

The Dynamics and Dialectics in Kandinsky's Non-representational Art

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Abstract: Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) has been regarded as one of the pioneers and founders of abstract art. Kandinsky held inspiring and progressive thoughts and largely influenced the artistic movements over the 20th Century. Still, his aesthetics were not delivered clearly, such that it caused criticisms of his intentions and debates over different interpretations. While Kandinsky seems to present a series of dualistic distinctions of concepts, this paper argues that he is ultimately pursuing a dialectical unity and artistic creation of another world through a dynamic relationship and movement between the artist, the artwork, and the spectator. The paper analyzes primarily Kandinsky's published collected writings and letters and relates them to theories of German Idealism to demonstrate how the dilemma of dichotomies could be solved from Kandinsky's standpoint.

Keywords: Wassily Kandinsky; Abstract Art; Aesthetic Experience; Modern Aesthetics

1. Introduction

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was a pioneer of abstract art in the 20th Century and one of its earliest painters and the first who laid the theoretical foundation of such practices. Kandinsky's art theory is known for his rejection of physical objects in art and the materialism he considered standard in the Early 20th Century, and his essentialist view of art acting as a medium, self-reflectively manifests a spirit. The historical changes in the style of art are considered a movement that is leading to a new age of the *Spirit*. He proposed that art creation should be based on the *Inner Necessity* of an artist. Such statements were presented in his earlier career in Munich when in 1910, he first published his theoretical writing *On the Spiritual in Art*. His aesthetics and practices faced criticism from his contemporaries and even today. In Ziółkowska-Juś's essay in 2017, the author is skeptical about Kandinsky's abstract art's effectiveness in universal communication: It requires the understanding of Kandinsky's theoretical considerations and the socio-cultural context to achieve his ideal color-form perception [1]. Following the typical categorization of Kandinsky as an abstract-expressionist artist, Peter Selz's study of Kandinsky's aesthetic theory also interprets Kandinsky's theories as expressionist, emphasizing the artist's subjective emotions [2]. The understanding of the *Spirit*, restricted to the artist's subjective, conscious feeling, seems to conflict with the artist's other desire to express the *inner reality* or the *spiritual world*. This paper argues, however, that communication through art without meaning, to a degree, is immediate and possible. His paintings were "to be felt" [3,4] instead of to be understood through our reason. In addition, the *Inner Necessity* or the *Spiritual*

in Kandinsky's language does not belong to the conscious mind and instead has a dialectical degree of objectivity.

This paper's primary purpose is to develop and present a more thorough understanding of the philosophical structure implied by Kandinsky's art. In addition, it hopes to draw further attention to the importance of Kandinsky's work and defend his position as an artist. It also goes against some of the criticisms presented above, which neglected his life-long oeuvre in art and interpretations that only focus on his published works of the Munich Period (1896-1921). The paper begins with a summary of previous studies and a justification for its approach. Following the two sections, the paper studies the fundamental framework of Kandinsky's works, drawing connections to the German Idealist theories.

2. Research Question

Former Kandinsky scholars such as Selz, Lindsay, and Ashmore have commented that Kandinsky's writing style is not easy to interpret, with a lack of language precision [2,4]. In particular, Kandinsky distinguishes a given topic into sets of dichotomies with an abrupt sequence of thoughts. Some typical examples are the "spiritual and material; inner and outer; and intuitive and intellectual" [4]. While Kandinsky explores his brilliant ideas lifelong, the apparent conflicts in his writings and the changes in his painting style have led to many disputes over the motivation behind his artistic practices and criticisms. However, as we can see from Kandinsky's repeated assertion of *dissonances* of elements in a painting resembling an ultimate *harmony* as a whole in his letters to Schoenberg, imply that he searches for a dialectical unity beyond the seemingly opposite relationships [5]. As early as 1992, Roskill marks that in the Bauhaus years of Kandinsky's life, when he published his *Point and Line to Plane*, there is "a form of dialectical interchange between representation and abstraction.[6]" Kandinsky's theories also stimulate "epistemological questions" on the relation of visual components on the tableaux's communicative or emotional impact on the spectator, as well as "consciousness and experience of the world at large" [6]. The mention of a dialectical method has been further linked back to Hegel in recent studies [7]. Thus, this paper's crucial focus is to seek a resolution and revision to the inconsistencies and philosophical dualisms on the surface of Kandinsky's core thoughts and generally present a more unified aesthetic theory, clearing the mist of misunderstandings of his artistic career.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Relation to Theosophy and Modern Physics

