

## *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Synesthesia, and the Avant-Garde: Wassily Kandinsky's *The Yellow Sound* as a Work of Art

**Abstract:** While completely repudiating representational or realistic art in *The Yellow Sound*, Wassily Kandinsky embraced some models of avant-garde drama and prefigured others. Influenced by the principles of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the symbolist theory of “correspondences,” Kandinsky also explored some of the themes of expressionistic drama, such as the eternal contradiction between Dionysian frenzy (yellow) and Apollonian “classicism” (blue) and the never-ending battle between the spiritual and the physical. In emphasizing the importance of collage and the juxtaposition of different arts within a total work of art, he also anticipated the Dadaist theories of automatic writing, chance collages, and random stage compositions. Finally, however, *The Yellow Sound* in its pure form cannot be identified with any particular avant-garde movement: instead, it is *sui generis*, presenting its own form and perhaps its own movement. This essay explores *The Yellow Sound* – a stage composition, as Kandinsky described it – in depth.

**Keywords:** Kandinsky, *The Yellow Sound*, avant-gardism, Dadaism, expressionism, synesthesia, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, *Blaue Reiter*

After studying law at Moscow University, the Russian-born Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) lectured on jurisprudence there until 1896, when he declined a professorship at the University of Dorpat (today the University of Tartu, in Estonia) to study painting in Munich. There he was able to gain traditional training as a painter while associating with many young experimental artists working in Munich at the turn of the century. In 1908, Kandinsky began to create expressionistic landscapes, and, from this point on, he moved steadily in his painting toward more abstract visual forms. Along with Franz Marc, he founded *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) in 1911, a group that embraced a wide range of art devoted to the exploration of the artist's inner life.

In 1912, Kandinsky and Marc edited *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach*, which included the first publication of Kandinsky's play *Der gelbe Klang* (*The Yellow Sound*). Written in 1909, this work occupies a significant place in the history of theater as one of the first abstract dramas (itself barely anticipated by the

---

\* PhD, Helsinki, Finland; email: robertjcardullo@gmail.com

ideas in the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin's symphonic work *Prometheus* [1910]) and also one of the earliest of modern light-and-sound "events." Its musical score, by the Russian composer Thomas von Hartmann, was unfortunately lost during the Russian Revolution of 1917.

At about the same time as he was writing *The Yellow Sound*, together with the plays *Daphnis and Chloe* (1908), *The Green Sound* (1909), *Black and White* (1909), and *Violet* (1911), Kandinsky published his main theoretical tract on modern art, *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911), in which he advocated the creation of increasingly non-objective art, free from the confines of physical representation. As a member of the Bauhaus beginning in 1922, Kandinsky continued to influence the development of this movement – whose primary goals, like his, were to reunite the arts, break down the barriers between artists and craftsmen, and make artistic products available to the common people as well as make them an integral part of daily life – until it was shut down by the Nazis in 1933.

Kandinsky's stage compositions *The Yellow Sound*, *Daphnis and Chloe*, *Black and White*, *Violet*, and *The Green Sound* were written at the very same time – the early 1900s – that he was attempting to break away from naturalism in art and create abstract painting. By renouncing the material object and the human figure in abstract painting, Kandinsky established a new relationship between form and color. Similarly, by renouncing individualized character and psychological motivation in stage composition, Kandinsky introduced a purely theatrical, ecstatically spectacular form whose goal was to have an exclusively spiritual, even regenerative relationship with its audience.

Indeed, inspired by the Wagnerian notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Kandinsky aimed at creating a wholly synthetic genre – the total work of art. Arguing, however, that the Wagnerian concept is based exclusively on the principles of representational art, in which all connections between and within different arts are artificial and external, Kandinsky offered his own model of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. He named his new model a "stage composition," a form centered on the principle of internal spiritual connections among sound, movement, and color. Kandinsky first presented his concept of purely theatrical, synthetic form and its relationship to the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* in his manifesto "On Stage Composition" (1912), which prefaced *The Yellow Sound* in the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*.

In this theoretical introduction to his ideas about the total work of art, Kandinsky reacts against the separation from one another of the three main performing arts: theater, opera, and ballet. He notes that separation or "specialization and the further elaboration of parts [are] the first consequence of materialism" (Kandinsky 1974A, 194). Materialism is concerned with *external* action, completely ignoring any cosmic, spiritual element: from this point of view, each of these arts is immensely "external"

in itself and thus separated from the others. In Kandinsky's theory, materialism ultimately becomes equated with realism, whose principles he, like many other avant-garde artists, denounces. Kandinsky argues, in "On Stage Composition," that "[t]he nineteenth century is distinguished as a period that lay far from inner creation. Its concentration on material appearances and on the material aspects of appearances logically caused creative powers to decline to the point of their virtual disappearance" (Kandinsky 1974A, 192).

