

Visual Manifestation of Things Unseen: Relating Abstraction and Trauma

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Submitted to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Contemporary Art, Design and New Media Art Histories

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2023

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Abstract

Noticing an upsurge in abstract, expressionist painting two decades into a new millennium inspires an examination of the effect of certain sociocultural events on the subject matter and style of expression chosen by painters. There may be a correlation between political, cultural, or psychological unrest and the appearance of abstraction in painting. Periods of trauma seem to spur an interest in things unseen and an increased reference to accessing the spiritual realm as remedy for existential crisis. By contrasting the substance and circumstances that define Wassily Kandinsky's use of abstraction with similarly motivated examples of contemporary abstraction – a comparison of artists living and working a century apart – a connection between trauma, spirituality, and abstraction is made visible.

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Introduction

When religion, science and morality are shaken, ... and when the outer supports threaten to fall, man turns his gaze from externals in on to himself. Literature, music and art are the first and most sensitive spheres in which this spiritual revolution makes itself felt. They reflect the dark picture of the present time and ... they turn away from the soulless life of the present towards those substances and ideas which give free scope to the non-material strivings of the soul.

(Concerning the Spiritual in Art 14)

Art can be a tool ... A bottle is a response to our need, yet inability, to carry water. (de Botton 5)

There is a translation that occurs between inspiration and expression and yet another that takes place at the moment of reception; in response to something experiential, a visual artist uses specifically selected emotive effects to intentionally communicate with a viewer. The relationship thus created between artist and viewer is based on a non-verbal language. This connection is evidence of Wassily Kandinsky's 'Spiritual in Art'. When social supports fail, one looks to the alternative, internal forces, to establish a new equilibrium, a new understanding. When the structure of reality is shaken, the response is often to seek an awareness of or connection with something greater, the invisible something that exists both within and around, that also unites each human. This something greater is more than common ground. It's not organized religion; it's both powerful and intangible; it's difficult to define.

Kandinsky's observation one hundred years ago parallels that of many art critics, gallerists, and artists working today. The 'spiritual' is also increasingly present in contemporary painting, though it is known by many other names and acknowledged using other terms. In "Spirituality Has Long Been Erased from Art History. Here's Why It's Having a Resurgence Today" contemporary art critic Eleanor Heartney writes, "Where once it was, in the words of Rosalind Krauss, 'embarrassing to mention art and spirit in the same sentence,' today it could not be more *au courant*". Heartney paraphrases Kandinsky by asserting that "[t]imes of upheaval inspire a search for alternative understandings of reality." In Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911), his use of the term 'spiritual' describes the "internal truth which only art can divine", why an artist is impelled to create and why the viewer is, in turn, impelled to revere (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art* 9). The timing of his publication coincides with a sense of cultural upheaval. Now, over a century later, in the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, responding to factors such as feminism's disruption of art's historiographical canon, economic uncertainty, the evolving ecological and political crises, and the shared trauma of a global pandemic, current trends in painting reflect a renewed interest in understanding the forces that formulate our reality.

Some historians (of art¹ and of science¹) acknowledge a pattern of emergences of interest in 'spiritual' pursuits precipitated/preceded by a period of destruction of beliefs. Whether prompted by personal suffering or a shared period of political/cultural unrest, there is a

¹ In 2022 Eleanor Heartney publishes another article about the influences of spirituality on art. In "Across the U.S., Museums Are Exploring Spiritualism and the Occult as Powerful, Unsung Forces in Art History" she discusses current exhibitions that "take spiritualism and the occult seriously, examining not only works made by artists in touch with other realities, but also the way that such explorations are woven into the fabric of American art and culture". As Heartney concludes her article she writes, "[i]t is often said that belief in mysticism, occult energies, and immaterial realities grows stronger in times of trauma".

noticeable tendency for one to reflect inwards in an effort to redefine or rebuild a sense of identity and security. Such inward reflection is effectively a tapping into something (akin to a language) that is unseen, an attempt to locate core values that remain unaffected by outer forces. Perhaps this cache is what Jung identified as the collective unconscious. For Kandinsky this would be “the expression of the soul of nature and humanity, or ... the innerer Klang” (M. T. H. Sadler xiii).

Painting and writing a century ago, responding to massive sociocultural shifts following the Industrial Revolution and events leading up to the first world war, the work of Kandinsky provides a point of comparison to the present-day global climate. His 1911 publication *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* is an insight into the “crucial changes ... at the start of the twentieth century” (Stratton ix) as formative in the “discovery of a new subject matter based only on the artist’s ‘inner need’” (Stratton viii). He first explains his motivation to respond to a vapid culture around him by appealing to viewers through their senses, “considering art as a spiritual antidote to the values of materialism” (Popova). The book’s second section, “About Painting”, “contains observations about the psychology of colour that reflect Kandinsky's quest for a universal means of communication ... based ... on colour perception and sensation” (Stratton viii). Aligned with Theosophical thinking characteristic of the time, he starts to postulate what might constitute such “universal” communication.

The untitled watercolour (see figure 7) that is frequently cited as Kandinsky's first abstract image² demonstrates another crucial change near the start of the twentieth century: whether it is literally his first attempt at abstraction or not, this piece is a prime example of Kandinsky's first mode of abstraction.

Made up of watercolor touches overlaid with black lines drawn with pen and ink, it dissociates the roles of drawing and color from one another. The lines provide no outlines for the shapes, instead lending them a rhythmic sense of movement.

(Kandinsky's First Abstract Work?)

Such dissociation of the relationship between line and colour is characteristic of Kandinsky's earliest style of abstraction. Elements of this particular style are evident in the work of many contemporary abstract painters, as seen in *Upper Partials* (2022) by Janna Watson (figure 11), and this observation forms the basis of the comparative analysis that inspires this research.

Kandinsky's lexicon of visual language does shift over the several phases of his career. For the purposes of this paper, the discussion will focus on the initial development of Kandinsky's

² This watercolor, signed by Kandinsky and dated 1910 with the inscription "abstract watercolor" on the back, has long been considered the first abstract piece in the entire history of painting. However, today's experts believe that it actually dates from 1913 and that it was intended as a draft for an oil on canvas, *Composition VII*. One question remains unanswered, however: is this merely an early draft, later fully realized in the oil work, or is it a study that came just before the completion of the composition, and therefore backdated by Kandinsky himself? The style of this watercolor and the management of space suggest that this piece is closer to the paintings done by Kandinsky in 1913. (Kandinsky's First Abstract Work?)

According to "Kandinsky's First Abstract Work?" (a webpage constructed by Google Arts & Culture using content culled from the prominent Parisian art museum, Centre Pompidou, to inform the general public), the date attributed to the creation of this piece - apparently Kandinsky's first abstract piece - is debatable. The more contentious claim here is that this piece is "considered the first abstract piece in the entire history of painting" (Kandinsky's First Abstract Work?). When and by whom abstraction is invented is the subject of a much larger debate. (see Endnote iii)

early abstraction and the writing and ideas expressed at that time regarding his motivations and intentions. Selecting the early stages of Kandinsky's work with abstraction marks one pole in a comparative study between the early 1900s and roughly 100 years later, in the decades following the newest millennium. Examining two moments in (art) history when periods of major social unrest coincide with spiritually motivated pursuits in art, specifically painting, could highlight a correlation between trauma and abstract painting and the spiritual. Though the degrees of unrest and the specific causes of such crises are not the same, the focus on the spiritual to transcend trauma is a striking and potentially instructive similarity.

Chapter 1: Kandinsky + Abstraction = Der Perfect Sturm

Is not (the reader may interject) this tourbillon of nationality, mechanical invention, science and anthropology enough to explain the excitement in modern art?

The effect upon the authority of previously-established tradition is manifest. Does the new movement which has spread like a rash over Western Europe mean anything more than artistic indigestion producing nightmare?

I am disposed to think that there is more to it than this.

The most characteristic works of the painters and sculptors of the left wing have, from the moment of their appearance, aroused intense admiration or angry resentment. There is something in their technique that cuts deep. They raise questions which lie beyond the sphere of taste. It is not only in the realm of art that they challenge current convention. They forebode change. (M. E. Sadler 12)

The title of Sir Michael Ernest Sadler's publication *Modern Art and Revolution* suggests a relationship between artistic production and periods of sociocultural unrest. The quotation itself also implies that the disruptive work made by artists of the avant-garde is created in response to societal disruption; turmoil felt births tumultuous response. The first sentences of Kandinsky's seminal 1911 text, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, make an analogous statement: "Every work of art is the child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions. It follows that each period of culture produces an art of its own". Sadler, a British historian, art collector, and early supporter of Kandinsky, begins his text with: "The subject which I wish to discuss with the readers

of this pamphlet³ is whether the temper of mind and trend of feeling disclosed by the work of many modern artists portend economic and social revolution” (5). An art (as much as an artist, it seems) is a product of its environment and, of this, the work of Kandinsky is a perfect example.