Some studies on Kandinsky show that the development of his ideas was influenced by the German Theosophy, particularly those of Rudolf Steiner and Mme. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Key figures in the theosophy movement proposed that the knowledge of God is obtained through either "direct mystical insight or by philosophical speculation," "or both" [4]. According to McDonnell, Kandinsky showed his interest in theosophy and occultism by attending lectures and reading the publications of Rudolf Steiner, who was "the primary spokesman of theosophy" at the time in Germany [8] and stated the idea of "spiritual vision" [9] and that science is insufficient in providing further knowledge to the ultimate "spiritual reality" as nature does not present the whole aspect of the "spiritual reality"[4]. It was clear to Ashmore that the idea from Steiner that the spiritual reality is manifested directly through art has affected Kandinsky's essentialist view of art. Grohmann, similarly attests that Kandinsky had met Steiner in Berlin and noted Steiner's friend, Edouard Shure, in his sketchbook [9]. Christopher Butler suggests that Kandinsky turned internally to the "theosophical traditions" in response to "the loss of faith" [10]. He considers this attitude intellectually and politically conservative, contrasting with progressivism and avant-garde, "anti-pathetic to a secularizing twentieth-century culture" [10].

However, Mark W. Roskill points out the positive influence of Nietzsche in both Klee and Kandinsky. Kandinsky referred to Nietzsche as "the genius" and his 'mighty hand' in shaking the values of religion, science, and morality" [6]. While he had been skeptical of the possibility of accessing artistic truth, Nietzsche himself in his *The Will to Power* praises art as to "making life possible" [6]. There is a dialectical link between "the forces of destruction and creation" [6]. Grohmann and Ashmore address that Kandinsky's interests in theosophy cannot equate him to a theosophist [9]. Likewise, In *Kandinsky, Shonberg and their Parallel Experiments*, Hahl-Koch claims that Kandinsky was never a member of the Theosophical Society and that his interest in such theories "faded after a short fascination" [11]. Grohmann further claims that the disillusionment of science and the turn against positivism was more critical for Kandinsky, "confirmed to him by science itself" [9].

The influence of modern physics on Kandinsky was Antoine Henri Becquerel's discovery of radioactivity [12]. In 1896, realizing that an atom decay made Kandinsky believe "the sturdiest walls collapsed," thus stimulating him to pursue artistic matters [12]. As further examined in *Modern Physics, Kandinsky and Klee*. McTague argues that Kandinsky and his contemporary, Paul Klee, as well as many progressive modern artists, were affected by the advancement of Early 20th century physics, especially Albert Einstein's theory of relativity in the sense that it proposes "a rejection of absolute time and space" and classical mechanics in science, parallel to the rejection of "objectivity and realism" in artistic movements [13]. The author also suggests that Einstein, Kandinsky, and Klee all intended to find a "transcendental unity" and "spirituality" and hoped they could actively uncover the realm while taking a different route from existing religions [13]. Another exciting remark by McTague about the impact of the new physics theories and the emergence of radical modern art was the Weimar Republic's social instabilities [13].

3.2 Relation to Kandinsky's Contemporaries

There are many valuable studies on the relationship between Kandinsky and his contemporary artists and the extent of mutual influence. After Kandinsky resigned as the president of the organization *New Society of Munich Artists*, Kandinsky and Franz Marc, published the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* in 1911. Later, joined by other progressive artists, they held open exhibitions, sharing in common the idea of artistic healing and spirituality [12]. The artist circle encouraged Kandinsky to develop his theories and clarified his vision, setting the foundation of his works [4].

In "*Dictated by Life*" *Spirituality in the Art of Marsden Hartley and Wassily Kandinsky, 1910-1915*, McDonnell offers a comparative study between Hartley and Kandinsky's aesthetic beliefs, which presents Kandinsky's departure from the expressionism of the external world. Hartley's creative motive is relied on his "direct perceptual experiences" and was deeply connected to his "personal experiences" [8]. While both Kandinsky and Hartley showed their interests in "spirituality" and "mysticism" [8], Hartley, after his second meeting with Kandinsky, criticized him that "true art cannot explain itself," and that Kandinsky's art was overly philosophical and theoretical [8]. Hartley had developed into, along with other early American modernists, artistic approaches which embrace the "phenomena of natural world" intuitively in "the tradition of transcendentalism and Jamesian empiricism" [8], while it seems that Kandinsky while expressing his "intuitive experiences" was evidently different to Hartley's subjectivist approach. McDonnell sees Kandinsky's position as rather "theosophical." [8]