Wagner's major error, according to Kandinsky, was in making external connections among plot, music, and movement – connections that could only lead to further externalization or isolation of each constituent part within a total work of art. In "On Stage Composition" he writes that "Wagner tried to intensify the means and bring the work to a monumental height by repeating one and the same external movement in [different] forms" (Kandinsky 1974A, 195). Thus music and movement in Wagner's art are inescapably predetermined by plot and the external actions of characters. And the causal unfolding of events and psychological expression of individual character presuppose a particular musical development. Wagner did not intend to alter the representational function of art, as Kandinsky knew; Wagner's aim was to create a grandiose art form that would produce a unanimous response from the audience and in the end serve a didactic purpose.

Unlike Wagner, Kandinsky contends that the three elements of his *Gesamtkunstwerk* – sound, movement, and color – should *not* have external or narrative connections with one another. He emphasizes, instead, the necessity of inner unity among these elements, which opens up the possibility that each element can keep its own external life, or manifestation, even if it contradicts the external life of another element (Kandinsky 1974A, 201). The inner unity among sound, movement, and color itself arises out of each one's inner connections with itself as well as with the other elements. Kandinsky stresses the importance of basing these inner connections, not on plot or dramatic action, but on the "inner sounds" of every art and the "inner vibrations" of the audience. The didactic or moral purpose is absent here (as it is not in Wagner), for the audience's response is not programmed or directed and thus becomes totally personalized, completely subjective.

As one might deduce, Kandinsky's proposed *Gesamtkunstwerk* repudiates any logical connections within a piece of art. Different art forms within the same artwork are outwardly juxtaposed, contrasted, or conflated, which creates aesthetic confusion that leads to external chaos. A decrease in musical tempo may coincide with an increase in dance movement. A bright, intense color may coexist with a passive, static gesture. Such external irregularities and conflicts within an art, and among the arts, stand side by side with the generative principles of "inner necessity" and "inner

collaboration.” Every art, consequently, has its own “inner sound” that can create different effects each time it communicates with an audience. These different effects depend upon diverse combinations of “inner sounds” within the total work of art. Kandinsky further maintains, in “On Stage Composition,” that it is possible “[t]o use as a method the inner sound of only one element [within a work of art]. To eliminate the external action (=plot) so that the external connection collapses of its own accord, just like the external unity, and [so] that the inner unity gives rise to an endless series of methods that earlier could not exist” (Kandinsky 1974A, 201).

The “inner sound” of each art is expressed through its movement. Kandinsky underlines three possible movements: the movement of music; that of psycho-physical sound, expressed through the physical movements of people and objects; and the movement of color. He rejects the governing triad of realistic drama – psychology, causality, and morality or providentiality – and creates instead his own formula in which the causal-motivational relationships among characters and events are governed by the internal or subjective causality contained in sound, movement, and color. Kandinsky’s formula does not deny the presence of characters and objects onstage; their presence, however, serves a purpose different from the one it would serve in any realistic play. Psycho-physical movement replaces verbal communication, and the word as a carrier of meaning ceases to exist: the same word, repeated frequently and disconnected from other words, loses its meaning and turns into pure sound. Character becomes abstract when thus deprived of verbal grounding as well as rational connectivity. A character’s actions and physical movements can then be comprehended only by relating them to the “inner sounds” of music and color. In this way, the principles of stage composition become similar to the principles of abstract painting.

Kandinsky’s concept of “inner sounds” is closely interwoven with the symbolist theory of synesthesia or “correspondences.” Fascinated by the idea of exploring the spiritual effect of the arts on the audience’s senses, the symbolists based their theory of “correspondences” on Baudelaire’s argument, in the essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863) as well as the poem “Correspondences” (1857), for the existence of an inner, spiritual reciprocity among the arts. This principle of reciprocity allows an artist to replace or merge one art with another, for different art forms can potentially affect the same senses and produce the same “inner vibrations” in audience members. As Frantisek Deak explains in his book *Symbolist Theatre*, the theory of “correspondences” implies that “a musical work can be seen as a poetic work, and a poem can be seen as a musical work” (Deak 1993, 100). This theory reflects the essentially symbolist understanding of the world as a “universe composed of a certain number of analogous systems. The components of one system correspond ... with the components

of any other system. Through the use of symbols, the relationship between the analogous systems is evoked” (Deak 1993, 100). Within this myriad of analogous systems, a particular piece of music can suggest ideas comparable to those invoked by a particular painting or implied by a certain literary work. Attuned to the theory of “correspondences,” Kandinsky in his book *Sounds* (1912), for instance – in which he paired thirty-eight of his poems with woodcuts – experiments with the possibility of “corresponding” or paralleling visuals and words. The pure sound of language should, according to the artist, call forth images and associations similar to those produced by a specific picture – an illustration of the poem, as it was.

In *The Yellow Sound*, Kandinsky further developed and somewhat altered the symbolist theory of “correspondences.” He was interested not merely in exploring the inner reciprocity among music, movement, and color, a reciprocity that would compel each art to suggest analogous ideas or invoke corresponding feelings by affecting the same senses in the audience; he was also concerned to affect the audience through a number of arts simultaneously. This idea of Kandinsky’s – of the total, inner synthesis of the work of art, according to which one art could substitute for or replace another – can be seen as a departure from symbolist theory. By uniting different art forms and creating internal connections among them, Kandinsky desired to originate a complex combination of “inner vibrations” in the audience, which then would have its collective imagination awakened.