The great-grandson of a Mongolian Princess, raised in an influential mix of affluence, Russian folklore, and cosmopolitan exoticism, the early life of Kandinsky (b. 1866, Moscow) endows him with confidence and determination to compliment his emotional sensitivity and synesthesia (the tendency for the activation of one sense to stimulate response in another – to see music or feel colour, for instance). Though the nature of his upbringing nurtures his talent in both visual art and music, he, also a gifted academic, decides to use his passion for bettering society in the most conventional of ways. Temporarily. At the age of 30, Kandinsky abandons an education in law to become a painter. Following an ethnographic research trip to a folklore and colour-rich community in northwest Russia, Kandinsky’s childhood interest in the effects of colour are reinvigorated. He shifts his educational pursuits from legal to artistic in order to best explore what he is most personally invested in: the effect of colour on psyche. By 1900, he is an artist at the forefront of Munich’s avant-garde. His trajectory toward abstract painting (and the consideration of his work as avant-garde) is somewhat gradual but is definitely contingent upon three formative events that Kandinsky repeatedly recounts in his autobiographical writing. Two events involve unexpected sensory reactions to major works of well-known artists at the time. First, he is emotionally moved by the expressive power of a Wagner opera (*Lohengrin*); the ability

³ Sadler’s “pamphlet” is one of many *Day to Day Pamphlets* published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf (between 1930 and 1939), which, as their title implies, address “contemporary social, political, and economic issues. Readers were presented brief views that were intended to inform, provoke thought, and challenge opinion” (Wagner). The intentions of the Woolfs to inform and excite their readers echo those of the writers and artists of modern art upon whom Sadler’s discussion surrounds.

for something completely nonmaterial to evoke emotional response, a success he attributes to music composers, motivates his interest in achieving similar affect through painting. Then, he is deeply impressed by the deconstructed representation technique seen an exhibition of French Impressionism (specifically, Monet's *Haystacks at Giverny*).

And suddenly for the first time I saw a picture. It was the catalogue that told me it was a haystack. I could not recognize it as such. And my failure to recognize it troubled me. ... I had a confused feeling that that the picture was lacking its object. ... But what was quite clear to me was the unsuspected power of the palette...

(Veizin 34-35)

The third event happens in his own studio when he encounters one of his paintings upside-down and doesn't know what he's looking at yet feels a response. He is amazed by the transmission of affect that isn't linked to a word, image, or symbol and becomes intensely focused on the expressive ability of colour.

Progressing from his early mode of painting – featuring conventional themes and overt references to the painterly techniques of the Impressionists (such as *Der Blauer Reiter*, 1903 – see figure 1) – toward his (apparent) first foray into abstraction (an *Untitled* watercolour, 1910 – see figure 7), Kandinsky progressively reduces the representational elements of his compositions to their basic components of colour and line, to what he believes is the stuff of a universal visual language. In fact, one of the “guiding principles” he writes in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (published in 1911, around the same time that his abstraction appears) is, “colour harmony must rest only on a corresponding vibration in the human soul” (26). Recalling his experience at the

opera and his felt responses to (what he first perceives as) non-objective imagery, Kandinsky intends to invoke synesthetic principles using visual art. Painting can be used to elicit response from and, thus, influence a viewer.

Kandinsky believes “art, that which is capable of educating further, springs equally from contemporary feeling ... but also has a deep and powerful prophetic strength” (Concerning the Spiritual in Art 4). And, for him, it follows that the artist becomes a prophet.

One way or another true art inevitably acts on the soul. The soul vibrates and "grows." That is the exclusive aim of the artist, whether he himself is fully aware of it or not.

Painting as such, i.e., as "pure painting," will affect the soul by its own original means of expression-paint (color), form, i.e., the distribution of planes and lines, their interrelations (movement). An object (a real one - a man, a tree, a cloud) is, as it were, merely an allusion to the real, an allusion or aroma in the composition. That is why the object (the real object) need not be reproduced with precision. On the contrary, its imprecision only intensifies the purely painterly composition. The timely (or truly contemporary) work of art ... reflects, inter alia, its epoch. And our epoch is a time of tragic collision between matter and spirit and of the downfall of the purely material worldview; for many, many people it is a time of terrible, inescapable vacuum, a time of enormous questions; but for a few people it is a time of presentiment or of precognition of the path of Truth. (Complete Writings 103)

With its ability to influence a viewer on a subconscious level, art becomes a tool for change. Kandinsky officially trades the legal system for the art world, however he seeks authenticity and truth (for the public as much as himself) just the same.

Kandinsky writes extensively about the singular seer/thinker/maker who is first ridiculed and later embraced for their quality and uniqueness of vision. Envisioning spiritual life as an upward-moving triangle with the highest point representing today and the lower segments (that follow in the movement upwards) as tomorrow, he positions an individual man at the peak of the triangle, solitary in his vision for the future.

At the apex of the top segment stands often one man, and only one. His joyful vision cloaks a vast sorrow. Even those who are nearest to him in sympathy do not understand him. Angrily they abuse him as charlatan or madman. (Concerning the Spiritual in Art 6)

He places Beethoven standing “alone and discredited on the peak” (6) and it is here that he also sees himself. His self-imposed mission is to develop a visual language that can be used to awaken the public to feelings suppressed by materialist society, encouraging an embracing and expression of emotion as foil to the widespread complacency fed by the numbing effects of imposed hardship. In his 1913 autobiography *Reminiscences* he plainly states his belief that “[t]he creation of the work of art is the creation of the world” (373). He says he “derive[s] spiritual experiences from the sensations of colours on the palette (and also in the tubes, which resemble those people who, strong in spirit but modest in appearance, in an emergency suddenly reveal and deploy their previously hidden powers” (Reminiscences 373). He fully believes in his ability

to offer people a way forward, a way upward, by activating / appealing to the soul through the language of abstraction.

Even within the members of the artistic avant-garde, Kandinsky takes a unique approach in responding to the dark climate of the times (perpetual revolution in Russia, impending WWI, and a population already devastated by poverty and famine). Emotionally speaking, the devastation of core values in favour of a vapid, materially motivated existence he witnesses affects him profoundly. He devotes the rest of his life to offering an antidote to the meaninglessness and fragmentation of culture by appealing to the unseen connections between individuals and begins to actively, publicly express his thoughts on the connection between “the spiritual” and art and the subsequent ability for spiritual art to directly impact the human soul. For Kandinsky, art heals all wounds. This stance – grounded in his personal experience with synesthesia, amplified by his Theosophical beliefs (that everything is connected by a deeper spiritual reality which, if accessed by transcending basic consciousness, can reveal the true nature of humanity and its place in the universe), and his repeated references to the artist as prophet – contributes to his ideas as being controversial, misunderstood, and difficult to neatly slot into the historical timeline of Modern art.

In a “reconsideration” of art history, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present*, Charlene Spretnak (a writer who specializes in the interrelatedness of culture, history, spirituality, and art) so succinctly frames the mood and motivations of the era in question with the title of her second chapter: “Mid-1880 To 1918: The Quest to Save Civilization from ‘Materialism’ Through a New Art Informed by Esoteric Spirituality” (53).

From the perspective of many of the young painters and poets in the mid-1880s and beyond, civilization - by which they meant European civilization - was being destroyed by the deadening grip of materialism. This was their umbrella term for the positivist contempt for all knowledge derived from any source other than empirical science, the loss of Europe's spiritual grounding through tightly constrained mechanistic thinking called "reason," the destructive effects of industrialization, and the increasingly powerful market forces rending family and community. Anything precious that could not be quantified was now drained of value... (53)

Evidence of the accuracy of Spretnak's analysis lies in the 1908 doctoral thesis of a young art historian witnessing the same climate of early 20th century Europe as Kandinsky. Released under a title comparable in weight to Sadler's pamphlet, Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* introduces two additional pairs of co-related terms to the discussion around art production and cultural temperament: abstraction and empathy as well as psychology and style. Worringer sought to connect the appearance of abstraction in painting with elements of Transcendentalism rising in popularity as a foil to representational imagery characteristic of European painting at the time. Abstract imagery (despite and, perhaps, because of its absence of recognizable subject) has communicative abilities (i.e. to share feelings between artist and viewer). The terminology used by Worringer is different than that of Kandinsky, but their underlying shared outlook is paraphrased by Spretnak: "[A] new type of art [is] emerging in the early twentieth century that could potentially evoke within viewers the refinement and elevation of their souls, such that a spiritual revolution and

the Great Spiritual Epoch would result, which would save Europe from materialism” (85). Kandinsky, like Worringer, believes the representational nature of the realist art embraced by materialism is void of true meaning and, by the time *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* is first published, his purpose is clear. He would use abstract painting to convey meaning via the senses of his viewer and, in doing so, prove the existence of invisible (immaterial) forces uniting humans through experience.