The musician Arnold Schoenberg, one of the members of *Der Blaue Reiter*, was friends with Kandinsky in the first decades of the 1900s and contributed to the development of Kandinsky's theory, or interdependently for the two artists. [14]. This was first noticed by Kandinsky's friend, the artist Franz Marc in his letter to August Macke. The two artists both believed that art's purpose is to communicate "the truths which exist in some sort of ideal, ungraspable world." [14]. In their theories of practice, Kandinsky considered that the power of color to stir spectators' emotions was similar to

Schoenberg's aesthetics on the music form and tonality [14]. Kandinsky was impressed by Schoenberg's idea of "dissonance" in musical tonality as "remote consonance" in a teleological future, where there lies a dialectical unison and emancipation of the difference between consonance and dissonance [11], but also both recognizing and emphasizing on the limitation of periods, are reluctant to provide an ultimate theory [11]. Both of them thought the historical changes in the content of art was "a composition urge for the seeking forever new possibilities of expressions," that the seventh cord, which had expressiveness back in the time of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, had lost the expressivity as it became common by the 19th Century [11]. In 1911, Schoenberg published his *Harmonielehre*. Melo argues that while there are various similarities in the two artists' theories, it is not valid to say that Kandinsky had "directly influenced" Schoenberg's publication of the *Harmonielehre*, for scholars believed it was already finished between the years 1906 and 1909 before Kandinsky had first encountered Schoenberg on a concert in 1911 [11]. This friendship did not last as Schoenberg was insulted by Kandinsky's antisemitism, rejecting Kandinsky's request to rebuild friendship.

3.3 Relation to Psychology and German Idealism

Several studies reveal Kandinsky's aesthetics through psychology theories. According to Ashmore, Kandinsky's view of psychology combines Theodore Lipps' *Einfühlung*, Wilhelm Worringer, and the Gestalt theory. Lipps' concept of empathy was an experiential, pleasurable process of the consciousness of the spectator of a piece of artwork, where there exists both a "feeling" internally inside that of the spectator and a "sensuous content" act as a "physical stimulus" which ultimately fuses into the aesthetic object itself [4]. In that case, the state is such that the spectator is involved inside the aesthetic object, where there is no subject-object distinction, and that the body of the self is "forgotten totally" into a state of "freedom from ego" and "living in" the artwork [4]. This is linked to Kandinsky's artistic practices on the picture plane and the material surface of the tableaux, and in parallel to his theories of "the forgetfulness of self" and "the 'living' nature of the contemplated object" in his *Reminiscence*, although not acknowledged by Kandinsky [15]. Such a theory of empathy, focusing on the dynamism in the spectator's "response to the medium itself", was the foundation of new abstract art, as interpreted by Reynolds [15]. According to Ashmore, similar to Kandinsky's idea of *Inner Necessity*, Worringer regards an "inner demand" in itself and pushes the creation of art as a "psychological need" [4]. Ashmore also claims that Worringer and Kandinsky do not consider the use of geometrical forms in abstract art as "regularity." Ashmore also believes that when he developed his ideas for perception, Kandinsky found affirmation and intellectual resources from Gestalt psychology, which understood 'representation' as schemas, or mental images [4,16]. Humber de Superville, a Gestalt psychologist, typically considered certain forms in artistic expressions having "absolute means of expression" and that the content of painting resembles intellectual thoughts, which Ashmore found similar to Kandinsky's general goal in Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane*, however differing in that they neglect emotional component of forms in themselves [4].

The basic idea of Gestalt psychology and the psychological theories of Lipps may be traced back to Kant's theory in his work *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Judgement* [16] and especially his notion of the imagination [15]. Kenneth Berry interprets the schemata, or "mental images" of the Gestalt theories, were ideas and thoughts referred to in the 17th-century philosophy context and may be thought of as Kant's "a priori representations of the imaginations" [16]. According to Berry, Kandinsky and Kant resemble similar views separating "the inner and outer, objective and subjective, noumena and phenomena," where Kandinsky accepts the Kantian notion of fine-tuned "logical categorization" in human experiences [16]. In *Symbolist Aesthetics and Early Abstract Art: Site of Imaginary Space*, Dee Reynolds provides his own theory and analysis of Kandinsky's theory and

practices starting from Kant's account of imagination, the sublime. Reynolds proposes that the Imagination, as used by Kant, was first theorized to have "its powers of representation" and presents the Kantian mathematical sublime through a negative function: recognizing its inability to fulfill the reason's desire of synthesis to an "absolute totality" of sensible objects [15]. Thus, it functions as a bridge from the "sensible" to the "supersensible", where the subjects receive the feeling of pleasurable sublimity without using the power of understanding [15]. He argues that his paintings "evoke indefinable imaginary 'objects'" from the spectator's response, generating an "imaginary space" [15]. Likewise, he also proposes that Kandinsky's theoretical writings have explained his desire to create effects in "the spectator's perception." However, Reynold also produces his theory of the imaginary in his book [15].

