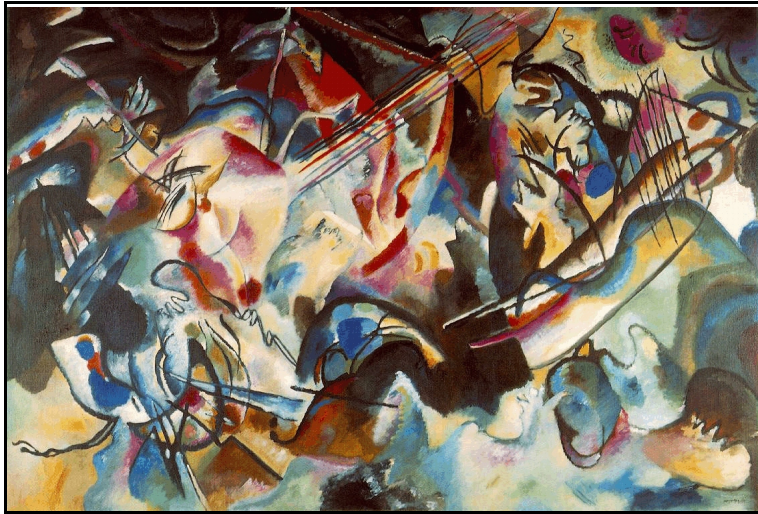


Wassily Kandinsky  
Excerpt from *Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 1911*<sup>1</sup>



Wassily Kandinsky. *Composition VI*. 1913.  
Oil on canvas, 195 x 300 cm (6' 4 3/4" x 10'). Hermitage, St. Petersburg

Every work of art is the child of its time, often it is the mother of our emotions.

Thus, every period of culture produces its own art, which can never be repeated. Any attempt to give new life to the artistic principles of the past can at best only result in a work of art that resembles a stillborn child. For example, it is impossible for our inner lives, our feelings, to be like those of the ancient Greeks. Efforts, therefore, to apply Greek principles, e.g., to sculpture, can only produce forms similar to those employed by the Greeks, a work that remains soulless for all time. This sort of imitation resembles the mimicry of the ape. To all outward appearances, the movements of apes are exactly like those of human beings. The ape will sit

holding a book in front of its nose, leafing through with a thoughtful expression on its face, but the inner meaning of these gestures is completely lacking.

There exists, however, another outward similarity of artistic forms that is rooted in a deeper necessity. The similarity of inner strivings within the whole spiritual-moral atmosphere — striving after goals that have already been pursued, but afterward forgotten — this similarity of the inner mood of an entire period can lead logically to the use of forms successfully employed to the same ends in an earlier period. Our sympathy, our understanding, our inner feeling for the primitives arose partly in this way. Just like us, those pure artists wanted to capture in their works the inner essence of things, which of itself brought about a rejection of the external, the accidental.

This important point of inner contact is, however, for all its importance, only a point. Our souls, which are only now beginning to awaken after the long reign of materialism, harbor seeds of desperation, unbelief, lack of purpose. The whole nightmare of the materialistic attitude, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, purposeless game, is not yet over. The awakening soul is still deeply under the influence of this nightmare. Only a weak light glimmers, like a tiny point in an enormous circle of blackness. This weak light is no more than an intimation that the soul scarcely has the courage to perceive, doubtful whether this light might not itself be a dream, and the circle of blackness, reality. This doubt, and the still-oppressive suffering caused by a materialistic philosophy a sharp distinction between our souls and those of the 'primitives.' Our souls, when one succeeds in touching them, give out a hollow ring, like a beautiful vase discovered cracked in the depths of the earth. For this reason the movement toward the primitive, which we are experiencing at this moment, can only be, with its present borrowed forms, of short duration.

These two similarities between modern art and the forms of bygone periods are, as can easily be seen, diametrically opposed. The first is external and thus has future. The second is internal and therefore conceals the seeds of the future within itself. After the period of materialistic trials to which the soul had apparently succumbed, yet which it rejected as an evil temptation, the soul emerges, refined by struggle and suffering. Coarser emotions such as terror, joy, sorrow, etc., which served as the content of art during this period of trial, will now hold little attraction for the artist. He will strive to awaken as yet nameless feelings of a finer nature. He himself leads a relatively refined and complex existence, and the work he produces will necessarily awaken finer emotions in the spectator who is capable of them, emotions that we cannot put into words. . . .

Wassily Kandinsky  
Excerpt from "On the Problem of Form," 1912<sup>2</sup>

At the appointed time, necessities become ripe. That is, the creative spirit (which one can designate as the abstract spirit) finds an avenue to the soul, later to other souls, and causes a yearning, an inner urge.

When the conditions necessary for the ripening of a precise form are fulfilled, the yearning, the inner urge acquires the power to create in the human spirit a new value which, consciously or unconsciously, begins to live in the human being. From this moment on, consciously or unconsciously, the human being seeks to find a material form for the new value which lives in him in spiritual form.

That is the searching of the spiritual value for materialization. Matter is here a storeroom and from it the spirit chooses what is specifically *necessary* for it—just as the cook would.

That is the positive, the creative. That is the good. *The white, fertilizing ray.*

This white ray leads to evolution, to elevation. Thus behind matter the creative spirit is concealed within matter. The veiling of the spirit in the material is often so dense that there are generally few people who can see through to the spirit. Thus, especially today, many do not see the spirit in religion and in art. There are whole epochs which disavow the spirit, since the eyes of people, generally at such times, cannot see the spirit. It was so in the nineteenth century and is, on the whole, still so today.

People are blinded.

A black hand is laid over their eyes. The black hand belongs to him who hates. He who hates endeavors, with all means, to hold back the evolution, the elevation.