IF YOU CAN'T SEE IT, HOW DO YOU KNOW IT EXISTS?

Adding fuel to the fires of cultural instability of the time is the dehumanization associated with the Industrial Revolution and related economical changes, the discovery of x-rays (electromagnetic waves capable of passing through solid masses) and the atom (exposing the fundamental truth that the world that meets the eye isn't a true reflection of matter), and the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (a threat to established systems of faith and religion). In a direct reference to the bevy of scientific progress he witnesses, Kandinsky writes: “Finally, science itself, in its most positive branches – physics and chemistry – is reaching a threshold whereon is inscribed the Great Question: Is there such a thing as matter?” (Complete Writings 101) On one level, he is excited that new developments in science hint at an existence of the unseen component of reality to which Theology and the occult allude thus vindicating the ideas to which he subscribes and strengthening his stance that the spirit of humankind must evolve. Conversely, he remains deeply disturbed to have his understanding of what substantiates reality be questioned.

In my soul the decay of the atom was the same as the decay of the whole world. Suddenly the sturdiest walls collapsed. Everything became uncertain, unsteady, and soft. It would not have amazed me, if a stone had melted into air before me and become invisible. (Kandinsky qtd. in DÜchting 10)

This statement demonstrates Kandinsky's dramatic reaction to the swift changes in the understanding of the world as caused by modern science, but it also initiates his appropriation of scientific terminology in his quest to lead the people into a new reality.

If a stone could actually melt into air, it would be said to go through the process of sublimation.

The term sublimation derives from chemistry. It names the process by which a solid substance is directly transformed into a gas, without first becoming a liquid. In art, sublimation refers to the psychological process of transformation, in which base and unimpressive experiences are converted into something noble and fine... (de Botton 26)

As a contemporary philosopher, Alain de Botton, points out, Kandinsky borrows a useful schema (and powerful symbolism) from science. Kandinsky's continued use of phrases that suggest the dissolution of form rely on scientific principles, only he uses such phrases in a symbolic (and ironic) way to appeal to (and activate) public sympathies. Effectively, he uses this leitmotif to frame the (psychological) response to the sense of dematerialization of the known universe in the same manner as he discusses the importance of abstraction (the dematerialization of subject) in painting as instrumental to human salvation. To circumvent the pain of existential crisis, he

urges his viewers, readers, and fellow artists to embrace the notion of letting go. Symbolically speaking, Kandinsky suggests making room for cathartic transformation with a sense of openness rather than constriction or (rein)forcing of old beliefs. Such reasoning equates the formal qualities of abstract painting as expression freed from representational form so as to eliminate the barrier between artist and viewer and more fluidly transfer sentiment (visually). This process is perhaps best described by de Botton when he writes that “We can see a great deal of artistic achievement as ‘sublimated’ [emotion] on the part of the artist, and in turn, in its reception, on the part of the audience” (26).

SCIENCE -> DISSOLUTION OF MATTER = SUBLIMATION = DISAPPEARANCE OF SUBJECT <- ART

The formal ideas of abstraction are important to consider here. Removal of representation in favour of non-objectivity creates a composition reliant only on the dynamics of colour (and point) and line (and plane) to generate meaning which, in turn, creates a dichotomy of power between things seen and things unseen. Kandinsky’s solid stance is that hidden content is more valuable than what meets the eye and that the hand of the artist can reveal the path to spiritual knowledge with “awakening prophetic power” (Kandinsky qtd. in Becks-Malorny 58). There is, however, a disparity within this discussion that cannot be ignored. Trying to define the spiritual beyond vague parameters is futile. Like any subjective experience, perhaps each person forms their own, personal definition of or relationship with such a concept. Similarly, as seen in the multiple iterations of abstraction that a contemporary view of art history affords us, not all abstract painters share Kandinsky’s interest in communicating emotionally with a viewer nor do they share his core beliefs in the potent (and prescribed) communicatory powers of sheer colour and

form or the artist as bearing responsibility in influencing people with their work. Like spirituality, abstract art takes many forms and has multiple definitions. Abstraction is itself an abstract concept.

Chapter 2: Problems with Words – If You Can't See it, How Do You Name it?

Salman Rushdie points out the softening of the boundary between the world and the self that takes place in an artistic experience: 'Literature is made at the boundary between self and the world, and during the creative act this borderline softens, turns penetrable and allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist flow into the world'. Creative work calls for a simultaneous double perspective: one needs to focus on the world and oneself at the same time. All art articulates the boundary surface between the self and the world both in the experience of the artist and the viewer. (Pallasmaa 771)

Kandinsky consistently made painting, not words or intellect, his primary point of contact with the spiritual domain. ... he continually sought harmony between his work and suspected laws of the spiritual universe. ... He thought of painting as being pure or adherent. If adherent, it was concerned and restricted by the physical things it tried to represent. It was adherent to them. If pure, it stayed within its own terms - color and form. And when pure it was spiritual representation. (Ashmore 230)

When categorizing the work of Kandinsky, words get in the way. Ironically, the artist whose volumes of writing almost equal his artistic contribution to history is frequently misunderstood; since his own terminology for his work evolves – abstract, non-objective,

concrete – it is often mislabeled. As Pallasmaa⁴ points out in his quotation, mastering visual communication (visual art being as much a “[c]reative work” as literature) is a matter of perspective. It is not exactly, as some curators suggest, a matter of perception... unless it’s the perception of Kandinsky’s motivations that are in question.

Through the medium of painting, Kandinsky attempts to express *innerer Klang* – the inner voice that sounds “the expression of the soul of nature and humanity” (M. T. H. Sadler xiii) – using imagery that possesses *Stimmung* (a nearly untranslatable German term describing the quality of a picture, a mood or atmosphere, that triggers an emotion in the viewer and, in doing so, creates a sort of harmony between the artwork and the viewer). In other (English) words, he intentionally uses visual language to affect the spirit of his viewer. His extensive writing on the topic explains his process of composing an image with such powers and why he believes this mode of communication not only exists, but that it can empower the viewer by stimulating some element of their soul. He proposes the existence of an invisible relationship that crosses the boundaries between a person and the world, between person and person, capable of spiritual salvation. His chosen medium of cross-border communication is that of abstraction. Abstraction – colour and form freed from representation – is the perfect vehicle for describing the indescribable.

⁴ Juhani Pallasmaa (Finnish architect, 1936-present) is a master of sensory design; he intentionally uses sound, texture, and smell to transform the interaction of people within his spaces. In “Embodied Experience and Sensory Thought” (2007) he writes:

The senses are not merely passive receptors of stimuli, and the body is not just a point of viewing the world through a central perspective. The body is not the locus of cognitive thinking, but the senses and our bodily being as such structure, produce and store silent knowledge. Our entire being in the world is a sensuous and embodied mode of being. (769-770)

Innate synesthesia drives Kandinsky's determination to convince others to consider visual art as they would music: without the encumbrance of physical (visual, recognizable) embodiment. Music is affective despite a lack of material presence. We hear a sound. (Or, rather, we 'hear' what is registered as 'sound' by receptors in our ears which travels to the auditory cortex of the brain for processing⁵.) Music gives us information on the vibration of a thing – the invisible essence it emits – rather than its physical identity. Bypassing the filter of appearances and sign-based association, sounds affect a listener fluidly; ears are inherently more open than eyes (as the body does not naturally equip them with lids that close out stimuli). The *innerer Klang* he feels so highly motivated to facilitate can also be translated to mean “inner sound” and, so, Kandinsky effectively encourages his viewer to use eyes as if they are ears⁶. In Kandinsky's own words, “colour is a power which directly influences the soul”; he is interested in harnessing said power – the “psychic effect” of colours – to “produce a corresponding spiritual vibration”

⁵ The process whereby sound is transformed from vibrations in the air into what we recognize as music is, basically, as follows:

- Sound waves from an instrument or a sound system reach the *outer ear*.
- In the *middle ear*, the sound waves cause the *eardrum* and tiny *bones* to vibrate.
- The middle ear passes these vibrations to the *inner ear*.
- The inner ear includes the snail-shaped *cochlea*. Inside the fluid-filled cochlea are 20,000–30,000 tiny hair cells. These hair cells are of different sizes that react to different tones and pitches.
- The inner ear translates vibrations into electrical signals.
- The electronic signals are carried into the brain by nerve cells called *neurons* via the *cochlear nerve* system.
- The signals travel along the cochlear nerve system to the brain's *cerebral cortex*. Like a supercomputer, this part of the brain.
- Other areas of the brain add their power to analyze different elements within the music, such as rhythm, pitch, and dynamics. (Your Brain on Music)

⁶ Kandinsky's acceptance of the concept of synesthesia led him to believe that his paintings might stimulate multiple sensory responses in the viewer. His belief that his paintings contained multiple stimuli (form, colour, line, images) lay behind his conviction that an abstract style could eventually have enormous evocative potential for communicating the spiritual. (Bowlt 51)

(Concerning the Spiritual in Art 24-25). “Soul”, “psychic effect”, “spiritual vibration” – these are not concepts that are regularly admitted into critical dialogue surrounding painting⁷.