In his treatise *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky fully delineates this definition of art as a catalyst of the audience’s imagination. The recipient – the audience – while “experiencing” art, becomes the creator of its own perceptions. Kandinsky thus conceived of the total work of art as a mysterious creation that provokes the audience to find its own connection to, and within, that work. In this sense, Kandinsky is a symbolist, for his conception of art as a mysterious, unknown, and unpredictable “space” in fact coincides with the symbolist understanding of the arts and the world. According to him, and to the symbolists, the truth was to be found beyond external reality – in a spiritual art form.

In *The Yellow Sound*, Kandinsky attempts to combine his theory of “inner sounds” with theatrical practice. (Kandinsky never saw *The Yellow Sound* performed during his lifetime, however. He and his *Blaue Reiter* colleagues, including Franz Marc, August Macke, and Alfred Kubin, worked intensively on a planned 1914 Munich production, with an original musical score by Thomas de Hartmann, but it was cancelled by the outbreak of World War I.) In this stage composition, the audience’s “inner vibrations” are supposed to be invoked by the interconnections within Kandinsky’s triad – interconnections among sound, movement, and color. Instead of real characters, the audience encounters five giants, some vague creatures, people in flowing robes, and people in tights. These “characters” are highly

depersonalized by their puppet-like movements and reactions. The brief appearance of a boy and a man is unexpected within this non-representational setting, yet their bizarre costumes and movements, not their personalities, are significant for the form of Kandinsky's composition. All the characters function as the creators of the "inner sound," or "sounds," of a psycho-physical movement. There is also a chorus backstage conflicting with an offstage musical orchestra: this conflict produces the "inner sound" of musical movement. The third element – color – almost becomes a character, for with its constantly changing tone it suggests a new relationship between the physical movements of the characters and the aural movements of the music.

The composition of *The Yellow Sound* is episodic and consists of a prelude and six "pictures," each of which seems to be complete. There is no intelligible plot that would unite the action of the characters. One can, however, discern some external connections among the "pictures" or scenes: the giants and the people who move from one picture to another; the combinations of the same colors in every picture; and a similar relationship between the chorus and the orchestra throughout the piece. The verbal aspect is almost absent; words do not unite the composition thematically. Nonetheless, after the chorus sings a couple of disjointed phrases during the prelude, in Picture 2 the people in flowing robes recite the following verses in uneven voice:

The flowers cover everything, cover everything.  
Shut your eyes! Shut your eyes!  
We are looking. We are looking.  
Cover conception with innocence.  
Open your eyes! Open your eyes!  
Gone. Gone. (Kandinsky 1974B, 217)

In this scene one experiences a sequence of "inner sounds" derived, not from the words, but from juxtaposed colors. The blue and yellow colors dominate the stage. Their relationship produces the quick appearance of green, red, white, and black tones. The green and white tones seem an extension of the blue color: a green hill coexists with a blue curtain; the blue color often dissolves into a white one. Red is an intense continuation of yellow. In Picture 1, for example, while the yellow giants are still onstage singing, "quickly from left to right fly vague red creatures, somewhat suggesting birds with large heads that are remotely similar to human heads" (Kandinsky 1974B, 214). Similarly, in another picture, the stage is bathed in a cold red light that slowly becomes brighter and yellow. The color black, for its part – if not total blackness – appears onstage as a result of the ongoing confrontation between the blue and yellow tones.

Indeed, there is a direct struggle between these two conflicting colors, blue and yellow. The blue backdrop and a blue light represent the blue color. Yellow is expressed through the yellow figures and faces of the giants, as well as the yellow flowers appearing in different parts of the stage. In Picture 1, the yellow giants introduce the battle between the yellow tone and the blue backdrop: the “flat, matt, blue, rather deep-colored curtain” (Kandinsky 1974B, 213) is almost exploded by the appearance of yellow. In the form of the giants, the color yellow invades the stage, which destroys the infinite quietude or peacefulness of the atmosphere created by the blue curtain, by the broad green hill at the rear, and by the backstage chorus “sounding, without feeling, quite wooden and mechanical” (Kandinsky 1974B, 213).

The appearance of the giants is anticipated by the movements of color and music. “After the chorus stops singing, a general pause: no motion, no sound. Then darkness” (Kandinsky 1974B, 213). The next moment, the yellow giants begin to fill the space of the stage. Their movements are odd when not awkward: “gliding over the stage” (Kandinsky 1974B, 213), they sometimes move their arms in various ritualistic gestures. In addition, “they remain far back, standing beside each other – some with hunched shoulders, others with drooping shoulders, with strange, indistinct, yellow faces” (Kandinsky 1974B, 213). Kandinsky thus makes these figures look extremely non-human. Always together whispering, singing, huddling, and moving, they create a unified image onstage with their exaggerated facial expressions and hunched or drooping shoulders. Visually, then, the giants become kinetic objects rather than real characters.