Düchting considers *On the Spiritual in Art* as a piece written from the intellectual influence of the German Idealists, not exclusive to Kant but the ideas presented by Fichte and Schilling [12]. Another connection to German Idealism is to Hegel. In the published book *Concerning the Spiritual and Concrete in Kandinsky's Art*, Lisa Florman draws a close link between Kandinsky's aesthetics and Hegel's. She argues that Kandinsky's published books *On the Spiritual in Art* and *Point and Line to Plane* were intended to respond to Hegel's philosophical claims. She also regards Kandinsky's theories and practices to resemble Hegel's dialectical methodology and philosophical structure [7]. Similarly, Jane Griffo agrees that Kandinsky and Mondrian seemed for the "truth" of a "universal spirit" in art by expressing the "unconscious inner world of the spirit in the outer world of the material" like Hegel [17]. Quoting Adorno's Hegelian conclusion, Slavoj- Žižek analyses that abstract art, even when creating undesirable and disharmonic experiences, is an expression of the truth in different periods of history [18].

Florman recognizes Kandinsky's famous opening claim in his *On the Spiritual in Art* that "every art is a child of its age" and is "constantly innovating" [19] through an "internally driven" process of organic development, like the idea of Hegel. However, Hegel, centuries before Kandinsky asserted that art's history had ended. Like Hegel in his *Philosophy of Nature*, Kandinsky acknowledges the internal forces of forms and the tensions between them when they are put as a whole, possessing a unity that is integrated with differences. Florman argues that Kandinsky was influenced by Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*, concerning the externality and otherness in the Spirit's development, which begins with a theory explaining the logical development of a point to a plane, and in the end, to the whole natural, the organic system described by empirical scientific theories [7]. In addition, Florman notices the adoption of dialectics in Kandinsky's art practices especially emphasizing that the flatness of the tableaux, the picture plane without the perspective illusion, upon the flatness of the canvas material, it liberates paintings through a new form of the non-representational illusion of the pictorial space, "transforming canvas and pigment into a realized tableau" [7].

3.4 Relation to Phenomenology

The contemporary French philosopher Michel Henry first linked Kandinsky's aesthetics to his radical theories of phenomenology, the phenomenology of 'life'. He equates "Interior=Interiority=invisible=life=pathos=abstract content= abstract form" [20]. Henry first distinguishes the canonical understanding of abstract as "separated from the reality to which it belongs" from his understanding of abstract in the Kandinskian sense [20]. He affirms that his approach is to create or express the real essence with what he named "radical subjectivity" and not isolate or abstract parts of reality without inspiration from the external world. By liberating forms and colors from external objects and using them based on internal affections, as Henry [20] interprets, the spectator perceives an internal space and focuses on how things were felt. For such reason, Henry praises Kandinsky for expressing visibility's nature, which is the fundamental non-objective knowledge and the harmony between the mind and the world [20,21]. Henry has philosophically

rejected the truthfulness of external objects but believed that there is an invisible and most truthful life which lives within our experiences, without being realized, which we may rediscover through Kandinsky's abstract art practices. This comes from his phenomenological approach to a human subject. He differentiates the "sensual body" as a being of visual object among other objects possessing sensual qualities and direction towards the external world and corporeality [20]. The universal, communicable corporeality, with an affective nature directed towards subjective experience itself, which allows the "sensual body" to be possible to us, is translated visually through Kandinsky's aesthetics and practices [1].