Kandinsky draws theoretical influence from his understanding of theories of Theosophy which, in the sociocultural climate of pre-WWI Europe, is not as polarizing as it would be in a discussion today. The teaching of Madame Blavatsky⁸ and her predecessors in the mid-19th century, while not necessarily being mainstream, is understood as being a spiritual pursuit (albeit a controversial one) of the time and for many people (Kandinsky included⁹) a remedy to the spiritually vacant materialism which he saw as rampant. Kandinsky plainly (and repeatedly) states his interest in metaphysical questions and the answers mystic practices offer. Applying principles inspired by the emotive capabilities of music (sans physical existence whatsoever) to his use of abstract imagery to affect his viewer through painting (sans representational cues), he sees elements of Theosophical beliefs (mainly that artists – positioned at the apex of his moving triangle – are considered initiates in the mission to enlighten the masses through spiritual evolution and that abstraction – colour and form freed from the constraints of representation –

⁷ Many art historians have expressed puzzlement that serious artists in the fin de siècle period "succumbed" to spirituality when they were living in an age of science. The avant-garde artists, though, regarded several of the latest discoveries of science as vindications of esoteric teachings. When the first X-rays were exhibited by the Berlin Physical Society in 1896, for instance, there was great excitement in artistic circles about this scientific support for exactly what Madame Blavatsky had taught in *The Secret Doctrine*: an invisible structure underlies every material surface. (Spretnak 57)

⁸ In addition to her 1888 pseudo-scientific multivolume occult-centric text *The Secret Doctrine, the Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy*, Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky - “The godmother of the New Age movement [who] co-founded modern Theosophy that combined mystical and magical beliefs” - ... published the journal *Lucifer* (1887-1897) (which was co-edited by Annie Besant) bearing the motto, 'To bring to light the hidden things of darkness' (Reigle).

⁹ Other visual artists - specifically early abstractionists - who cite Theosophical influence on their work include Kasimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Franz Kupka, and Hilma af Klimt. Theosophical beliefs also informed Thomas Edison and William Butler Yeats.

is tantamount to spiritual art) as “going hand in hand with the spirit of thought toward an epoch of great spiritual leaders” (Concerning the Spiritual in Art 57). However, the strength of this influence is something some art historians refuse to fully acknowledge.ⁱⁱ

In *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present* (2014) Charlene Spretnak reminds her reader that “[t]o claim that the pioneering abstractionists were inspired not by the metaphysics gripping the prewar avant-garde ... makes no sense unless one favors theories of art history that are disembodied from the cultural dynamics from which the art emerged” (Spretnak 78). Her scathing criticism of how Kandinsky’s motivations are framed in the exhibition catalogue for the prominent 2013 exhibition at Museum of Modern Art, *Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925: How Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, suggest that the most radical idea still plaguing the understanding of Kandinsky’s contribution to the invention of abstraction is the refusal to accept what the artist explicitly expresses in the writing that describes his aspirations. Quoting MoMA’s curator for the *Inventing Abstraction* exhibition (Leah Dickerman), Spretnak highlights a misunderstanding that leads to a major mislabeling.

... she asserts that Kandinsky's goal was ... the "phenomenological fantasy of being able to bypass language, gaining unchecked access to the perceiving mind." In fact, "access to the perceiving mind" was not his goal, nor did he think that he alone had achieved literal perception of the workings of the immaterial realm. Rather, Kandinsky's goal was a necessarily partial and expressive art that was in contact in some way with the dynamics of the transcendent realm and was deeply informed by them. He felt that he finally had a sense of how spirit in the state of formlessness suddenly manifests (because of inner necessity) ... To ignore the

abundance of Kandinsky's writings on the all-encompassing spiritual quest of the day ... yields a severely truncated understanding of what the artist explained repeatedly that he and his work were about. (Spretnak 78-79)

On the first page of the introduction for *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* Kandinsky expresses admiration of imagery that expresses “only internal truths, renouncing in consequence all consideration of external form.” Attention must be paid to his use of the words “internal truths” – this is a notion that echoes his *innerer Klang*; it also implies the presence of a truth that is not attached to or limited by external appearance, thus is potentially invisible (an echo of Theosophical ideas). He writes extensively on the dual identity of any given thing (painted or real) as possessing both outer and inner – seen and unseen – qualities. Outer (quantifiable) qualities of an object are colour, form, and the relationship between the two. “The impressions we receive ... consist of three elements: the impression of the colour of the object, of its form, and of its combined colour and form, i.e. of the object itself” (Concerning the Spiritual in Art 31).

Form, in the narrow sense, is nothing but the separating line between surfaces of colour. That is its outer meaning. But it has also an inner meaning, of varying intensity, and, properly speaking, *Form is the outward expression of this inner meaning*. To use ... the metaphor of the piano – the artist is the hand which, by playing on this or that key (i.e., form), affects the human soul in this or that way.

(29)

He believes that harmonies of colour and form (perceived senses of harmony, at least) are dependent upon a “corresponding vibration in the human soul” (26). “The inner, spiritual

element of the world is accessible for man because it is connected with man's corresponding inner element, and it will hence be reflected in the inner element of art" (Ringbom 181). The crux of his conviction is that an overarching harmony (a unification of sorts) needs to be struck between the unseen nature of a thing (its "internal truth") and its outer "impression" to experience (or express through art) any real truth.

About the same time as Kandinsky is developing his theories on the evocative nature of colour, other promoters of Theosophical ideals publish a text dedicated to the idea that the stuff of the mind exits the body (via the aura) to exist in the universe (with which the aura coalesces). Kandinsky is thought to be influenced by the publication (see Endnote ii). *Thought-Forms* (1901) by Annie Besant (one of Madame Blavatsky's acolytes) and Charles W. Leadbeater is a small but potent volume which, as the title suggests, discusses the visual manifestations of thoughts and emotions (complete with colour illustrations¹⁰ – see figures 3-6); it also addresses the visual manifestations of music. Like Kandinsky, the underlying belief here is that thought (or feeling, or sound) has the ability to affect others on an emotional level. The nature of the thought (be it happy, angry, etc.) determines its corresponding colour as well as the shape and density of its form. According to Besant and Leadbeater, three general principles underlie the creation of all thought-forms:

1. Quality of thought determines colour.
2. Nature of thought determines form.
3. Definiteness of thought determines clearness of outline. (Besant 18)

¹⁰ John Varley Jr. (the grandson of the painter John Varley) provides some of the illustrated examples of the *Thought-Forms* contained in the book.

The relationship expressed by Besant and Leadbeater here is reminiscent of Kandinsky's discussion of the three elements of the impressions we receive of any physical object: its colour, its form, and its colour and form combined. The main precept of *Thought-Forms* (and, surely, something with which Kandinsky's thinking aligns) is that a thought is a thing. So much of a (sighted) human's understanding of reality is grounded in what is tangibly seen or felt. It's easier to believe in something if you can see and/or touch it. That said, humans (sighted or not) easily accept the existence of emotions without needing visible proof.

IF YOU CAN'T SEE IT, HOW DO YOU NAME IT?

Liberated from the constraints of depicting the real world, abstract art is free to explore the invisible Other. It can reflect the subjective reality of the spiritual – inner states of being and spiritual presence – through materials, form, and color alone. For such an adventure, what vehicle – with its ability to convey the complex range of human experience – is more adept at engaging the spiritual in art?

(Fanning 71)

Leesa K. Fanning is a contemporary curator with both an MA and a PhD in art history and the primary writer and editor of *Encountering the Spiritual in Contemporary Art* (2018), a massive publication revealing contemporary manifestations of the spiritual in visual art. Many artists profiled in her survey work in abstraction, and, for Fanning, the connection between abstract art and the intention of the artist to relate to a viewer on a deeper level is obvious. After Kandinsky's

time, the relationship abstraction has with spirituality seems to become prevalent. This is the definition of 'abstract art' according to the famous British Tate Gallery¹¹:

Abstract art is art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality but instead use shapes, colours, forms and gestural marks to achieve its effect ... Strictly speaking, the word abstract means to separate or withdraw something from something else.

The term can be applied to art that is based on an object, figure or landscape, where forms have been simplified or schematised.

It is also applied to art that uses forms, such as geometric shapes or gestural marks, which have no source at all in an external visual reality. Some artists of this 'pure' abstraction have preferred terms such as concrete art or non-objective art, but in practice the word abstract is used across the board and the distinction between the two is not always obvious.