Both the presence of the yellow giants onstage and the later emergence of a huge yellow flower, blossoming alone on the green hill; precede the appearance of the people in Picture 2. Kandinsky continuously tries to avoid the representational portrayal of these people as actual human beings: deprived of individual names and wearing shapeless (but colorful) robes, they appear to be animated puppets or just objects in motion. They move and speak in ritualistic unison, keeping close to one another. They even have indirect physical and verbal communication with the color yellow. Each of the people holds a huge white flower that resembles the yellow flower on the hill. They are all fascinated yet frightened by their surroundings, as we saw in their lines, “The flowers cover everything, cover everything, and cover everything. / Shut your eyes! Shut your eyes!” (Kandinsky 1974B, 217). In this scene the color yellow is becoming more and more powerful, and the people, who may be part of the blue environment (yellow is completely missing from their robes), can well be considered victims of a yellow invasion. Indeed, the white flowers in their hands turn yellow as they walk “slowly to the front of the stage as if in a trance, and gradually move farther away from each other” (Kandinsky

1974B, 218). From this scene on, the color yellow will never disappear from the stage until the very last image of the composition. The yellow giants themselves are always there, more distinct and audible in some scenes than in others.

The dramatic development of the battle between the yellow and blue colors in Kandinsky's scenario turns out to be circular, however. The yellow "sound" celebrates its victory only temporarily, and Picture 3 is the culmination of its triumph. The yellow giants become taller as they separate from one another and occupy the whole stage. The backdrop and the floor turn black; music is completely absent. This is the most "tragic" moment of the entire composition. Starting with the next episode, though, the yellow tone begins to lose its vigor. The people in tights, a new group, are gaining in power. There is no direct confrontation between the color yellow and the people in tights. The struggle is represented instead by an intense change of color: "various lights sweep the stage and cross each other" (Kandinsky 1974B, 223). Music is also involved in this conflict: "In the orchestra – confusion. The shrill shriek of Picture 3 becomes audible. The giants shudder" (Kandinsky 1974B, 223).

The people, not the giants, are the main characters in the third episode. They inhabit the whole space, and their movements are similar to those found in modern dance. Some of these characters are

running, leaping, running to and from each other, falling. While standing, some figures rapidly move only their arms, others only their legs, or their heads, or their torsos. Some combine all these movements. Sometimes these are group movements. Sometimes whole groups make one and the same movement. (Kandinsky 1974B, 224)

As a result, the yellow giants gradually become invisible and are eventually consumed by total darkness. Kandinsky writes that "it seems as if the giants are being snuffed out like lamps, that is, the light flickers several times before total darkness descends" (Kandinsky 1974B, 224).

The final scene, which "must appear as quickly as possible" (Kandinsky 1974B, 225), resembles the beginning of the composition. The blue backdrop is dominant again. One giant is still onstage, though his face is absolutely white, not yellow. The other four giants have permanently disappeared. The last giant – a trace of the bygone struggle – "slowly raises both arms (with palms facing downward) alongside his body and grows taller" (Kandinsky 1974B, 225). The finale itself is totally unexpected. Seeing a serene blue backdrop at the beginning of the last picture, the audience cannot anticipate the following change at the end: when the lone giant's figure begins to resemble a cross, darkness suddenly devours the stage. Only music, "as expressive as the action on stage" (Kandinsky 1974B, 225), is heard. The last picture by no means clarifies the juxtaposed



relationship of diverse “inner sounds” in the composition. Is the struggle between colors infinite? Does the cross at the end symbolize some sort of reconciliation? Does this allegorical sign of Christianity somehow coincide with the apparent search for knowledge undertaken by the frenzied, fleshly giants, who are otherwise supernatural creatures linked to the Titans of ancient Greek mythology (in particular Coeus, Titan of intellect, and Prometheus, Titan of forethought).

In line with his theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Kandinsky not only introduces conflict within one movement in *The Yellow Sound* – within musical sounds, physical motions, or colorful tones; he also emphasizes the significance of the conflict between these different movements: between sounds and colors, or between sounds and gestures. The music in the orchestra, for example, vehemently reacts to the invasion of the stage by the color yellow. When the yellow flower begins to glow more brightly, the music in the orchestra “becomes nervous, leaps from fortissimo to pianissimo” (Kandinsky 1974B, 217). In another case, when the color yellow celebrates its triumph onstage, the music responds with total confusion. As written by the composer Thomas de Hartmann, the musical portion of this stage composition, in combination with the various colors as well as the physical movements of the characters, can be considered the beginning not only of simultaneity in performance, but also of the noise of brutism. Since there is no musical motif or melody that could externally convey or reflect the actual action of this composition, the only answer is the complete disharmony or chaos of conflicting musical sounds.

