinsky that appeared at the time in *Stile Futurista*, the review Prampolini edited, bore witness to these links, old and new: “I perfectly remember the start of Italian Futurism and do you know, I still have all the *MANIFESTI* that I received more than twenty years ago?”⁵¹ In conversation with *Il Lavoro Fascista*, the artist drew certain, implicit parallels between his own work and Futurism’s second wave, signaling the way he had begun, since arriving in Paris, to mix sand with pigment as a textural element in compositions such as *Entre Deux*, *Rayé*, and *Relations* (1934), which was reproduced as an illustration alongside the interview. This particular technical innovation identified his developing practice not only with the work of Miró, erstwhile Surrealist André Masson, and pre-war Cubism, but also with resurgent contemporary interest in mural painting and, more to the point, Prampolini’s own *polimaterico*. The “pleasure and gratitude” with which the painter received this “unsolicited homage from the [Italian] press” both reflected and fueled his optimism that under Mussolini’s regime, in contrast to National Socialism and Communism, a plurality of styles continued to flourish.⁵² He looked hopefully to Italy, buoyed that a group of abstract artists, including Magnelli, were at that moment presenting their work at the quadriennale di Roma, and that G.A. Colonna di Cesarò had translated *On the Spiritual in Art* into Italian (albeit

without a publisher).⁵³ And while Kandinsky was not attracting much interest from French dealers or critics, apart from his two small exhibitions at the Galerie des Cahiers d’Art in 1934 and 1935, he had a contract with Giuseppe Ghiringhelli’s Galleria del Milione in Milan, which was “putting on one abstract show after another.”⁵⁴ This is certainly why Kandinsky, who otherwise tried to avoid political intrigue in Paris, abandoned his usual discretion in April 1935 to welcome and support Marinetti on the occasion of a Futurist exhibition at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune and a related debate at the École du Louvre centered around the question of: “Which will be the art of tomorrow? Futurism, Cubism, Surrealism, or a plastic mural art inspired by these tendencies?”⁵⁵ Alongside Marinetti’s highly favorable account of these events in a special bilingual issue of *Stile Futurista*, Prampolini in turn reproduced two photographs of Kandinsky, one showing he and his wife smiling among the Futurists at their exhibition (Fig. 5).

The chosen title of Marinetti’s lecture alluded to way that contemporary Futurist painters like Prampolini were also pursuing a “synthesis” under the name *aeropittura*, blending Cubist, Constructivist and Surrealist vocabularies and deploying biomorphic forms in plunging or panoptic perspectives to evoke the exhilaration of flight, freedom from gravity, and a sense of the immaterial beyond.⁵⁶ “With the power of volume and color alone, [Enrico Prampolini] paints the drama of geology, of interplanetary electricity and of cosmic waves,” wrote Marinetti, in terms that resonated with some of Kandinsky’s descriptions of his own work. “In moving away from verism and all memory of reality...he fixes on the canvas every fantasy of the universe and all that is

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Kandinsky to Albers, 25 January 1935, in *Friends in Exile*, 51. Kandinsky had exhibited 43 watercolours and 30 drawings at the gallery from 24 April to 9 May, 1934. See *Il Milione. Bollettino della galleria del Milione* 27 (1934).

⁵⁵ F. T. Marinetti, “Quale sarà l’arte di domani?,” *Stile Futurista* 8-9 (1935), 3-4.

⁵⁶ Marinetti frequently invoked the idea of synthesis in his texts of this period. See, for example, Marinetti and Fillia’s text, “L’Art sacré futuriste,” *Stile Futurista* 8-9 (1935), 5. Lisa Panzera points out that Futurism’s embrace of Surrealistic imagery, did not signal a shift away from political themes, but went hand in hand with Fascism’s sacralization of politics, and its appropriation of religious ritual for political ends. See “Celestial Futurism and the Parasurreal,” in *Italian Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, ed. by Vivien Greene (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2014), 327.

⁵⁰ “Il pittore Kandinsky e le sue idee intorno all’arte,” *Il Lavoro Fascista*, 28 July 1935, 4.