Abstract art is often seen as carrying a moral dimension, in that it can be seen to stand for virtues such as order, purity, simplicity and spirituality. (Abstract Art)

Given this rationale, attachment of the term 'abstract' to the paintings of Kandinsky seems fitting. Sadly, this is another problematic word. In his early career, Kandinsky consistently calls his work 'abstract'. (In the 55 pages of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* there are 40 instances of the word.)

¹¹ Coincidentally, Kandinsky's (*Composition IV*) (1910-1) is the primary image chosen by the Tate to epitomize the term. (See Figure 2)

A few years later this shifts to non-objective.¹² Later it shifts again and ‘concrete’ becomes his preferred adjective. Whatever the turn of phrase, the mode of image making that releases the bonds between colour and form to representation (a.k.a. abstraction) is Kandinsky’s (and that of many other artists since his time) foil to the restrictions of object-based images of reality and this enables art to express (and affect) the invisible essence of human experience.

Is this the definition of spirituality? Perhaps it’s *a* definition. The term spiritual is as elusive as its concept. It is both adjective and noun, a way to be and a value to uphold; it is inherently indefinite, as it can be considered both subjective and objective; it can, at once, be considered loaded and void of value. Apparently, the discomfort in discussing something so illusory also translates into an equally awkward appellation. Depending on who makes the attempt, a clear delineation of what is meant by the word ‘spiritual’ takes many shapes.

What is the spiritual? It is an incursion from above or deep within to which the ordinary human being in each of us can only surrender. ... the spiritual is a dramatic shift in experience and an undoing of what we take to be ourselves. (Lipsey 10)

For Roger Lipsey, an art historian and author of *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (1988)¹³, researching the multiple examples of artists citing spiritual influences on their work proves both the frequency of such influences and that the amount of interpretations of the term almost equal

¹² In his autobiography, dated June 1913, Kandinsky used the term *gegenstandslos* (objectless [or non-objective]) to refer to some of his works, and he defined that term as meaning forms deriving mostly or exclusively ‘from within the artist’ as contrasted to forms derived from nature. (Bowl 49)

¹³ Lipsey’s text exposes the spiritual underpinnings of many artists, from Cubism to Postmodernism, including the Theosophical interests of Kandinsky.

the artists citing it in number. Fanning's and Spretnak's research for their texts reveal further (nuanced and confounding) iterations.

... spirituality represents and encompasses a broad spectrum of possibilities: compassion; considerations of living well in our complicated world; the search for ultimate meaning, truth, or reality; questions of being and belief; the mystery of life and death; a sense that all things are interconnected; ritual practice signifying life-changing events; mind-altering transformation; and ... [it] is a direct and immediate experience involving felt bodily experience. (Fanning 32)

In our own society, the term spirituality has taken on numerous connotations both within and apart from organized religion. Some people feel that spirituality is the more encompassing concept while religion is a subset; others feel that religion is the overarching term with spirituality being a subset. Some feel that the term spirituality has been so stretched out and bounced around by pop culture and the media that it has lost any substantive meaning. Still others feel that spirituality simply exceeds any definition. Given the vague, and sometimes trivializing, uses of the term in recent decades, I appreciate the artist Richard Tuttle's comment to me on this matter: "What I want more than anything is a definition of spirituality that is trustworthy." (Spretnak 14)

The signs and signifiers of semiotics (which are literally designed to be rigid and unwavering in their roles within the system of linguistic interpretation) are disappointingly crude tools to communicate the intangible.

If the ineffable is incapable of being put into words, then for it to have any representation accessible to human consciousness and experience, the ineffable will only be manifested in those forms of expression which do not rely on spoken language. (Fanning 32)

Kandinsky's case in point.

Humans ourselves are ineffable, as modern physics (over a century after Besant's manual) teaches us. What appears as solid and static is actually a field of vibrating subatomic particles interacting with each other and with the surrounding environment which, in reality, makes our physical selves interconnected with each other and with the universe. Our internal identity — formed by our thoughts, feelings, urges — extends out of and through corporeal binds to participate in a life unseen and unknown even to ourselves. Forget mystical; it's almost magical.

Chapter 3: "This is Not Ancestor Worship" - Connecting Kandinsky to Contemporary Art Practice

An evolutionary perspective of the spiritual, which suggests that spirituality emerges from certain features spanning from psychosomatic to metaphysical realms, stresses the impact of multilevel parameters whereby the spiritual is shaped. Both the fact that certain theories consider the spiritual as an innate quality of the psyche related to the potential for something higher, deeper, bigger, or future (eschatological) and the fact that aspects of the spiritual are manifested within the socio-cultural realm suggest, and to some extent verify, the evolutionary perspective of the spiritual. Just as the cognitive function is the unquestionable ground for the development of self-consciousness, so psychic facts are indispensable material and essential events for spiritual experience and evolution. However, as self-consciousness cannot be reduced to cognitive functions, as it incorporates dynamics from the external world, so can spiritual experience not be reduced to psychological facts insofar as it interrelates with the socio-cultural and the metaphysical. (Tympas 32)

...the calling of the artist, in any medium, is to make it new. I do not mean that in new work the past is repudiated; quite the opposite, the past is reclaimed. ... Leonardo is present in Cezanne, Michelangelo flows through Picasso and on into Hockney. This is not ancestor worship, it is the lineage of art. It is not so much influence as it is connection. (Winterson 12)

Periods of sociocultural unrest seem to correlate with an increased interest in understanding spiritual forces and, for artists motivated to explore/express a connection to the spiritual as a remedy for existential crisis (especially when triggered by shared sociocultural trauma), abstraction, as opposed to realist representation, is frequently their mode of expression. Anchoring to this observation (demonstrated with the contextualization of Kandinsky's abstract art as activism), we can focus our discussion on the 21st century and examine the work of two abstract painters who cite spirituality as being influential: Adam Lee and Janna Watson. Comparing Kandinsky's abstraction to that of painters today may reinforce the idea of a relationship between spirituality and abstraction and their correlation with times of trauma.

Two decades into the newest century, one ushered in by the events of 9-11 and the subsequent War on Terror, we find the world in the throes of a massive effort toward decolonization, suffering the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, navigating Russia's unfolding war on Ukraine, and battling climate change. Roughly one hundred years ago, at the turn of the 19th century, in the time fostering Kandinsky's artistic ascendance (and that of abstraction), the world is suffering the effects of the Industrial Revolution while navigating radical scientific discoveries. The traumatic climate builds as polarized populations suffer the disintegration of multiple systems of belief and disruptions of social order, feeding tensions leading to world war. Kandinsky's visual practice (as elaborated by the accompanying volumes of writing) is an effort designed to translate feelings of unrest and uncertainty via abstract painting, using visual language to communicate spiritually with the viewer. He hopes to awaken the *joie de vivre* of the European people and activate a retaliation against their materialist slumber by appealing to their senses, visually.

In Kandinsky's time, abstraction is a new convention. To remove representation from painting, to design a composition whose meaning is untethered to the image of a familiar thing, is initially met with resistance and ridicule. Nowadays, abstraction is a commonplace mode of painting, a term prominently associated with the last hundred years of art, and fully assimilated into art historical vocabulary. It is presently a fully accepted genre of painting with several subsets: figurative, lyrical, geometric, etc. However, in its ubiquity, contemporary artists must defend their choice of abstraction against those who view such artistic expressions as self-indulgent (at one end of the spectrum of criticism) or void of any real content (at the other). They also have to justify their use of the 's' word.

Five years into the new millennium, art critic Ken Johnson writes in the *New York Times*, "Academic art historians and critics still tend to discourage talking seriously about the spiritual in art. But considering how many artists continue to be motivated by spiritual urges, however the word spiritual is defined - this is something worth discussing" (qtd. in Spretnak 9). Even when artists have commercial success, it is common for gallerists and critics to focus on the formal aspects of their work when promoting it. Interestingly, an analysis of such formal qualities, the same qualities focused on when open reference to other – spiritual, for instance – aspects of the work may not be accepted, makes the creative motivations of many contemporary painters and the century-old work of Kandinsky worth contrasting. The similarities and differences in pursuits are compelling.

Adam Lee (b. 1979, Australia) and Janna Watson (b. 1983, Canada) are two artists who represent a trend in contemporary established painters: those whose practices thrive amidst the collective traumas characteristic of the year 2000 and beyond and who are open about there

being a spiritual aspect to their work. Like Kandinsky, they reference aspects of the mystical realm as possessing unifying value in times of uncertainty and discord. Unlike Kandinsky, these artists make work out of personal resolve that they trust will resonate with their viewers; they don't assume the role of prophet or visionary, but, rather, share impressions of personal reflections on their own perceptions of trauma, challenge, and change.