In each picture of *The Yellow Sound*, it can be said; Kandinsky establishes a new kind of relationship within his triad of sound, movement, and color. The people in shapeless robes, who, in a very timid way, react against the yellow aggression, are followed, in Picture 3, by the people in tights, who, together with the orchestra, courageously fight the color yellow, gradually producing total bedlam onstage and ousting the giants. Conversely, the tiny, imprecise creatures, “going from right to left, (...) vaguely green in hue, [and] walk[ing] very slowly over the hill” (Kandinsky 1974B, 217-218), strengthen the effect and power of the color yellow. Right after these creatures walk onto the stage in Picture 2, the yellow flower begins violently to convulse, to the point that all the white flowers held by the people in robes gradually turn yellow.

The chorus and orchestra in this composition function separately. The chorus, for its part, more or less reflects the movements of the color yellow. In the prelude, it introduces the struggle to come between yellow and blue by singing about “tears and laughter. (...) Prayers while cursing. (...) The joy of union and the blackest battles” (Kandinsky 1974B, 210). It is still dark-blue dawn, yet the chorus can foresee the inevitable confrontation. In Picture 3, when the stage and the floor turn black and the yellow giants

grow bigger and taller, the soloist of the chorus – a tenor – seems to get involved in the struggle as well: “Suddenly a shrill, terrified tenor voice can be heard from behind the stage, rapidly shrieking completely unintelligible words” (Kandinsky 1974B, 219). The orchestra, by contrast, seems to be an extension of the color blue, for it becomes most audible in its violent response to the yellow giants. At the beginning of this confrontation of colors, then, Kandinsky himself suggests the struggle between the orchestra and the chorus and their direct association with either the blue or yellow tone. Later, when “the orchestra struggles with the chorus and defeats it, [a] thick blue fog completely obscures the stage” (Kandinsky 1974B, 214).

By juxtaposing or conflating different arts in this way, Kandinsky is simultaneously trying to find an “inner” justification for his method. He attempts, for example, to establish an “internal” musical equivalent for every color and physical movement. When the group of people in tights appears onstage – colorful tights to go along with their colored hair – the movement of each person corresponds to a musical sound in accordance with the color he or she represents. Kandinsky specifies in his stage directions that “[c]orresponding to each color-sound, single figures rise from different places: quickly, hastily, solemnly, slowly, and as they move, they look upward. (...) [Then] in the orchestra again single colors are heard” (Kandinsky 1974B, 223).

Kandinsky also notes that the atmosphere created by color or physical movement and the mood evoked by music should not be the same, which further demonstrates his break from the symbolist theory of “correspondences.” In other words, the victory of the yellow sound in color does not correspond to the victory of the same sound in music. To wit: in Picture 3, “[a]s the light increases, the music becomes lower and darker (these motions suggest a snail withdrawing into its shell). (...) When the light is most intense, the music has faded away entirely” (Kandinsky 1974B, 219). Kandinsky indicates here two opposite motions: the motion of the color and that of the music. He creates the same effect with physical movement: when the yellow light becomes powerful, the giants that actually represent this color remain motionless. They also remain motionless in Picture 5 – giving the people in tights enough space to create their own dance – and at the very moment the giants assume their motionless posture, the music, in a kind of counterpoint, becomes intensified.

Kandinsky calls, finally, for the total liberation of art from previous traditions by creating a composition where the simultaneous existence of logically unrelated actions stimulates, for the audience, a process of infinite, nearly extra-aesthetic associations, and in this his work is a predecessor of Dadaism and futurism. The Dadaists, in particular, were fascinated by Kandinsky’s stage composition *The Yellow Sound*, probably regarding it as a loosely constructed scenario that would allow them to create onstage a

series of their signature collages. Hugo Ball himself was rehearsing *The Yellow Sound* in Germany in 1914, intending (but not succeeding) in turning its performance into the first Dadaist manifesto. In his posthumous book *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary* (1974), Ball indicated that *The Yellow Sound* enormously attracted his attention: “The struggle between tonalities, lost equilibrium, ‘principles’ falling apart, unexpected drumbeats, big questions, apparently aimless aspiration, apparently desperate urgency and longing shattered the chains and attachment that make several things one antagonism and [a series of] contradictions” (Ball 1974, 230). Antagonism and contradiction, for Dadaists, create the possibility of liberating the audience’s fantasy and imagination. For them as for Kandinsky, all forms, including those of antagonism and contradiction, exist exclusively as a form of the inner spirit; and in *The Yellow Sound*, according to Ball, “[t]he spirit creates a form and goes on to another form” (Ball 1974, 230).