Nevertheless, Henry's position has been questioned by Ziółkowska-Juś's essay in 2017 and 2020 by Junichi Murata. While admitting that both Kandinsky and Henry shared the idea of art as a way to obtain transcendental reality, Ziółkowska-Juś writes that Kandinsky has an "intentional nature" and "is not as independent of the outside world as Henry claims", for that it requires conscious attention for the aesthetic experience of abstract art to be possible [1]. Furthermore, Ziółkowska-Juś suggests that Kandinsky "acts consciously, selectively, purposefully, and intentionally" in producing his work [1]. In his writing, the author also criticizes Kandinsky and Henry that the universality of expressions may not be possible for that to experience art requires the share of a cultural context, despite that the impression we have of them is "intimate, inexpressible, and personal." In his *Seeing the Invisible: Kandinsky and the Multi-dimensionality Colors*, Murata perceives Henry's interpretation of Kandinsky as "too metaphysical and anti-phenomenological." [22] He challenges that Henry's "distinction between the inner and the outer" is a metaphysical claim of dualism and only focuses on the "invisible." [22]

In contrast, Kandinsky believed that internality and externality are inseparable when perceived as impressions. Although Murata does not think Kandinsky has noticed or spent conscious effort on "the special mode of colors," Murata considers this, the element on the canvas and the context in which the canvas is located as a crucial aspect of abstract paintings [22]. He, again, notices a dynamic experience of the color change, depending on the focal point of the spectator and their distance to the artwork in the display, whether the vision is filled with color on the tableaux or views them as *figures* on a material plane [22]. Murata refers to Merleau-Ponty's art theory in *Eye and Mind* to take this forward. He quotes Merleau-Ponty that artists must use their bodies, paints, and the canvas in the real world to "transpose a world into paintings", corresponding to the fact that "a perceiver also must lend his body to the world to see the world" [22]. He concludes that artists in their work highlight the structure or condition of visibility that "a world becomes visible only through some medium", that is, "various modes of appearances" as well as "emotions", distancing the perceiver from the actual object being perceived, without the philosophical tool of reason [22].

4. Method

The paper's primary analysis is based on the collected writings of Kandinsky and his letters to Arnold Schoenberg. Unfortunately, the author of this paper is not competent to read and understand Kandinsky's original writings in German, such that there can be details in the choice of words lost in the English translation that remain unnoticed. The paper also links the idea presented by Kandinsky to Immanuel Kant's theory of Imagination and Hegel's philosophical system as support and evaluation of Kandinsky's philosophical implications. However, it should be noted that the paper's qualitative analysis derives from subjectively selected evidence from these authors' writings, so misinterpretation is possible. That is, these authors might misunderstand the original meaning. This paper's argument intends to present Wassily Kandinsky's aesthetics. However, it is unavoidable to touch on epistemology and metaphysics areas of philosophy and philosophically reply to some counterarguments. It does not fully present an argument proving the ultimate truth or the soundness of Kandinsky's art theory. Instead, the target of this paper is to support and revise its philosophical

validity. Further examination of the soundness of Kandinsky's argument is a possible gap for future philosophical studies, given its unique philosophical standpoint, which the paper explores in later sections.

5. The Material and the Spiritual, the Internal and the External

Kandinsky believes that actual artistic creation begins with the artists' unconscious but does not claim that the whole process of creation should be unconscious. His own earliest, detailed and comprehensive description of this is in his letters in Munich in 1910 when he comments on the artworks he saw on his trip to the Moderne Galerie Thannhauser:

"...there appeared before my eyes with unexpected clarity the link between the objectless song of Manet and that definite internal necessity which, translated by the artist's talent from the realms of unconscious possibility to those of conscious creation, has been explored by no less outstanding talents...Slowly but inexorably, conscious creativity comes into its own, and with it the elements that will constitute the already advancing composition of the future: a kind of composition that is pure, untrammelled, exclusively pictorial, based upon evident laws of combination, of movement, of the consonance and dissonance of form, of line and color." [23]

There is a dynamic transfer of necessity from the unconscious to what would be presented in the painting. To be specific, from a spark of inner feeling which is self-spontaneous, necessary, and self-evident, the artists pay conscious attention to this feeling and, through time, consider the pictorial elements that one must use to express it precisely on the canvas. In other words, what in the artist's mind is associated with the emotions, the nature of the independent elements, and their arrangement to make the ultimate meaning? Kandinsky's idea of this transferring process is also confirmed in his *Content and Form*, that the artist must use their senses to translate this emotion into a "material form," or "a means of expression," that is, the pictorial element, something external. Again, the movement is out of necessity. The emotions are not sufficient to appear but manifest themselves using the most appropriate materiality through the medium of senses. The dialectics here is that the spiritual, self-spontaneous from the artist can only be known for its existence or to be sensed with consciousness, which also means that it is not self-sufficient. Furthermore, it must be resembled or be expressed as something different from itself, which Hegel may refer to as the otherness of materiality, from intangible to tangible. Similarly, what we have in the end, the complete artwork existing in the external, material world as a material, actually contains the soul, something different from itself.