Working a century after his time, each of these artists can be said to draw inspiration from aspects of Kandinsky's oeuvre. Their style of work exists because of the precedent Kandinsky set a century ago. Lee's wildly coloured works are often barely recognizable figures in landscapes reminiscent of Kandinsky's *Improvisations*¹⁴ (see figure 8); Watson energetically suspends subjectless masses of colours within void-like atmospheres arranged similarly to the all-over compositions characteristic of Kandinsky's watercolour studies for *Compositions* (see figure 7). Like Kandinsky, they use the visual language of abstraction to connect with and emotionally affect their viewer. Lee's images possess an eerie but magical sense that almost beckon the viewer to explore his pictorial spaces if their spirit has the mettle; Watson spontaneously crafts her tidy yet frenetic paintings with such undulating energy that the paint threatens to either explode or trickle off the canvas into real space.

Featuring figurative abstraction with reduced landscape elements and unnatural applications of colour, the paintings of Adam Lee are described as "captur[ing] atmospheric

¹⁴ Kandinsky divides his abstract work into three categories: Impressions (the least abstract images most directly representing his observations of the real world), Improvisations (spontaneously created images designed to express felt emotions that are more abstract than his Impressions, though still alluding to representations), and Compositions (non-representational images that also convey inner experiences, but that are less spontaneous - usually planned through studies - and more complex.

visions that shift in and out of figuration” that frequently feature “a smudgy dark-hued background” and contrasting applications of bright colour that “creates a sense of fluorescent movement ... [and] evok[es] the otherworldly” (Trebuchet). One image featured in the Trebuchet article is Lee’s *This Earthen Tent* (figure 9). Punctuating the “smudgy dark-hued background,” two orange lines peak together to form a roof-type shape hovering over a glowing, circular orb. Loops of linework swirl around the orb like streams of energy emanating outward from and tracing back to their source. In Lee’s more overtly figurative abstractions, like *Two Hermits* (2015) (figure 10), by his positioning of the figure forms in what could be considered the foreground of a completely non-representational, yet directional, background he almost suggests that the mood of the amorphous coloured shapes of the background is an extension of the felt experience of the figures featured. In Kandinsky’s *Impression III* (1911) (figure 8) a similar compositional structure is seen: figure-esque forms occupy the bottom of the image, foregrounding (and somewhat puncturing) the imposing swaths of yellow and black¹⁵ that extend outward and away from the figures.

Lee’s narratives are generated by weaving together personal “memory, imagination and [notions of] transcendence” (Station Gallery).

I see the act of making art as fundamentally an act which can connect us to that invisible, Divine world. ... I’m interested in the ways art can reveal things hidden

¹⁵ It should be noted that Kandinsky’s use of yellow is to imply harshness. In the fifth chapter of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, “The Psychological Working of Colour”, he states his opinion that “yellow hurts the eye in time as a prolonged and shrill trumpet-note the ear, and the gazer turns away to seek relief” (25). In the sixth chapter, “The Language of Form and Colour”, he expresses his impression of black: “A totally dead silence, on the other hand, a silence with no possibilities, has the inner harmony of black. (39)”

deep down in us, and how it might bring some of those things to the surface. (Lee qtd. in Coeur & Art)

Lee extends this sentiment to express a contemporary iteration of something so central to the beliefs of Kandinsky: visual art possesses the power of social unification by virtue of its ability to reflect the invisible connections between the “corresponding inner element[s]” of man with the “inner, spiritual element[s] of the world” (Ringbom 181). Where Kandinsky endeavors to use the universal language of art to unite people in the spirit of a sort of social activism, Lee proposes the potential for art to offer solace, understanding, and solidarity in uncertain times.

One thing I’m curious about in our current times of crises [the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown] is whether we might see more of a return to an engagement with art as something fundamental to our humanity... where the making of art is ... more about ways of trying to understand our experience of the world, both around us and within us. (Lee qtd. in Coeur & Art)

In both of these quotations, Lee reminds us that the world – that is, existence – exists both inside and outside the self. And the state of the physical self can be an expression of (and offer a glimpse into) the relative state of one’s inner life. The implication is that there is an unseen, inner, spiritual component of life that permeates the barrier of the individual that can be made visible (and, so, can its ability to connect individuals be made visible) through artistic expression.

According to another contemporary abstract painter, Janna Watson, society upended due to global pandemic and survival of personal trauma are also crises to which art can contest. Watson, who identifies as queer, uses painting to process personal feelings in a process she’s

refined since being publicly outed at her church as a teenager. Having her sense of belonging (and understanding of the universe) shattered, she returns to early life teachings of her grandfather and his introducing her to the power and magic of abstraction for reassurance. The alienation and rejection of what was a major life experience for her as an individual also determines her identity as a painter. Again, abstract painting is the chosen method to sublimate emotional trauma.

Watson talks openly about being forsaken by the religious community within which she'd been raised as a traumatic event that motivates her need to paint. She has a childhood memory of her grandfather who instilled in her the idea that "painting abstraction is about capturing the 'essence' of everything, and how energy can be felt but not seen" (Watson qtd. in Artoronto). She carries this sentiment with her as she injects 'essence' (the mystical qualities that unite the components of the universe to form what we experience as reality) into her studio process. She understands the act of painting to be "sexuality and spirituality made tangible"; she believes that "a good painting does not come from the brain. It is about alchemy. It is the most transformative form of art-making" (Watson qtd. in Artoronto).

Abstraction, essence, alchemy, transformation – these terms, taken from Watson's dialogue surrounding spirituality in contemporary art, could just as easily be found in a discussion about the work of Kandinsky as an early abstractionist working a hundred years ago. When one analyzes her signature style of image making, it seems that Watson shares formal as well as transcendental concerns with Kandinsky.

Bundles of colour, made up of discrete yet inseparable instances of pigment –what Watson refers to as “moments” – are teeming and poised as though caught mid-multiplication. Sweeps of paint re-direct sharply and fold over themselves; thin, rigid ink lines cut into the pictorial field as rudimentary elements in an increasingly complex system of painterly language. All the components play out on a surface of slow, chromatic gradation. Like many of Watson’s players, these backdrops tenderly gesture toward the familiar, stopping just short of representation. The result is a conceptual project (and distinct, stylistic signature) that speaks to a contemporary milieu in which abstract painting is not the retreat of meaning into an unrecognizable realm, but rather the emergence of medium as a “figure” in its own self-inscribed world of feeling and being. (Artist Decoded)

There is a similarity between Watson’s and Kandinsky’s intentions to give shape (manifesting emotion and sensation through applications of colour and line) to some of the least tangible aspects of the human experience.

The lyrical abstraction¹⁶ and spontaneous mark-making that characterize the painted atmospheres created by Janna Watson are recognized by their distinctive fields of tangled coloured lines and smears. Watson’s work indeed engages with her “contemporary milieu”, but it also speaks Kandinsky’s abstract language – her *Upper Partials* (2022) (figure 11) resembles Kandinsky’s first watercolor abstraction (figure 7) with the disconnected, floating drawn and

¹⁶ Lyrical is an adjective used to describe expressive (though non-violet) abstract painting. The term originates in post WWII Paris with the art movement called Abstraction Lyrique which aesthetically opposes the geometric abstraction of cubism that preceded it. Lyrical is sometimes applied to the abstraction of Kandinsky as it is seen as a mode of expressing the inner, spiritual sensibility of the artist.

painted elements on a neutral ground. Variations on this compositional construction are seen in most of Watson's work. A completely non-objective mass of coiled smears and lines of colour that swoops diagonally, but delicately, across a painting's surface is emblematic of Watson's aesthetic. Most of her mixed media works combine the fluidity of paint with graphic mark-making to intentionally expose the expressive qualities inherent to each. Swirls of liquid pigment contrast elements of almost crudely implemented drawing materials to comprise compositions that are both soft and harsh at moments (a contradiction that is, perhaps, a representation of internal conflict) and that, somehow, coalesce in her painted environments.

Each mark and brushstroke are evidence of Watson's journey across her canvas; the resulting image is record of her experience contemplating her chosen subject (usually a specific, lived scenario) and translating her feelings about it into visual terms. Bearing titles like *Hit the Wrong Button but it all Worked Out*, *After the Rain*, or *Speak Softly* (figure 12), Watson offers her viewer subtle hints at underlying narrative and emotive content in her work, though she, like Kandinsky, relies heavily on compositional movement, colour, and quality of line to convey the impression of emotion and narrative.

Lee and Watson choose abstraction to process and share their respective experiences and understandings of human existence and all the mysteries, truths, successes, struggles, and traumas that factor into it. They offer their work to their viewers in a gesture of solidarity with other struggling souls, whereas Kandinsky uses his abstraction to give his viewers permission to acknowledge that they're struggling and embrace the idea that a change in values (to appreciate the underlying depth of emotion and breadth of experience being alive offers) can similarly change one's fate. While Lee and Watson do not take on the role of prophet or claim to be able

to use their art to lead the public into a brighter future, they share Kandinsky's need to respond to trauma (of one variety or another) artistically in the name of deliverance.