⁵¹ Kandinsky’s words featured as part of a tribute page that appeared as page four of the first four issues of *Stile Futurista* in 1934, and which also included contributions from, among others, Mussolini, Amelia Earhart, Ezra Pound and Piet Mondrian.

⁵² “Il pittore Kandinsky,” 4.

inexpressible.”⁵⁷ Kandinsky’s own dynamic, large-scale works from the mid-1930s, which combine dislocated forms, spatial ambiguities, color transparencies, and weight reversals, share certain formal and philosophical affinities with the paintings of his friend Prampolini, whose flying forms and nebulous spaces had been exhibited several times in Paris in the 1930s.⁵⁸



Figure 5. F. T. Marinetti’s article, “Quale sarà l’arte di domani?” in *Stile Futurista* 8-9 (1935), page 3, with portraits of Fernand Léger and Wassily Kandinsky by Florence Henri and a photograph of Wassily and Nina Kandinsky with Marinetti and others at the exhibition “Les futuristes italiens” at the Galerie Berheim-Jeune in Paris in April 1935.

Kandinsky had once likened the upper and lower parts of the canvas to “heaven” and “earth,” and in many works from this period, including *Entre Deux*, but also, for example, *Composition IX* (Fig. 6), executed in 1936, he shifted the traditional center of interest from the lower points of his composition to its upper half.⁵⁹ In this work,

geometric and irregular forms, dominated by a black, heart-shaped outline, appear to hover, weightless, against the directional thrust provided by oblique planes of yellow, blue, red, purple, orange and green, the painter using translucent pastel shades to emphasize the immateriality of his free-floating elements. Their apparent levitation *in front* of the fixed, diagonal bands of opaque color realize in paint what Kandinsky had set forth the year before in his text “Toile vide, etc.,” when he wrote that “‘the action’ in the painting must not take place on the surface of the physical canvas, but ‘somewhere’ in the ‘illusory’ space” that results when the work’s “mobile” forms “gather strength in concert,” and appear to release themselves forward “in a single ‘HERE I AM.’”⁶⁰ In continuing to exploit such tensions between individual forms and the picture plane, between figure and ground, and between the fixed and the free, to create what he equated with a “cosmic” or “limitless space,” Kandinsky approached the formal devices and celestial themes of Second Futurism, particularly what Marinetti referred to as Prampolini’s “stratospheric, cosmic, biochemical *aeropittura*.”⁶¹

If Kandinsky’s flirtation with Futurism’s reincarnation under Fascism was in part politically stimulated by his still-bitter recollections of Bolshevik revolution and his scorn for the “fashion among ‘modern’ people,” and particularly the Surrealists, to call themselves Communists, it was surely also a consequence of simple artistic rivalry.⁶² By supporting Marinetti’s movement, Kandinsky was indirectly protesting the (baffling) sanctity Cubism then enjoyed in Paris. In the Dutch periodical *Kroniek van hedendaagsche Kunst en Kultur*—a safe distance from which to voice his complaint—he specifically opined that “it is remarkable how Cubism, which is just as old (or

⁵⁷ F. T. Marinetti, “L’aéropinture futuriste ouvre une nouvelle ère de la peinture,” *Stile Futurista* 8-9 (1935), 7-8.

⁵⁸ Prampolini’s work was exhibited at “Prampolini et les aéropintres futuristes italiens,” 2-16 March 1932, Galerie de la Renaissance; “Les futuristes italiens,” 3-27 April 1935, Galerie Berheim-Jeune; and “L’art italien des XIX^e et XX^e siècles,” May-July 1935, Musée du Jeu Paume.

⁵⁹ His choice of words, while not meant literally, serve here as an interesting metaphor. See Kandinsky, “Point and Line to Plane,” 645.