One could argue that the Dadaists’ ideas about bruitism, simultaneity, and automatism (automatic writing, action painting) were partly influenced by *The Yellow Sound*. Indeed, in their performances the Dadaists developed a principle of theatricality in which it was precisely a fusion of the arts that would attempt to affect the audience’s unconscious mind. In his “Zurich Chronicle” (1920), Tristan Tzara describes one such performance from a Dada Evening:

Boxing resumes: Cubist dance, costumes by Janco, each man his own big drum on his head, noise. Negro music (...) literary experiments: Tzara in tails stands before the curtain, stone sober for the animals, and explains the new aesthetic: gymnastic poem, concert of vowels, bruitist poem, static poem, chemical arrangement of ideas, (...) vowel poem (...) new interpretation: the subjective folly of the arteries, the dance of the heart on burning buildings, and acrobatics in the audience. (Goldberg 1988, 64)

Such brutal juxtaposition of widely divergent artistic and non-artistic elements confuses and ultimately overwhelms spectators, who must slowly search their minds for their own connections to the material onstage.

Like the Dadaists, Kandinsky does not try to manipulate the audience; rather, he gives it a certain freedom to construct its own mental images. While playing with different ideas and perceptions, spectators thus become involved in the artistic and intellectual process of constructing their private “inner” connections to, and within, a particular piece; and in this process, the importance of chance replaces that of consequence or predictability. In Dadaist performances themselves, however – where the notion of chance or randomness was carried to the extreme according to the principles of collage-cum-montage – spectators were concerned less with spiritual or “inner” connection than with external connections (or the lack thereof) in what they were witnessing. The Dadaists favored the motif of the circus, for

example, with its unrelated acts devoid of any psychological or transcendent interest and based purely upon technical virtuosity. These avant-garde artists were concerned more with juxtaposing, in a more or less mechanical, haphazard way, disparate elements within an improvisational structure than with finding any psychic connection or correspondence among such elements.

While offering his audiences an opportunity to play with a collage of images and find, by chance, their own "inner" connections among them, Kandinsky himself, as creator, does not juxtapose the "inner sounds" in any fortuitous way. He orchestrates a very precise structure in which no improvisation is possible; performers and designers must follow Kandinsky's stage directors to the letter in order to reconstruct a composition such as *The Yellow Sound*. In fact, the entire composition, as written, can be seen as an extended set of stage directions. Nonetheless, if one disregards Kandinsky's concept of "inner sounds," *The Yellow Sound* can indeed be seen as a dada-like collage or montage of music, moving objects, and assorted colors, all of which become intensified or diminished by the amount of light projected onto them.

In this collage-cum-montage, Kandinsky even combines elements of representational art with those of non-representationalism. Picture 4 of *The Yellow Sound*, for instance, seems to contradict the otherwise unconventional dramatic development of this stage composition, for it is the only episode in which Kandinsky introduces individual characters: the man and the boy. There is nothing extraordinary about their behavior, either. "A small boy in a white shirt sits on the floor (facing the audience) and slowly and regularly pulls the lower end of [a] rope. At stage right, a very large man is standing dressed entirely in black" (Kandinsky 1974B, 220). The rope is connected to a bell in a turret on the roof of some building. When the man yells "Silence!!!" (Kandinsky 1974B, 220), the boy drops the rope.

In this episode, Kandinsky continues to play with different colors, presenting here a combination of red, blue, and gray tones. Moreover, there is a contrast in color between the boy and the man: the boy is dressed in white, whereas the man is in black. Does such a picture relate to the composition's blue-yellow confrontation? Or in a work like this does any search for such meaning or external connection become pointless? More likely, Kandinsky is teasing the audience's imagination here. He intentionally inserts a seemingly representational situation into his stage composition to upset the audience's expectations, for the episode to follow brings the audience back to the unconventional nature of *The Yellow Sound* and its dramatic conflict: at the start of Picture 5, "Gradually the stage is bathed in a cold red light that slowly becomes brighter and yellower. At this moment the giants in the back become visible (as in Picture 3)" (Kandinsky 1974B, 221).

Kandinsky also plays with the notion of a representational set in *The Yellow Sound*. A representational landscape, consisting of the hill and some rocks at the back, is part of his stage composition. The “set,” however, quickly loses its representational aspect and becomes associated with the “inner sound” of colors. The green hill comes to coexist with the blue curtain; the red rocks become an extension of the yellow tone. Furthermore, the representational landscape at the beginning of the composition is not the only instance of such a setting or milieu in Kandinsky’s stage piece. Other instances of representational art in *The Yellow Sound* – at least in its printed version – are the illustrations that Kandinsky and Franz Marc placed next to every picture or episode in their edition of the *Blauwe Reiter Almanac*. The illustrations, most of which were taken from various traditions of folk art, are titled “German,” “Russian,” “Egyptian,” “Dance Mask,” and “Bavarian Glass Painting,” and can hardly be considered abstract paintings. Apart from two illustrations that include symbols of Christianity – the cross and the fish – the book illustrations exist in a different “dimension” from the stage composition itself. Referring to the notion of “inner necessity,” Kandinsky himself, though, would perhaps argue for the “inner-sound” connections that exist between the more or less representational illustrations and the abstract stage performance of *The Yellow Sound*, and thus would he repudiate somewhat the Dadaist principle of illogical collage in which no connection – internal or external – between disparate elements is discernible.