Conclusion

Each person is a product of their environment: nature, nurture, embodied and psychological experience, cultural bias, the widespread beliefs of any given time. Our written histories are intended to document events, the unfolding of responses to them, and the subsequent events triggered in the process. Somewhere within the ever-evolving web of interconnectedness of human history we position Kandinsky – his theories and his art practice – and somewhere we position ourselves. A century after we notice the emergence of abstraction in painting as response to the sociocultural unrest of the turn of the 19th century, another century has turned, new sociocultural events cause unrest, and, again, there is a renewed attention on things spiritual and, again, painting turns to abstraction.

Expanding the adage that defines an individual as a product of their environment to entertain the inverted sentiment – that one has the power to define one's environment – could be an extension of the study of the power of visual expression. For a world united in shared trauma, embracing a shared language seems of critical cathartic value.

Notes

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Dr. Richard Tarnas is a cultural historian, director of the California Institute of Integral Studies' graduate program in Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness, and student of Joseph Campbell. His extensively researched tome *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View* (2006) highlights patterns of connection between the history of humanity and the alignments of the major planetary bodies Uranus, Pluto, and Neptune.

I was encouraged to examine the possible existence of historical correlations with planetary cycles when I encountered a number of highly suggestive patterns in which certain cyclical alignments between the outer planets coincided with major historical events and cultural trends of a distinctive character, as if the specific archetypes associated with those planets were emerging on the collective level in periodic cycles (141).

The archetype-based characteristics of the outer planets Tarnas examines are as follows: Uranus is rebellious but innovative; Pluto is destructive yet transformative; Neptune (ruling the imagination, things unseen, and transcendental realms) reshapes awareness by breaking established boundaries.

When I applied those meanings to this entirely different category of phenomena-analyzing periods of history when the outer planets were in major alignment in the sky and thus, theoretically, when the corresponding archetypes were most activated in the collective psyche – I was deeply impressed by the empirical

correlations. These extended alignments of the outer planets consistently seemed to coincide with sustained periods during which a particular archetypal complex was conspicuously dominant in the collective psyche, defining the zeitgeist, as it were, of that cultural moment. The dominant archetypal complex was always discernibly composed of the specific archetypal principles associated with the relevant aligned planets, as if those archetypes were interacting, merging, and mutually inflecting each other in highly visible ways. (142)

Tarnas places a particular focus on the alignment of Uranus and Pluto during the similarly intense periods of the French Revolution and the 1960s to establish a pattern.

...since the French Revolution, there were only two other periods when Uranus and Pluto were in conjunction or opposition alignments [and] both of these eras stand out as clearly defined by historical events and cultural trends bearing this same highly charged character of massive change and revolution, innovation and upheaval. The first of these alignments took place in the mid-nineteenth century, from 1845 to 1856... coincident with the wave of revolutionary upheavals that took place in almost every capital of Europe in 1848-49... [with] the sudden eruption of a collective revolutionary impulse affecting an entire continent with mass insurrections, the emergence of radical political and social movements, revolts... The second such alignment ... was the opposition that took place during the decade that spanned the turn of the twentieth century, from 1896 to 1907 –again, a period characterized by intense political and social ferment... (145-147)

Overlapping the 1896 to 1907 Uranus-Pluto opposition is a period of Uranus-Neptune opposition, 1899 to 1918. Alignments of Uranus and Neptune, as Tarnas identifies, initiate spiritual awakening and shifts in cultural perspective, but also philosophical disorientation “associated with the rapid dissolution of previously established structures of belief and certainty” (356). Uranus-Neptune alignment appears to also coincide with shifts in the visual arts, including the major historical contributions of Picasso, Mondrian, Duchamp, and Kandinsky. “The Uranus-Neptune alignment of this period precisely encompass[es] the many-sided birth of modernism in European and American culture” (359).

... thus the period in which the Uranus-Pluto and Uranus-Neptune oppositions overlapped at the beginning of the twentieth century coincided with the beginning of the great twin revolutions in modern physics, relativity theory and quantum physics. The two revolutions together constituted a larger paradigm shift that eventually informed and affected all the sciences and strongly shaped the cultural imagination of the twentieth century. As many cultural historians have pointed out, the parallels were many and profound between [that and] the artistic revolution ... (359-360)

ii

In recent years, the contribution that occult or mystical ideas have made to the evolution of art – or to culture in general – has been increasingly recognized. But this was not always the case. For a long time, the notion that belief systems like Theosophy, founded in 1875 by Madame Blavatsky and her companion Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, were anything more than a disreputable side-show to the mainstream of cultural development was scandalous. (Lachman)

Member of the Theosophical Society in America and writer of many books linking consciousness, culture, and esoteric traditions, Gary Lachman's 2008 article "Kandinsky's Thought Forms and the Occult Roots of Modern Art" (published in *Quest Magazine*, a publication of the Theosophical Society in America) delves into Kandinsky's connection with Theosophy while framing that connection as something not always included in discussions of influences on the artist's motivations.

Lachman attributes this new recognition to several critics and historians whose research uncovers Kandinsky's interest in the occult, and Theosophy in particular, as instrumental in the mission to rescue Europe from materialism. The most crucial (and, at the time of its release, controversial) text to reveal this connection is Sixten Ringbom's *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*. First published in 1970, reissued in 2022, Ringbom (a writer on cultural history with a PhD in art history) focusses on Kandinsky to demonstrate the links between esoteric thought (specifically Theosophical teachings) and non-representational painting. Ringbom's case does "not fit with the image of

Kandinsky created by academia, but he support[s] it with strong evidence, including the list of spiritual works Kandinsky read over the years" (Anapur).

Kandinsky's occult library was considerable, but certain books in particular fuelled his speculation. Three key works were *Man, Visible and Invisible* (1902) by C. W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms* (1905) by Annie Besant and Leadbeater, and Rudolf Steiner's *Theosophy* (1904). Kandinsky was very interested in Steiner and attended some of his lectures in Munich and Berlin. He was also a keen reader of Steiner's theosophical journal, *Luzifer-Gnosis*, and in his notebooks Kandinsky copied out several passages from a series of articles Steiner had written entitled "*Von der Aura des Menschen*" (On Man's Aura). (Lachman)

iii

Curator Leah Dickerman's 1912 exhibition at MoMA, *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925*, is a massive survey of abstract artworks intended to commemorate “the centennial of this bold new type of artwork [by] tracing the development of abstraction as it move[s] through a network of modern artists” (with Kandinsky included as one of the first) (*Inventing Abstraction* [MoMA Calendar]). The first sentence of the exhibition's overview on MoMA's website boldly states: “Abstraction may be modernism's greatest invention” and the last sentence characterizes this period (1910-1925) as a “watershed moment in which art was wholly reinvented” (*Inventing Abstraction* [MoMA Interactives]). Though the exhibition includes the work of 83 artists, it somehow omits the existence of Hilma af Klimt (a female painter whose abstract work predates that of Kandinsky) or the influences of much earlier artists and cultures in the discussion.

Britain's Tate museum does a better, more inclusive, job of honing in on the origins of abstraction. In 2013, a year after the MoMA show, the Tate's art magazine *Tate Etc.* publishes an article called “The first abstract artist? (And it's not Kandinsky)”. The article, which focuses on the work of Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), points out that the Swedish painter dates her first abstract piece as 1906 (five years before Kandinsky's). Additionally, on the Tate's website, there is a page dedicated to “A Brief History of Abstract Art with Turner, Mondrian and More” which suggests that the late landscape works of J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851) be read as a “pioneering” form of abstraction. “What might be traditionally recognisable forms in the hands of another painter are transformed by sublime elements, and overwhelming suggestions of light and scale by Turner” (*A Brief History of Abstract Art*). This page goes on to relate the elements of abstraction seen in the work of Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), Kasimir Malevich (1879-1935), Henri Matisse (1869-

1954), and (a lesser-known female painter whose “influence was reciprocal” with that of Mondrian) Marlow Moss (1889-1958) (A Brief History of Abstract Art).

Extending the roots of abstraction yet further, American writer Carla Blank’s article “The Presleying of Abstract Art” cites findings published in 2002 by both *Science* and *Scientific American* that show evidence of abstract images as old as the Middle Stone Age. Also written in 2013, Blank’s article goes so far as to say that MoMA’s *Inventing Abstraction* is “audacious because it even refutes documentation available in the museum’s own exhibition history” of “various shows intended to heighten awareness of connections between contemporary arts and non-Western and indigenous traditional arts, largely because many of them employ “abstraction.”

