



Handout 2 - Kandinsky: The Visual Musician

Wassily Kandinsky was, to many, a "visual musician," and he was most likely a synesthete as well. Kandinsky saw each painting as a composition--in the musical sense--of color and form. In 1911 Kandinsky published *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in which he argued that a true freedom of expression in art must go beyond the traditional forms of representing people and object. Today, Kandinsky is considered the father of abstract art by many.

The below excerpts from Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* were published online by Project Gutenberg in 2004.

Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Wassily Kandinsky (1911), Excerpt 1

With few exceptions music has been for some centuries the art which has devoted itself not to the reproduction of natural phenomena, but rather to the expression of the artist's soul, in musical sound. A painter, who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end. He naturally seeks to apply the methods of music to his own art. And from this results that modern desire for rhythm in painting, for mathematical, abstract construction, for repeated notes of colour, for setting colour in motion.

In manipulation of form music can achieve results which are beyond the reach of painting. On the other hand, painting is ahead of music in several particulars. Music, for example, has at its disposal duration of time; while painting can present to the spectator the whole content of its message at one moment.

Excerpt 2

Painting has two weapons at her disposal:

1. Colour.
2. Form.

Form can stand alone as representing an object (either real or otherwise) or as a purely abstract limit to a space or a surface.



Colour cannot stand alone; it cannot dispense with boundaries of some kind. A never-ending extent of red can only be seen in the mind; when the word red is heard, the colour is evoked without definite boundaries.

But when red is presented in a material form (as in painting) it must possess (1) some definite shade of the many shades of red that exist and (2) a limited surface, divided off from the other colours, which are undoubtedly there. The first of these conditions (the subjective) is affected by the second (the objective), for the neighbouring colours affect the shade of red. This essential connection between colour and form brings us to the question of the influences of form on colour.

A yellow triangle, a blue circle, a green square, or a green triangle, a yellow circle, a blue square--all these are different and have different spiritual values. It is evident that many colours are hampered and even nullified in effect by many forms. On the whole, keen colours are well suited by sharp forms (e.g., a yellow triangle), and soft, deep colours by round forms (e.g., a blue circle). But it must be remembered that an unsuitable combination of form and colour is not necessarily discordant, but may, with manipulation, show the way to fresh possibilities of harmony.