⁶⁰ Kandinsky, “Toile vide, etc.,” 117. This piece extended a line of thinking he had already developed, first in *On the Spiritual in Art* as the “attempt to constitute the picture upon an ideal plane, which thus had to be in front of the material surface of the canvas”; and again in *Point and Line to Plane*, as the way in which a “dematerialized surface” led to the creation of an “indefinable space.” See Kandinsky, “On the Spiritual in Art,” 195; and “Point and Line to Plane,” 672.

⁶¹ Marinetti, “L’aéropinture futuriste,” 7. I am also struck by the number of Kandinsky’s titles from this period that seem to carry the suggestion of flight, such as *Montée gracieuse* (1934), *Monde bleu* (1934), *Volant* (1936), *Vers le bleu* (1939), *Bleu de ciel* (1940).

⁶² Kandinsky to Albers, 19 December 1935, in *Friends in Exile*, 79.



Figure 6. Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition IX*, 1936, oil on canvas, 113.5 x 195 cm, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne. Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Droits réservés.

young) as abstract painting, has nonetheless become 'historical' and hence sacrosanct."⁶³ He was confounded by Cubism's critical resurgence and canonization in France in the 1930s and infuriated by accounts that elaborated upon his work in terms of its so-called Cubist origins. Alfred Barr's "conjecture that [his] painting may have been influenced by Arp or Miró" vexed Kandinsky, but he was nevertheless "grateful to Barr, because he [did] not trace [the artist's] painting from Cubism," as was often the case in France.⁶⁴ In the grand narrative of *Histoire de l'art contemporain* that René Huyghe compiled in 1935, the author, curator of painting at the Louvre and editor of the review *L'Amour de l'Art*, acknowledged that Kandinsky's "non-figurative art ... remained profoundly different to Cubism" in its meaning or "signification." He emphasized, however, that "the Cubists' attempts to substitute pure geometric combinations for representation [had] rubbed off" on the artist and his work had accordingly developed "under the impetus" of Cubism.

⁶³ "Abstract Painting" (1936), in *Complete Writings on Art*, 785.

⁶⁴ Kandinsky to Galka Scheyer, 29 May 1936, cited in Endicott Barnett, "Kandinsky and Science," 83-84.

Perhaps, however, Kandinsky took note of (or solace in) Huyghe's analogy that paintings such as *Chacun sur soi*, which he mentioned, were "*fugues* about a line, an angle, a circle, that develop on the surface of the canvas" according to "an intuition of a musical order," and that the artist was not "concerned with creating compositions built and defined like an edifice of French Cubism." In many of the kaleidoscopic paintings he completed in Paris, Kandinsky seems to have deliberately stripped—"deprived"—his forms of the sort of structure or order that might be mistaken for what Huyghe termed a "powerful Cubist armature."⁶⁵ Closed configurations cede to open and dynamic formations, the surface of the canvas dematerializes into a nebulous space almost "Baroque" in its disregard for the limits of the picture plane.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ René Huyghe, "L'Allemagne et l'Europe Centrale. Introduction," in *Histoire de l'art contemporain*, ed. by René Huyghe with Germain Bazin (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1935), 420.

⁶⁶ Paul Overy argues that the way Kandinsky attempts to subvert the physical limits of the canvas in his Parisian works is akin to Mannerist or Baroque spatial principles. See *Kandinsky: the Language of the Eye* (London: Elek, 1969), 120.



Figure 7. Wassily Kandinsky, *Courbe dominante*, 1936, oil on canvas, 129.2 x 194.3 cm, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, 45.989. Photo © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

In the aptly named *Courbe dominante* of 1936 (Fig. 7), an illusionistic set of stairs ascend into the upper sections—the “heavens”— of the painting, where the central arabesque, inscribed with delicate hieroglyphs, unfurls in the mist, scything its way through the painting like an extravagant question mark. Overlapping, luminous orbs shine through the haze, overlaid with organic elements and black, calligraphic flourishes more reminiscent of the sinuous, decorative nineteenth-century forms of the artist’s youth. Grohmann later remarked upon the “Russian or Asiatic splendor” and “enamel colors” of these large horizontal canvases, likening their “epic breadth,” serpentine lines and densely interwoven forms to the intricacy of Chinese embroidery on silk and the “passionate curves” of Chinese painting on scrolls.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Grohmann, *Life and Work*, 227-228.