...it is well known, certainly in art world circles, that many modern artists experimenting with new forms have been avaricious collectors of images and objects made for everyday home or ceremonial use in non-European cultures, be they ceramics, basketry, textiles, hide paintings, beading and quillwork, masks and other sculptures made of wood, carved stone, wrought iron, and so forth. So many artists, of all ethnicities, have used these pre-existing objects, ancient or not, to create new works that the art world accepted and defined the practice with terms such as “borrowed,” “appropriated,” and “found.” (The Presleying of Abstract Art)

Blank specifically criticizes the scope of Dickerman's MoMA exhibition (much like Charlene Spretnak does) by posing the question: "Are curators and critics deliberately ignoring the full picture, even if they know better?" (The Presleying of Abstract Art).

Images



Fig 1. Wassily Kandinsky, *Der Blaue Reiter* (*The Blue Rider*) (1903)

oil on canvas

21.65" x 25.59"

Private Collection, before Collection Emil Bührle, Zurich



Fig 2. Wassily Kandinsky, *Cossacks (Composition IV)* (1910-1)

oil on canvas

37 1/4" x 51 1/4"

Tate

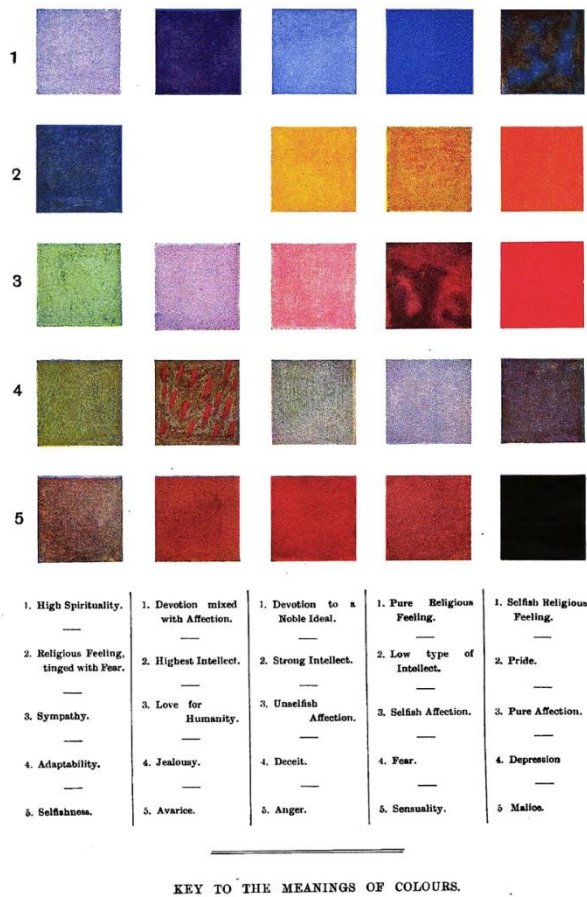


Fig. 3 John Varley Jr., "Key to the Meanings of Colours", *Thought-Forms*, by Besant and Leadbeater (1901)

In the public domain.



Fig. 4 John Varley Jr., "Vague Religious Feeling", *Thought-Forms*, by Besant and Leadbeater (1901)
In the public domain.

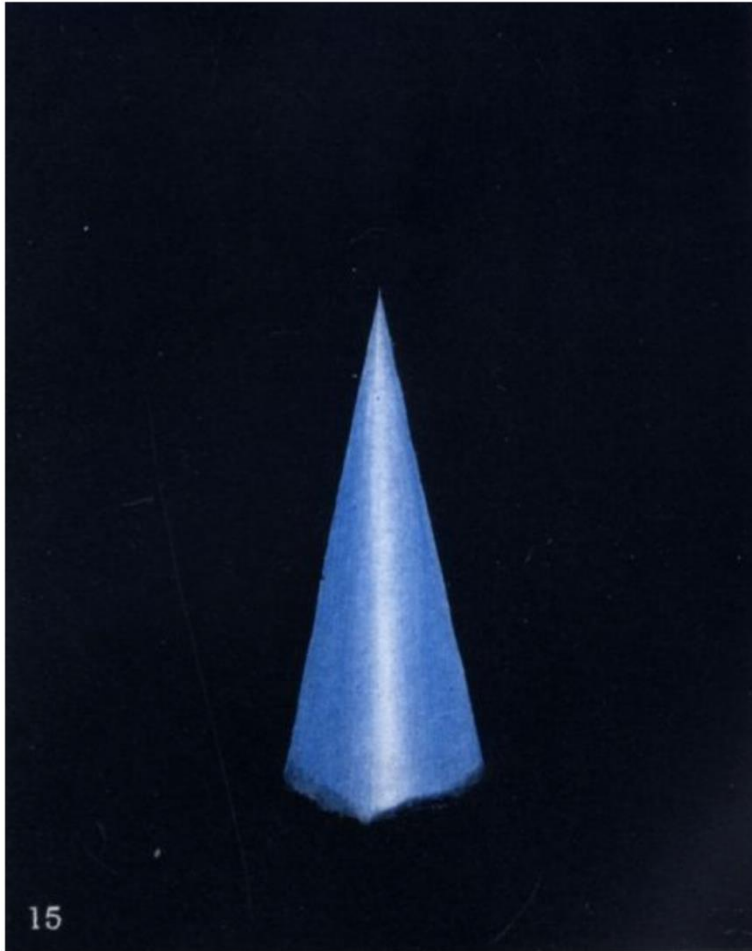


Fig. 5 John Varley Jr., "Upward Rush of Devotion", *Thought-Forms*, by Besant and Leadbeater (1901)
In the public domain.

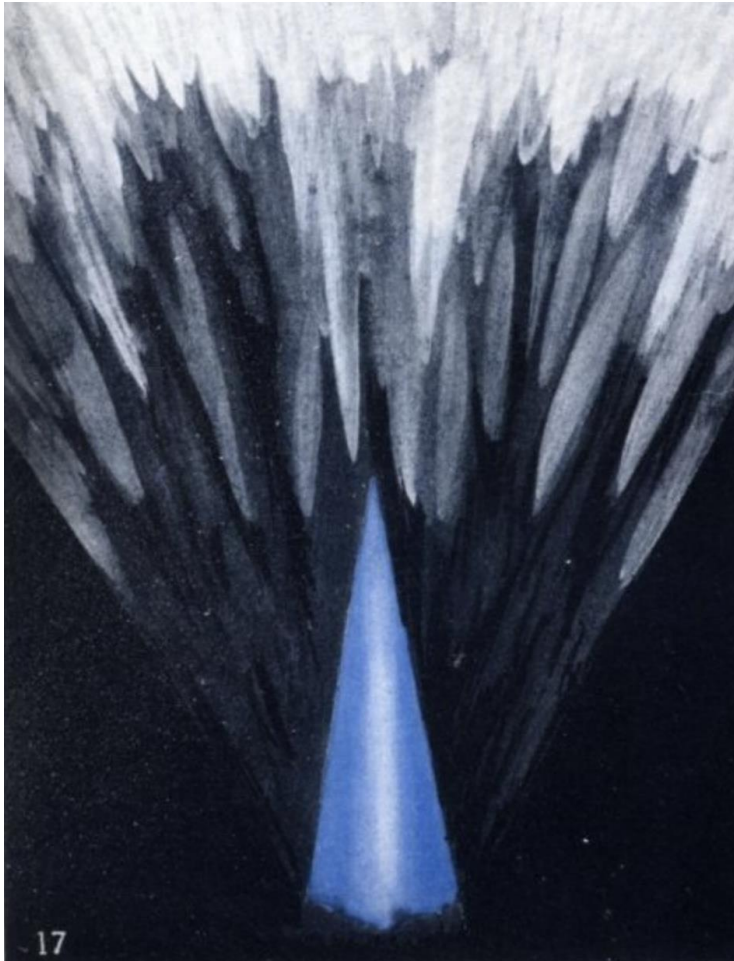


Fig. 6 John Varley Jr., "Response to Devotion", *Thought-Forms*, by Besant and Leadbeater (1901)

In the public domain.



Fig. 7 Wassily Kandinsky, *Untitled*. Inscribed on verso "*Aquarelle (1910) (abstraite)*"

Watercolour, india ink, and pencil on paper mounted on board

19 1/2" x 25 1/2"

Centre Pompidou



Fig 8. Wassily Kandinsky, *Impression III (Konzert)* (1911)

Oil on canvas

31" x 40"

Lenbachhaus



Fig. 9 Adam Lee, *This Earthen Tent* (2017)

Oil and Synthetic Polymer on Canvas

74 4/5" × 57 1/10"

Copyright (2017) by Adam Lee. Used with permission.



Fig. 10 Adam Lee, *Two Hermits* (2015)

Oil and Synthetic Polymer on Canvas

49 1/2" × 35 4/5"

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Fig. 11 Janna Watson, *Upper Partials* (2022)

Mixed media on board

36" x 36"

Copyright (2022) by Janna Watson. Used with permission.



Fig. 12 Janna Watson, *Speak Softly* (2022)

Mixed media on board

48" x 48"

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