



40. Advertisement for the film *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. 1932. Approx. 11 by 10 cm. (Private collection).



41. Photograph of Fredric March as Mr Hyde in the film *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. 1932. (Private collection).

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was screened with an extra: 'Duke Ellington and his famous orchestra: in a torrid Harlem revue!'.¹⁶

Davis was ever alert to visual manifestations of modern American life, and almost a dozen years after he first exhibited *American painting* he explained that 'skyscraper architecture [. . .] fast travel by train, auto and aeroplane which brought new and multiple perspectives [. . .] movies and radio; Earl Hines hot piano and Negro Jazz music in general' were among the things that had inspired him to paint.¹⁷ The seemingly discordant subjects in Davis's 1932 painting comprise a lively survey of modern life in the United States: innovative airplane design, speed and

distance records, famous personalities, jazz music, distinctive architecture, progressive painters, gangster activities and award-winning special effects in film. In *American painting*, as it was exhibited at the First Whitney Biennial, Davis used a clean-lined style to capture the rhythm of contemporary urban events and visually insist that art and life in the United States should be defined by all that was vital and modern.

¹⁶ Cinema advertisement, *New York Times* (5th February 1932), p.25.

¹⁷ S. Davis: 'The Cube Root', *Art News* 41 (February 1943), p.34.

Kandinsky: recent exhibitions and publications

by CHRISTOPHER SHORT

WITH THE APPROACH of the centenary of some of Wassily Kandinsky's most important contributions to painting and art theory – the first *Improvisation*, for example, dates to 1909, the first *Composition* to 1910 – there has been a marked increase in scholarship on the artist. Contributing to this is the current exhibition *Kandinsky – Absolut. Abstrakt*, which originated at the Lenbachhaus, Munich, and is now at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (to 10th August), before going to New York.¹ Closely related to it and important for its evaluation is *Kandinsky – Das druckgrafische Werk*, which ran concurrently in Munich and is at the Kunstmuseum, Bonn, to 12th July. The two catalogues for these shows,² as well as Helmut Friedel's and Annegret Hoberg's *Kandinsky*³ provide new material and fresh interpretations of Kandinsky's life and work.

¹ The exhibition was at the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus and Kunstbau, Munich, from 25th October 2008 to 8th March 2009; after its Paris showing it moves to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (18th September

Kandinsky – Absolut. Abstrakt consists of over ninety paintings, of which approximately two-thirds come from the foremost Kandinsky collections held by the Lenbachhaus, the Centre Pompidou and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. Thus the curators were well placed to launch one of the most significant exhibitions of Kandinsky's work for several decades. Add to this the exhibition of the entire Lenbachhaus collection of Kandinsky's prints and the stage was set for a truly monumental display of Kandinsky's *œuvre*.

The title of the exhibition is a little awkward. It seems to have been reached by taking a phrase from an undated text by Kandinsky entitled 'Development of Artforms', which reads 'II. Epoche – Abstrakt – absolute K.[unst]'.⁴ In quoting from this, Hoberg's catalogue essay converts the hyphen into a full stop (something

to 10th January 2010).

² Catalogues: *Kandinsky – Absolut. Abstrakt*. Edited by Helmut Friedel. 300 pp. incl. 147 col. + 87 b. & w. ills. (Prestel, Munich, 2008), £30. ISBN 978-3-7913-4128-6;

that would have intrigued Kandinsky), and in the title of the exhibition and its catalogue, the words *Abstrakt* and *absolute* are reversed; they appeared infrequently in the Munich showing³ and, in the literature advertising the Paris and forthcoming New York incarnations of the exhibition, they seem to have disappeared altogether.

The ambition of the exhibition is most clearly articulated in the published 'exhibition concept', which describes the many shows and extensive studies that have been produced on (and by) Kandinsky, and states that 'the time has come to attempt to create a summary, or at least draw definitive conclusions, from all these studies and insights'. The question we must ask, then, is whether or not the exhibition realises this ambition.