In the footnote section of Kandinsky's published work *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky explicitly rejects a metaphysical dualism:

"Is everything matter? Is everything spirit? Is it not possible that the distinctions we draw between matter and spirit are merely degrees of matter or spirit?" [23]

In this sense, what makes Kandinsky believe that a piece of artwork is higher than nature, is that the materiality in the artwork is determined by the necessary, whereas the forms found in nature are produced out of chance, but not out of a metaphysical dualism [23]. And thus, if the elements in an artwork is ultimately determined by the artist's conscious and unconscious, it would consist of both "the inner" and "the outer", where the outer resembles the inner in the material form. Similarly, there lies the distinction between form and content, where the form is the exact "embodiment of its content" [23].

For the reasons given above, Kandinsky explicitly rejects the emphasis of absoluteness in aestheticism in his *On the Spiritual in Art*. The contingent form has been sensed, as beauty, preceding the content. In other words, while the most beautiful form should be what best corresponds to the internal impression of the artist, the artist thought that the forms have the aesthetic power in themselves, that which is the alienated impression of oneself. Such an understanding of art is wholly the reverse of what is true for artistic creation, according to Kandinsky. Instead of 'l'art pour l'art',

Kandinsky's absoluteness in art is more radical because he reapproaches it to deliver some spiritual truth [11]. Likewise, he also opposes naturalism and considers it the most decadent in *On the Spiritual in Art*, as what many try to portray in the external nature is merely relative and accidental.

However, Kandinsky also praises Darwin's theory of natural selection, first as it provides "'infinite' variety" [23] and that the forms, or things which are the most suitable, are what is necessary. It is the notion of necessity that Kandinsky regards as valuable. We may also see the implication or the presupposition of his argument that what is essential in itself and drives itself is the most truthful in the world. The origin of the unconscious is, too, while remaining internal, as it is not controlled by subjectivity and has a mystical and objective nature, which he referred to as the *Inner Necessity*. This implies that due to spontaneity, the ultimate origin and where the truth comes from "takes place outside the free will of the artist" [11], but it is also what Kandinsky understands as the "unlimited freedom" [23]

Kandinsky produces another analysis of such a dialectical relationship between the internal and the external in *Schoenberg's Pictures* 1912, which he refers to as a "process of transformation which expresses itself outwardly in the altered form" [23]. He clears the misunderstanding that in terms of art, the external is "created by the internal" [23]. Kandinsky noticed the problem in his epoch's artworks was that as the spiritual takes the material form of art, the spectator does not realize its presence, which he believes was "destructive" or a barrier to art's evolutionary progress in his analysis of art history. In this way, he rejects materialism, where the hierarchy has been turned, from his standpoint, upside down.

We may produce this equation:

(via senses=feelings=consciousness=vibrations)

Inner Necessity → Unconscious=Emotion=Internality=Content=Soul → Material
form= Pictorial Elements=Externality → Finalized Piece of Artwork in complete Materiality
(Containing the spiritual)

So, what emerges from self-reflexive unconsciousness, after being treated with intentions, determines what must be expressed on the canvas. Such pieces of work with conscious effort are called composition. Kandinsky further defines artworks that are created based on "the direct impression of 'external nature,' expressed in linear-painterly form" as Impressions and the "chiefly unconscious, for the most part suddenly arising expressions of events of an inner character, hence impressions of 'internal nature' as Improvisations [23].

6. The Abstract and the Concrete

After 1936, Kandinsky declared his art concrete [7]. However, while many studies focus on the Munich period, little has been done to interpret the idea of his Paris Period (1933-1944). To examine this, we need to focus on Kandinsky's idea of art producing an effect on the spectator.

Already in *Content and Forms*, Kandinsky states:

"Emotion—sensation—the work of art—sensation—emotion

Therefore, the vibration in the artists' soul must find a material form, a means of expression, capable of being picked up by the receiver." [23]

While the receiver does not determine the production of an artwork, it is crucial in Kandinsky's position that the content of the artwork is communicable via "vibration," irrationally, to the spectator. To restate, the message in the work is the emotion and the soul of the artist, which is not a logical thought that should be understood via understanding and reason. Similarly, Kandinsky's use of the word "sensation" is not exclusive to the sensory ability of one but as a process including what he calls the vibration of the soul, that which produces a more robust and authentic effect in the soul or the emotions of the spectator. Chronologically, there first exists a stimulus that the physical organ captures and produces a sensation that "disappears once the stimulus has ceased." Then, "at a higher

level of development," we obtain an impression of that stimulus which is the beginning of a series of psychological experiences. This triggers "a deep emotional response," where the "psychological power of color becomes apparent" and reaches the spectator's soul. This triggering effect may relate to other senses or memories through the "association" process. However, Kandinsky also mentions that "color contains within itself a little-studied but enormous power, which can influence the entire human body as a physical organism," which is activated using the artist [23].