What decisively distinguishes Dadaism and its notion of collage from Kandinsky is the importance for the latter of formal relationships in any stage composition. The principles of Dadaist collage did not include the importance of form; none of the Dadaist performances were concerned with constructing form or structure onstage. The space of any production of *The Yellow Sound*, by contrast, creates its own form. In his treatise *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky argues that “form itself, even completely abstract, resembling geometrical form, has its own inner sound” (Kandinsky 1982, 163). The form of *The Yellow Sound* is created by the spatio-temporal arrangement of its colors, music, and objects. That form, taken as one unified “inner sound,” will eventually affect the audience and invoke its “inner vibrations.” And, within this form, any contradictory *or* logical relationship is possible.

Form in combination with color is, of course, the most important feature of abstract painting. As in abstract painting, form in *The Yellow Sound* is mostly determined by the use of space. In its stage performance, in fact, this composition can be presented as a succession of abstract paintings accompanied by music. When the people in tights enter the stage, they arrange themselves into a number of different groups that by themselves create a painterly, spatial composition. But such “paintings” consist of

movement, color, and music that are constantly changing; the composition is by no means static or inert. The giants and the other characters, for example, exist or move on different spatial planes. “The movements,” according to Kandinsky, “are different in each group: one walks fast, straight ahead; another, slowly as if with difficulty; a third now and then leaps joyously; a fourth looks around continually; a fifth advances in a solemn theatrical manner, arms crossed; a sixth group walks on tiptoes, each with one palm raised, and so on” (Kandinsky 1974B, 222). Contrasted (not blending) colors and lights also can coexist, in the same episode, in various places or on different spatial planes on the stage, forming distinct, independent *mise-en-scènes*.

The form, in this way, becomes a multidimensional composition in which the stage space is allocated to many different, and differently dispersed, groups. Kandinsky controls the audience’s attention by constantly changing the focus, mainly with the help of light and color. When he wants to switch the audience’s attention to the giants, for instance, he makes them more yellow and therefore more visible. Musical and physical movements can also increase the importance of one compositional group and weaken the physical presence of another. Yet it is not the “physical presence” or external connections of the groups that is essential to *The Yellow Sound*, but rather the “inner sounds” they create within Kandinsky’s triad of sound, movement, and color.

Significantly, Kandinsky had a theory about different colors and their effect on the other arts as well as the audience. In his Dada-Merz experiments in collage from 1918, Kurt Schwitters later explored his own theory of colors, yet without proposing any spiritual connections to music and movement. The Italian futurists also dealt with colors, at least on the external level. In Fortunato Depero’s work called *Colors* (1916), “the ‘characters’ were four cardboard objects – Gray (plastic, ovoid), Red (triangular, dynamic), White (long-lined, sharp-pointed), and Black (multiglobe) and were moved by invisible strings in an empty blue cubic space” (Goldberg 1988, 28). Kandinsky’s theory of colors, for its part, partially explains the conflict of “inner sounds” in *The Yellow Sound*. He writes that

Yellow is the typical earthly color. (...) If one compares it to the human mind, it could have the effect of representing madness – not melancholy or hypochondria, but rather mania (...) or frenzy – like the lunatic who attacks people, destroying everything, dissipating his physical strength in every direction. (...) The deeper the blue becomes, the more strongly it calls man toward the infinite, awakening in him a desire for the pure and, finally, for the supernatural. It is the color of the heavens (...) Blue unfolds (...) the element of tranquility. (Kandinsky 1982, 181)

Kandinsky goes on to compare the black color to absolute nothingness and “eternal silence without future, without hope” (Kandinsky 1982, 181). The white color symbolizes another kind of nothingness: the nothingness before birth, when all hope still lies in the future. Red is a color of warmth, strength, and maturity; green is the most peaceful color, the one that appears to resolve the conflict between yellow and blue. Kandinsky argues, in *On the Spiritual in Art*, that the green color “does not move in any direction, has no overtones of joy or sorrow or passion, demands nothing, calls out to no one” (Kandinsky 1982, 181).

In addition to defining the role and purpose of each color within a stage composition, Kandinsky considers the effect that each color can have on the audience. Yellow, for example, is a warm color and thus moves toward spectators, whereas blue is cold and moves away from the audience. The movements of the other colors are directed toward themselves, not toward audience members. White, for example, shows internal resistance toward every other color, while black indicates the complete absence of such resistance. Red is identified with movement within itself, “which (...) is very little directed toward the external” (Kandinsky 1982, 186), whereas the extremely stable green does not move in any direction whatsoever.

In Kandinsky’s triad, then, the function of psychology is taken over by different colors and their psychological effect on the audience or on one another. And even though Kandinsky argues for the independence of all three elements in his triad – sound, movement, and color – and balance among them, it is color that actually dictates the action. Color replaces not only psychology in the triad, but also causality or cause-and-effect relationships, for changes in color program the movements of the other elements in Kandinsky’s composition: music and dance. Indeed, if one applies his theory of colors, combined with his theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to *The Yellow Sound*, this stage composition becomes less a collage of disparate artistic elements than, finally, an expressionistic drama dominated by color.