That is the negative, the destructive. That is the evil. *The black, death-bringing hand.*

The evolution, the movement forward and upward, is only possible if the path is clear, that is if no barriers stand in the way. That is the *external condition*.

The force which moves the human spirit forward and upward on the clear path is the abstract spirit, one which must naturally ring out and be able to be heard; a summoning must be possible. That is the *internal condition*.

To destroy both of these conditions is the means of the black hand against evolution.

The tools for it are: fear of the dear path; fear of freedom (which is philistinism); and deafness to the spirit (which is dull materialism).

Therefore, people regard each new value with hostility; indeed, they seek to fight it with ridicule and slander. The human being who carries the value is pictured as ridiculous and dishonest. The new value is laughed at and abused. That is the misery of life.

The joy of life is the irresistible, constant victory of the new value.

This victory proceeds slowly. The new value conquers the people quite gradually. And when it becomes undoubtable in many eyes, this value, which was absolutely necessary today, will be turned into a wall—a wall which is erected against tomorrow.

The changing of the new value (of the fruit of freedom) into a petrified form (a wall against freedom) is the work of the black hand.

The whole evolution, that is to say, the inner development and the outer culture, is then a shifting of the barriers.

The barriers are constantly created from new values which have over-thrown the old barriers.

Thus, one sees that basically the new value is not the most important, but rather the spirit which has revealed itself in this value. And further, the freedom necessary for the revelations.

Thus, one sees that the absolute is not to be sought in the form (materialism).

The form is always bound to its time, is relative, since it is nothing more than the means necessary today in which today's revelation manifests itself, resounds.

The resonance is then the soul of the form which can only become alive through the resonance and which *works* from within to without.

*The form is the outer expression of the inner content.*

Therefore one should not make a deity of form. And one should fight for the form only insofar as it can serve as means of expression of the inner resonance. Therefore one should not seek salvation in *one* form.

This statement must be understood correctly. Every creative artist's own means of expression (that is, form) is the best since it most appropriately embodies that which he feels compelled to proclaim. From that, however, the conclusion is often falsely drawn that this means of expression is, or ought to be, the best for other artists also.

Since the form is only an expression of the content and the content is different with different artists, it is then clear that there can be *many different forms at the same time* which are *equally good*. *Necessity creates the form*. Fish which live at great depths have no eyes. The elephant has a trunk. The chameleon changes its color, and so forth.

Thus, the spirit of the individual artist is mirrored in the form. The form bears the stamp of the *personality*.

The personality, however, can naturally not be conceived as something which stands outside of time and space. Rather, it is subject, to a certain extent, to time (epoch), to space (people).

Just as each individual artist has to make his word known, so does each people, and consequently, also that people to which this artist belongs. This connection is mirrored in the form and is characterized by the *national element* in the work.

And finally also, each age has its especially assigned task, the revelation possible at a specific age. The reflection of this temporal element is recognized in the work as *style*.

All these three elements inevitably leave their stamp on a work of art. It is not only superfluous to worry about their presence, but also harmful since forcing, here too, can achieve nothing but a delusion, a temporal betrayal.

And, on the other hand, it becomes self-evident that it is superfluous and harmful to want to lay particular stress upon only one of the three elements. Just as today many concern themselves with the national element and still others with style, recently homage has been paid especially to the cult of the personality (of the individual element).

As has been said in the beginning, the abstract spirit takes possession first of a single human spirit; later it governs an ever-increasing number of people. At this moment, individual artists are subjected to the spirit of the time which forces them to use particular forms which are related to each other and, therefore, also possess an external similarity.

This factor is called a *movement*. It is completely justified and indispensable to a group of artists (just as the individual form is indispensable for one artist).

And as no salvation is to be sought in the form of a single artist, it is not to be sought in this group-form. For each group its own form is the best since it most effectively embodies that which the group feels duty-bound to make known. One should not thereby conclude, however, that this form is or ought to be the best for all. Here also, full freedom shall prevail: one shall consider valid every form, deem correct (= artistic) every form, which represents an inner content. If one acts otherwise, one is no longer serving the free spirit (white ray) but the petrified barrier (black hand).

Here also, one arrives at the same result which was established above: the form (material substance) in general is not the most important, but rather the content (spirit).

Consequently, the form can have a pleasant or unpleasant effect, can appear beautiful, ugly, harmonious, disharmonious, skillful, unskillful, fine, coarse, and so forth, and yet it must not be accepted or rejected either for the qualities which are held to be positive or for the qualities which are felt to be negative. All of these notions are completely relative, as one observes at first glance in the endless, changing series of forms which have already existed.

The form itself is just as relative. This is the way the form is to be appreciated and understood. One must approach a work in such a way that the form has an effect on the soul. And through the form, the content (spirit, inner resonance). Otherwise one elevates the relative to the absolute.

In practical life one will hardly find a person who, if he wants to go to Berlin, gets off the train in Regensburg. In spiritual life, getting off the train in Regensburg is a rather usual thing. Sometimes even the engineer does not want to go any further, and all of the passengers get off in Regensburg. How many, who sought God, finally remained standing before a carved figure! How many, who sought art, became caught on a form which an artist had used for his own purposes, be it Giotto, Raphael, Dürer, or Van Gogh!

And so, as a last conclusion it must be established that it is not most important whether the form is personal, national, or has style; whether or not it is in accordance with the major contemporary movements; whether or not it is related to many or few other forms; whether or not it stands completely by itself: but rather *the most important thing in the question of form is whether or not the form has grown out of the inner necessity. . . .*

1. *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp. 87-88.

2. *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*. Herschel B. Chipp ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 155-158. This English translation is by Kenneth Lindsay from Wassily Kandinsky, "Über die Formfrage," *Der Blaue Reiter* (Munich: R. Piper, 1912), pp. 74-100.