The idea that pictorial elements can hold in themselves their values links us back to the question of forms. While Kandinsky tries to establish "the science of art" [24] already in his *On the Spiritual in Art* by providing a detailed analysis of color's correspondence to the feelings of the perceiver, and mainly in his last major work, *Point and Line to Plane*, he does not trust the tool of logic. He believes that intuition, experiences, and practices must be the origin of the theoretical work and that there could never be a complete grammar system that describes art as a whole. The immutable is the *Inner Necessity*, while the "outward form" is "changeable" [23]. There seems to be a balance that Kandinsky strives for between conscious, scientific, and logical arrangement and the unconscious, necessary nature. In addition, he claims that artworks are themselves temporal to their epochs, as what is specific to their time may alienate the spectators in their future. In this sense, criticizing Kandinsky's theories or correspondence merely on the level of specific colors and forms, as the counterarguments of recent empirical studies have found, is superficial, for he has never claimed that these external materials would be universal and eternal. Instead, he believes that what is mystic, self-spontaneous internal that "conceals the seeds of the future within itself" and is common in all artistic matters [23].

Another link to the question of form is the idea of concreteness and the real. In *On the Question of Forms*, Kandinsky identifies two poles: The Great Abstraction and the Great Realism. In a seemingly confusing way, he equates them:

"Realism = Abstraction

Abstraction = Realism

The most significant external dissimilarity becomes the most significant internal similarity." [23]

Again, did Kandinsky reject dualism and instead argue for a dialectical unity, even though he presents a dichotomy? We start our interpretation of this equation with a conclusion that we may draw from what has been presented previously in this paper:

When a pictorial element is presented in a piece of artwork and seen by the spectator, the impression either causes the production of an emotional effect in the spectator using association or by the pictorial element's inner sound itself, independent of being recognized and linked to other things by the spectator.

In the first case of what Kandinsky names 'The Great Realism,' the pictorial elements resemble natural external objects with the most diminutive artistic rendering that tries to add any extra ornamentation. For example, when an artist uses perspective, an illusory space on the canvas, the spectator may perceive it just as brute space in the real world. Kandinsky's explanation of this

"The outer shell of the object, conceived in this manner and fixed within the picture, and the simultaneous exclusion of accustomed, importunate beauty reveal the inner sound of the thing in the surest way. By reducing the 'artistic' element to a minimum, the object's soul sounds forth most strongly forth..." [23]

As Kandinsky has stated in his affirmation of the natural selection theory, tangible objects in the external world are in their forms to express their essence. An example of this would be a lemon's yellow color and oval shape, such that its exterior color and shape are necessary for a lemon to be itself. Therefore, the spectator perceives the necessity within the pictorial elements as one illusorily identifies them as objects in the real world. On the contrary, an alternation or change through partially imitating the object in the artwork would make such formal element lose their *Inner Necessity*.

In The Great Abstraction, like what Kandinsky had claimed in his *On the Spiritual in Art*, the internal emotions of the artist may be transformed into material elements in the pictures and stirs the spectator's emotions via spiritual vibrancy. There lies an internal "free play" of "associations" based on the experience of the arts and the experience of the spectator [25].

Another dimension of internality, too, is transferred in the Great Realism. As the pictorial elements are restricted to express natural objects, universal and not limited to subjective choice and the artists' personality, it would be easier for the spectator to obtain an impression of the pictorial elements. Thus, through association, provoking an emotional effect. That is not to say such effects are determined by externality, but to assert the inner power of objects in themselves.

Understanding how abstract art can achieve the two-leveled effect proposed above may require extra effort. Nevertheless, Kandinsky not only believes that objects in the external world have their internality but also claims that there is an internal dimension that lies even the pictorial element of color and form (the form with the meaning of linear elements) in the abstract. In his abstract artistic practices, Kandinsky also searched for animating the objects' inner life, creating another world on the pictorial plane, where what is in the picture may eternally possess their lives [15]. This is achieved by abstracting them from their "practical purposive" [23] or their usual functions.

To describe this process, it is essential to return to Immanuel Kant's theory of Imagination and the Sublime presented in his book *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. The general function of the Imagination in the Kantian context is to apprehend what is grasped by one's intuition of the sense before understanding and thus without the reference to a concept. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the author synthesizes sensory impressions into "a single representation," or mental category, so they can become concepts in human understanding. The imagination also "reproduces" and "orders" what would be sensed in the past and the present so that they may be grasped in a continuous and temporal sequence [26, 27].