The German expressionists were particularly attracted to the theme of the infinite struggle between heaven and earth, soul and body, spirit and flesh; and they saw in this struggle a never-ending conflict between spirituality and material substance. In Kandinsky’s theory, this eternal struggle is delineated through the antagonistic struggle between the yellow tone, which Kandinsky associates with earth, and the blue tone, which he associates with heaven. The composition begins with dawn, “which at first is whitish and later becomes intense dark blue” (Kandinsky 1974B, 210). This is the beginning of life, at which point the heavenly blue color has not yet been juxtaposed against the earthly yellow one. A blue fog is peacefully settling down upon the stage, but the internal spirit identified with blue is soon to be disturbed by the outer body identified with yellow. In the

next stage picture, by directly contrasting blue and yellow, Kandinsky is indicating the eternal conflict between inner spirit and external matter.

In another expressionistic drama, *Murderer, the Hope of Women* (1907), which was written a bit earlier than *The Yellow Sound*, Oskar Kokoschka also introduces the battle between the flesh and the spirit. Kandinsky may have been influenced by this work and used its organizing principle as the theme for his own composition, for it is noteworthy that in his play Kokoschka employs almost the same set of colors to be found in *The Yellow Sound*. The blue color, which is associated with the Man in *Murderer, the Hope of Women*, symbolizes light and the inner world, whereas the red color – the Woman – signifies the flesh that leads ultimately to darkness, destruction, and death. In Kandinsky's composition, yellow at some point also becomes red and resembles blood; in Picture 2 of *The Yellow Sound*, even white flowers turn suddenly to red, and they "seem to be filled with blood" (Kandinsky 1974B, 218).

As in Kokoschka's drama, the inner spirit in *The Yellow Sound* – the blue color – longs for transcendence. Spiritual transcendence is unobtainable, however, because the yellow giants – the frenzied flesh – are given life and become powerful. At times when these giants occupy the entire theatrical space – whispering, flailing their arms, running around, falling down, or gliding frighteningly over the floor – the lights go off and the stage turns totally dark, revealing the futility of any further attempt on the part of the spirit to transcend. Except for the first picture of *The Yellow Sound*, in which the power of the inner spirit remains strong, the other episodes in fact conclude in complete darkness. The end of this composition proves the final impossibility of the inner spirit's survival.

It's true that the last giant – the only one left at the finish – is willing to sacrifice himself, as the following stage direction suggests: "when he extends to the full height of the stage, (...) his figure resembles a cross" (Kandinsky 1974B, 215). His sacrifice, nevertheless, is not accepted. The stage again suddenly becomes black, without any trace of the blue color. As a result, Kandinsky's composition seems more pessimistic than Kokoschka's drama. Unlike *Murderer, the Hope of Women*, *The Yellow Sound* shows the inability of the inner spirit to conquer the outer body. The inner spirit is unable to register any triumph, but the flesh does not celebrate its victory, either. Blackness – the final image of the composition – proves the impossibility of any attempt on the part of body and spirit to inhabit the same space together for very long. Devouring the stage, the black color simply ends the contest. It is nothingness – the nothingness of the last sound, the undefeated yellow one – that is expressed by the orchestra. Nothingness prevails. The movement is finished.

While completely repudiating representational or realistic art in *The Yellow Sound*, then, Kandinsky embraced some models of avant-garde drama and



prefigured others. Influenced by the principles of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the symbolist theory of “correspondences,” Kandinsky also explored some of the themes of expressionistic drama, such as the eternal contradiction between Dionysian frenzy (yellow) and Apollonian “classicism” (blue) and the never-ending battle between the spiritual and the physical. In emphasizing the importance of collage and the juxtaposition of different arts within a total work of art, he also anticipated the Dadaist theories of automatic writing, chance collages, and random stage compositions. Finally, however, *The Yellow Sound* in its pure form cannot be identified with any particular avant-garde movement: instead, it is *sui generis*, presenting its own form and perhaps its own movement.

### References

- Ball, Hugo. 1974. *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*. Ed. John Elderfield. Trans. Ann Raimés. New York: Viking Press.
- Deak, Frantisek. 1993. *Symbolist Theatre: The Formation of an Avant-Garde*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Goldberg, RoseLee. 1988. *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. 1974A. “On Stage Composition.” In *Blaue Reiter Almanac*. Ed. Klaus Lankheit. Trans. Henning Falkenstein. New York: Viking Press. 190-206.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. 1974B. *The Yellow Sound: A Stage Composition*. In *Blaue Reiter Almanac*. Ed. Klaus Lankheit. Trans. Henning Falkenstein. New York: Viking Press. 207-225.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. 1982. *On the Spiritual in Art*. In *Kandinsky, Complete Writings on Art*. Ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo. Vol. 1: 1901-21. Boston: G. K. Hall. 114-221.