Kandinsky regarded *Courbe dominante* as one his most accomplished paintings, the apex of his Parisian production and its “synthetic period.”⁶⁸ It was exhibited as part of *Origines et développement de l’art international indépendant* at the Musée du Jeu de Paume in 1937 (Fig. 8), alongside a further four works that the artist carefully selected to represent the spectrum of his œuvre: the early abstractions of *Die Blauer Reiter in Mit dem schwarzen Bogen* (1912); the theoretical investigations of form at the Bauhaus, *Auf Weiss II* (1923); the last work he painted in Germany, *Entwicklung in Braun* (1933); and one of the first, newly biomorphic canvases he completed in Paris, *Entre Deux* (1934). Kandinsky himself played a formative role in the advent of this exhibition. Grieved that abstract and Surrealist artists had been otherwise excluded from the official proceedings of the *Exposition Internationale des*

⁶⁸ Kandinsky to André Dezarrois, 15 July 1937, 9200-1514a, Fonds Kandinsky.



Figure 8. Photograph of salle XIV at the exhibitions “Origines et développement de l’art international indépendant” at the Musée du Jeu de Paume, Paris 1937, showing works by Wassily Kandinsky, left to right: *Courbe dominante* (1936), *Entwicklung in Braun* (1933), *Mit dem schwarzen Bogen*, (1912), *Auf Weiss II* (1923), *Entre deux* (1934). Photo © Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI.

arts et techniques dans la vie moderne in Paris that year, and particularly from the enormous display of *Maîtres de l’art indépendant* at the Petit Palais, he personally lobbied the director of the Jeu de Paume, André Dezarrois, to stage an alternative, more comprehensive show, offering his expertise during the course of preparations. He argued for the inclusion of Dada, as “Surrealism’s point of departure,” recommended the work of his friend Prampolini, “as an Italian futurist would certainly be necessary,” and forcefully insisted on distinguishing abstract art from Cubism, because the two movements, while both stemming from Cézanne, had developed independently of one another. “Both movements came into the world at almost the same time: 1911. Cubism may have been something like a brother to abstract art but it

was, by no means its father.”⁶⁹ Kandinsky specifically selected his large 1912 work (Fig. 9), never before exhibited and “in which there [was] not a single Cubist influence to be seen,” to show the dubious and unreceptive Parisian audience that he was not a mere (Cubist) disciple, but the pioneer of a new type of painting, one that he increasingly preferred to call “concrete.”⁷⁰ The abstract artist, in Kandinsky’s terms, created “a new ‘world of art,’” one that “in its externals [had] nothing to do with ‘reality,’” but which existed alongside the “‘world of nature’... [and] was just as real, [and] concrete.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Kandinsky to André Dezarrois, 10 May 1937, 9200-1512, Fonds Kandinsky.

⁷⁰ Kandinsky to André Dezarrois, 31 July 1937, 9200-1514b, Fonds Kandinsky.

⁷¹ Wassily Kandinsky, “Abstract or Concrete?” (1938), in *Complete Writings on Art*, 832.



Figure 9. Wassily Kandinsky, *Mit dem schwarzen Bogen*, 1912, oil on canvas, 189 x 198 cm, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne. Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Philippe Migeat.

Prominently displayed in the center of the artist's allocated space, the eponymous black arc of *Mit dem schwarzen Bogen* accordingly functioned as a prophetic marker, pointing the way to the "self-contained universe" of Kandinsky's creation as it appeared on either side, to the black lightning bolt dissecting *Auf Weiss II*, to the black darts punctuating *Courbe dominante*.⁷²

⁷² The description of "a universe, complete and self-contained" comes from Alexandre Kojève's unpublished 1936 essay, "Les peintures concrètes (objectives) de Kandinsky," that was later translated by Nina Ivanoff in *Correspondances avec Zervos et Kojève*, 187.