Obtaining the sublime, "a state of mind elicited by the representation of the boundlessness or the infinite," specifically the mathematical sublime in *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, requires a dynamical action of the Imaginative power as well [28]. Here, Kant's purpose, when it desires to apprehend units into a numerical sequence, realizes its failure to count into infinity. Likewise, accommodating a single schema to one that is "more encompassing" is beyond its ability. This is because Imagination precedes the power of understanding and reason [28]. Alternatively, to be clear, it may only process what is given using intuitive senses. Surprisingly, however, Kant believes that such a moment is when one may encounter the pleasurable feeling of the sublime: Through a dialectical negation. In other words, by acknowledging its own cognitive failure, the power of imagination can obtain the idea of the maximum and the infinite without using the power of understanding and reason.

A similar description can be applied to understanding Kandinsky's aesthetics, where an identical cognitive sequence occurs in viewing a purely abstract artwork. The Imagination of the spectator is what necessarily allows graphical objects to be recognized as independent: The spectator's power of imagination, facing the painting with pictorial elements each isolated from their "customary state" and as a whole in a dissonant, contrasting relationship with the other elements, fails to grasp the painting in harmonic unison [23]. To bring this further, Kandinsky, in practice, disguises the use of traditional illusory perspective and makes the pictorial space relative to the spectator, even 'absorbing' them. So, the painting cannot be viewed as an independent thing on the material of the canvas, which the spectator can comprehend into a single mental image. The spectator thus recognizes their impotence of directly 'knowing the meaning behind the representation of the pictorial elements and feels the otherness, the independence, and the living inner power of graphical objects and elements themselves, in a wholly pictorial world. As he describes in *Point and Line to Plane*:

"...it frees itself from dependency, from the practical-useful. Here it begins its life as an independent being, and its subordination transforms into an inner-purposeful one. This is the world of painting."[23]

For the reasons above, taking a completely different route, the Great Abstraction led us to the Great Realism and had Kandinsky declare his abstract work as *concrete*. Such is only achieved through a dialectical method and a dynamic movement beginning with artwork being created based on the abstract principle of *Inner Necessity* that ends with being perceived by the spectator. One may argue that the biomorphic features of graphical objects in Kandinsky's Paris Period work, the adoption of more organic pictorial elements, only highlights the intrinsic animism in the pictorial elements, such that they are less theoretical. Indeed, Kandinsky, in his often-neglected Parisian works, did not make his departure from the idea that he formed in Munich.

7. Conclusion

In the previous discussions, solving the dilemmas of dualism, the paper has demonstrated how Kandinsky's life oeuvre in artistic theories and practices are systematically interconnected and how they may be understood in a dialectical and dynamic method. Kandinsky's art is based on his ultimate principle of inner spiritual necessity, which stimulates an artist's unconscious and seeks the best material form, selected via the artist's intentional logic and senses, to manifest itself through the work of art. The manifestation occurs only when a relatable spectator perceives it through means or association or the relation between and within pictorial elements evoking the imagination. In Kandinsky's words in the Great Realist Art and the Great Abstract Art, in this sense, the picture can fulfill the most critical spiritual purpose, as they both express and animate the inner sound and reflect another world of *Inner Necessity*.

Kandinsky did not aim to produce artworks that express the individual and subjective emotions of the artists, nor to construct a universal grammar of art in the way some superficial critics one-sidedly categorized him. He certainly has not logically proved his foundational notion of the inner necessity, which is mystical in terms of its origin, is credible to be the bedrock of all his arguments and works. Therefore, his philosophy is not complete as an autonomous system. However, as examined in this paper, his investigations and theories are not inconsistent and conflicting in his life-long development as an artist. This paper may conclude that Kandinsky has successfully presented his practice of radical philosophy, which argues that art is and should only be the means to express the ultimate spiritual truth and create a living pictorial world through artistic languages.

As the history of art progresses, contemporary art in the 21st Century has moved away from the abstract and the claim for authenticity, proving Kandinsky's prophetic assertion of the spiritual epoch to be wrong. Nevertheless, Kandinsky's descriptions and epistemological claim on the process of artistic creation and perception may inspire further philosophical examination or even experiments in empirical psychology. Whether we should consider today's artistic practices as justified or that they have lost their artistic essence of expressing the spiritual dimension would also need further examination.

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