Beyond Kandinsky–Theoretical Prophet

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I was a painter freshly disenchanted with Pop Art and not yet convinced by Minimalism when I first discovered *Concerning the Spiritual in Art.* I was thrilled by its justification of abstraction, even though it read like a sermon at times. I skipped over the stilted prose and recognized the urgency of its delivery. Kandinsky had pitched battle on the field of representational art in a mood of revelation and apocalypse. Only Inner Necessity, the angel of light, could overcome Materialism, the dark agent of evil.

He tested these forces in the privacy of his studio, like a latter day alchemist, with his diagrams of color relationships, temperature oppositions and e-motional effects. His search for the abstract grail was both modern and medieval. An artist, he said, should "train not only his eye but also his soul, so that it can weigh colors in its own scale…" (p.67).

I found easy parallels in Abstract Expressionism as a movement poised like a deposed father figure for Pop and Minimalism. Who better to kill(?)… given its odd mix of formalism and metaphysical tendencies… but I still felt something like a heart beating in the older style—and that was a relief. The term Abstract Expressionist had first been applied to Kandinsky in Germany (1919). There was a kind of legacy. I was grateful to the prophet of non-objective art. He used his scholarship to champion play and intuition.

Re-entering the book now I stop at the comment… "art is looking for help from the primitives" (p.32). I wince at the word, but not at the concept. Lifted out of context it seems bold and naked. It speaks to my later, present interest in Kandinsky's study of ethnography. Although it is not openly acknowledged in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, it is shadowed in his arguments against the materialism of science.

He compares the atomic scientists of his time to "self-sacrificing soldiers making a desperate attack." He invokes Madame Blavatsky in the good fight, mentioning... "the number is increasing of those men who put no trust in the methods of material science when it deals with questions which have to do with 'non-matter', or matter that is not accessible to our senses. Just as art is looking for help from the primitives, so these men are turning to half-forgotten times in order to get help from half-forgotten methods. However these methods are still alive and in use in many nations…." (p. 32)

He thanks Madame Blavatsky for blazing the way, translating ancient Hindu mystical practices into Western Theosophical teachings. His assessment of her work seems inconsistent at first, but on closer reading the ambivalence proves carefully measured. Investigating the nature of reality beyond materiality he gravitated towards the invisible, the abstract and the esoteric. The prophet in him and in others was a source of strength and delusion, a most curious place of vulnerability and invincibility. Kandinsky's struggle to balance worldviews, religion, revolutions in art and personal history yielded genuine insights but incurred some awkward associations and messianic misappropriations.

More to be said on the hidden aspects of Kandinsky.