Origines et développement de l'art international indépendant was the first and only instance during his lifetime that Kandinsky's works appeared in a national French institution, and came at the very moment when the National Socialists were pillorying his "abominable painting" on the walls of Munich's *Entartete Kunst* exhibition and systematically purging Germany's museums of his particular brand of "Kultur bolschevismus."⁷³

⁷³ Kandinsky chose to take heart from the enormous success of "Entartete Kunst," believing that at least some of those who saw it were "proper devotees" of modern

Whatever consolation the show at the Jeu de Paume offered, however, was marred by Christian Zervos, who served as secretary general of the organizing committee. Much to Kandinsky's chagrin, Zervos transformed the original, broadly international scope of the exhibition to an anthology of Parisian art from Cézanne to the present day, in which the best spaces went to artists already well represented at the larger *Maîtres de l'art indépendant* at the Petit Palais: Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, and Pablo Picasso. Worse still was the preface to the short accompanying catalogue, written by, although not credited to Zervos, for while Kandinsky was accorded a principle role in the section devoted to "abstract art," in every other instance developments in contemporary art were defined according to the all-pervasive influence and example of Cubism:

PURISM, of which Ozenfant is the creator, comes directly from Cubism...

NEOPLASTICISM The influence of Cubism on 'new plastic expression' is undeniable...

SURREALISM If Cubism has revived senses previously dull to any contact with the spirit of things, Surrealism has wanted to create poetry of the invisible...

CONSTRUCTIVISM is equally a child of Cubism...⁷⁴

As a result of the exhibition, Kandinsky and Zervos were no longer speaking when, in its wake, the editor penned his lavishly illustrated *Histoire de l'art contemporain* the following year. Devoting a thin chapter—30 pages out of 450—to what he titled "Au-delà du concret," Zervos acknowledged the painter as the principle representative of "*art dit abstrait*" and even lifted some of Kandinsky's own evocative descriptions from *Reminiscences* (1913), but only in such a way as to reduce the artist's paintings to curiosities by likening them to the poetry of "the cold butt of a cigarette lost in the ashtray...the little piece of bark carried in the powerful jaws of an ant across thick grass for an

art, who traveled expressly to pay tribute to (or even buy) the work on display. Kandinsky to Albers, 5 December 1937, in *Friends in Exile*, 112.

⁷⁴ *Origines et développement de l'art internationale indépendant* (Paris: Musée du Jeu de Paume, 1937), np.

extraordinarily important purpose which escapes us..."⁷⁵ And despite the care with which Kandinsky always labeled photographs to indicate their proper orientation, Zervos reproduced two paintings upside down, turning the floating, heart-shaped form beating in the upper margins of *Composition IX* into a earthbound pear, a further insult to critical injury in this fat volume in which, as the artist complained, "Picasso was and remains the origin, the continuation, and the future of modern art."⁷⁶

The same year, Kandinsky sought to reclaim the term Zervos had appropriated to defend the existence and value of "Concrete art" in a new Parisian review edited by the Italian Gualtieri di San Lazzaro, *XX^e siècle*. Cubism, the artist argued here, no longer existed, it was one "ism" among many, already filed away into the different boxes of art history, relegated to the past. "Concrete art," in comparison, continued to attract young artists and was "in full growth, especially in the free countries...The future!"⁷⁷ As his very reference to "free countries" indicates, Kandinsky was far from oblivious to worsening international tensions, but he tried to hold fast to his conviction that art too must remain "free" of politics and took refuge in his painting. "When I enter the studio and go to work, there are no 'bombs or poison gas' for me—they disappear completely," he wrote to his former student, Hannes Beckmann, in Prague. "There I am in my 'ivory tower,' and I personally know many other artists who are just the same. Woe to the artist who is subject to 'bombs!'"⁷⁸ In May 1938 he took part in a group exhibition at the Galleria del Milione in Milan alongside Hans Arp, César Domela, Alberto Magnelli and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, persisting in his hope that "in a few years Italy [might] be an important art market."⁷⁹ In July, he happily celebrated Otto Freundlich's sixtieth

⁷⁵ Christian Zervos, *Histoire de l'art contemporain* (Paris: Cahiers d'Art, 1938), 311. See Kandinsky's original description in "Reminiscences" (1913), in *Complete Writings on Art*, 361.

⁷⁶ Kandinsky to Albers, 28 April 1938, in *Friends in Exile*, 119.

⁷⁷ Wassily Kandinsky, "L'art concret," *XX^e siècle* 1 (1938), 14-16.

⁷⁸ Kandinsky to Hannes Beckmann, 26 January 1938, cited in Bronislava Rokytová, "Lieber Herr Beckmann..." From Wassily Kandinsky's letters to Hannes Beckmann in Prague (1934-1939), *Umění/Art* 1 (2014), 62.

⁷⁹ Kandinsky to Albers, 5 December 1937, *Friends in Exile*, 106.

birthday at a tribute, *Hommage à Freundlich*, organized by the gallerist they shared, Jeanne Bucher, but rigorously avoided any affiliation with German exile groups, those whom the English critic Herbert Read described as “determined to make political capital out of their unhappy fate.”⁸⁰ The same month, Kandinsky lent four paintings to Read’s show *Twentieth Century German Art* at the New Burlington Galleries in London, which was conceived as a riposte to *Entartete Kunst*, but where once again Kandinsky seemed more concerned with separating himself from Cubism. He wrote at length to Read to emphasize that

in Germany, Cubism amounted to almost nothing...Abstract art (or as I prefer to call it, “concrete”) was not a result of Cubism in Germany, as it was in Paris. I began making abstract painting in 1911, without having seen a Cubist painting. And it is readily apparent that my art especially never had, and does not today have, anything to do with Cubism.⁸¹

Read’s reply to the artist, however, also suggests that Kandinsky strongly advised organizers to exclude artists still living in Germany, due to the “risks involved” and “to refrain from any political propaganda in connection with the show,” so as not to “give offence to the German authorities.”⁸² Kandinsky’s stand, while not terribly courageous, was both principled and pragmatic: on the one hand, he certainly believed, as Read later concurred, “that if one strives for the freedom of art, one does not at the same time strive for the politicisation of art;” on the other, Berlin was not all that far from London or Paris, and the need “to preserve the distinctions” between “political realities” and “aesthetic realities” must have seemed acute, especially when in August the Kandinskys’ German passports expired and their situation in one of Europe’s few remaining free countries became all the more precarious.⁸³ For

these reasons, perhaps, even in Kandinsky’s self-contained artistic universe, there were sometimes signs of political incursion. In *Entassement réglé* (*Ensemble multicolore*), painted in 1938, a host of brightly colored biomorphic and musical forms swim in a dense liquid filled with bubble-like circles, bringing to mind not a large cosmic space, but an infinitely small one, an invisible microcosm made visible. But its “colorful ensemble” is only just held by the asymmetrical, blue-green outer border and at several points the tiny globules look set to breach this membrane, black plasm threatening to overrun the clean, neutral space of the buff-colored ground, as if to suggest an ivory tower that was no longer quite so impenetrable.

Despite his many statements to the contrary, Kandinsky had never be able (nor had he always wanted) to isolate himself completely, and the many movements he undertook during the course of his remarkable career, which coincided with distinct phases of the avant-garde’s development, attest rather to the artist’s tangled relationship to politics: from turn-of-the-century secessionism to the pre-war internationalism of *Die Blaue Reiter*; from short-lived political fermentation in Revolutionary Russia to the radical aesthetic and social agenda of the Bauhaus; before, lastly, the highly-competitive and polarized arena of Paris. The paintings he created here demonstrate the way that, during the period he labeled “synthetic,” the artist was revisiting his own ideas about the spiritual nature of art and the problems of abstraction in connection with the other “isms” that were historically visible in the French capital. The evocatively organic shapes that swarmed his canvases and linked his worked to the biomorphism of Arp and Miró also functioned, according to the artist’s own analogies, to signal the “natural growth” of his abstract art from simple organism to complex system. Surrealism had early exploited the implicit vitality of such

⁸⁰ Herbert Read to Kandinsky, 9 November 1938, 9200-851, Fonds Kandinsky. For a comparison of Kandinsky and Freundlich’s alternative claims of autonomy versus commitment, see Keith Holz, “Scenes from Exile in Western Europe,” 43-46.

⁸¹ Kandinsky to Herbert Read, 2 April 1938, 9200-1533, Fonds Kandinsky.

⁸² Herbert Read to Kandinsky, 27 April 1938, 9200-850, Fonds Kandinsky.

⁸³ Herbert Read to Kandinsky, 9 November 1938, 9200-851, Fonds Kandinsky. Nina Kandinsky recalls that their passports expired “at the very moment that the situation of Germans abroad became extremely difficult and dangerous.” *Kandinsky und ich*, 187. The Kandinskys, through their own persistence and with the aid of others, were fortunately able to secure French citizenship for themselves in August

1939, a month before France declared war on Germany. See the painter’s letters to Pierre Bruguière, reproduced in Christian Derouet, “Notes et documents sur les dernières années du peintre Vassily Kandinsky,” *Les Cahiers du MNAM* 9 (1982), 92-94.



Figure 10. Wassily Kandinsky, *Bleu de ciel*, 1940, oil on canvas, 100 x 73 cm, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne. Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Philippe Migeat.

loose, curvilinear forms for their power of suggestion, and while Kandinsky thoroughly disliked the group's politics, in Paris he began to employ similarly vivid forms both to make visible his own "internal view" and to give his viewer an "experience of the small and the great."⁸⁴ To heighten the emotive effect of these forms, Kandinsky played upon tensions between surface and illusionistic space, a frequent subject in his pedagogical texts, drawing on formal techniques—including color transparencies, weight reversals, and the incorporation of sand—that were similar to those the Futurists were using, a group with which he readily interacted. Conversely, unwanted associations with Cubism plagued Kandinsky in Paris, and the way he deliberately relaxed the geometric syntaxes and structural principles of his "cold" Bauhaus painting in favor of dynamic forms

⁸⁴ Kandinsky, "Two Directions" (1935), 778.

and compositional arrangements also served to distance his work from this particular *bête noire*.

Far from having "nothing to do with politics," the complex "synthesis" Kandinsky effected in his paintings in Paris was the result of both the maturation of his ideas on abstract art and his adaptation to a rocky political and cultural landscape. His very use of the term "synthesis" ties him to a new and specific "post-avant-gardist conscience" that emerged against this backdrop of social and political instability in the 1930s, when artists shed their work of signs of excess order and embraced a new freedom of application in a simultaneous gesture of their subjectivity and autonomy.⁸⁵ The politically-determined significance of Kandinsky's free-flowing forms, liberated palette, and resolutely apolitical stance became even more apparent once hostilities finally erupted. In his *Bleu de ciel* of 1940 (Fig. 10) a multitude of multi-colored fantastic shapes hover on the surface of the canvas, amoebas and curious invertebrates in the very process of formation. No longer contained by any cellular boundary, they float freely upon a sky-blue ground that dissipates at its edges, disrupting the perimeter of the frame and lending the whole a celebratory and oneiric quality. Much like Miró, who, during the first wartime blackouts, had begun to immerse himself in a universe of *Constellations* on the Normandy coast, Kandinsky continued to paint here according to his own cosmic sentiment and demiurgism. There is no hint of the apocalyptic signs and symbols that had suffused the *Compositions* he had painted on the eve the First World War; instead, as Germany invaded France, bringing with it another cataclysm, Kandinsky called into existence his concrete *beings*, filling the canvas with nascent forms that celebrated the very generation of life, even as Paris faced occupation by the country that labeled his work "degenerate."

⁸⁵ Llorens Serra, "Le mouvement moderne au moment de la synthèse," 27.