Works chosen for inclusion are those that the curators considered of most importance for Kandinsky himself, ones to which he gave preference in exhibitions and publications. For this reason, works from before 1907 do not appear, and smaller studies such as those done in and around Murnau, so important for his development towards abstraction, are little represented. The exhibition is ordered more or less chronologically, and in Munich, where the present writer saw the show, it was divided into eleven discrete spaces. As one went through the first ones, there was an exciting sense of moving incrementally towards abstraction, but in a way that called attention to particular aspects of this – such as the dedication of the third area almost entirely to *Improvisations* made in 1910–11, and of the fourth mostly to landscapes of 1912–13. After the section documenting works made in Russia during and after the First World War, including *In grey* of 1919 (which the literature identifies as a turning point in his move towards the use of geometric form in his painting; cat. no.52; Fig.42), three areas were dedicated mainly to works from 1921 to 1926. The first of these presented paintings such as *Red spot II* (1921; no.56), *Red oval* (1920; no.53) and *Blue segment* (1921; no.57), all of which mention in their titles and/or depict colour planes. The second area presented such works as *Black grid* (1922; no.62) and *Through-going line* (1923; no.65; Fig.43), but also *Black lines I* of 1913 (no.43) and *Light picture* of the same year (no.42; Fig.44). Although it contains no lines in the title, the latter is one of the paintings given over to abstract linear qualities that Kandinsky was exploring more thoroughly on paper at about this time. The theme here was line and the chronology was completely disrupted to this end. The third section contained such works as *Several circles* (1926; no.70), *On points* (1928; no.73) and *Composition VIII* of 1923 (no.67; Fig.45), which, like many of the works in this area, contains numerous relatively small discs, or points. Not all the exhibits in these sections conformed to the scheme, but most did and the arrangement across these three areas according to the sequence 'Plane – Line – Point' seemed clear, and justified the disrupted chronology.

Not surprisingly, though, the exhibition by itself, even with some quite concentrated passages and a detailed timeline on wall panels, did not constitute a summary, nor does it draw 'definitive conclusions' from existing scholarship. The catalogue makes some amends for this, including commentaries on a number of the works in the exhibition, as well as its five essays. In 'Vasily Kandinsky – Absolute. Abstract. Concrete', Hoberg's essay presents an overview of Kandinsky's life and *œuvre* and, in covering what may be familiar territory, nonetheless animates this through



42. *In grey*, by Wassily Kandinsky. 1919. Canvas, 129 by 176 cm. (Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris).



43. *Through-going line*, by Wassily Kandinsky. 1923. Canvas, 115 by 200 cm. (Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf; exh. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris).

attention to concepts that are of importance to the exhibition, such as the relations between the terms listed in her essay's title, and by drawing on new research that extends current scholarship. Likewise, Vivian Endicott Barnett's excellent essay, 'The Artist Reinvents Himself: Changes, Crises, Turning Points', follows the trajectory of Kandinsky's life, but with particular focus on major turning points (such as occurred in the years 1914, 1917, 1933 and 1941), their relationship to the development of his art and the place of key works shown in the exhibition in relation to these turning points. Both essays take good advantage of the show's tremendous scope to explore the 'bigger picture' of Kandinsky that it offers. But, between the detailed chronology of Kandinsky's life that appears at the beginning of the catalogue, and the two essays by Hoberg and by Barnett, some repetition is inevitable. Christian Derouet's 'Kandinsky and the *Cahiers d'Art*, 1927–1944', attending to the final years, continues this biographical focus. He traces the changing relations between Kandinsky and Christian Zervos, the owner and editor of *Cahiers d'Art*, which moved from collaboration and support to disagreement and hostility. The detail of these changing relations is important,

and *Kandinsky – Das druckgrafische Werk/Complete Prints*. Edited by Helmut Friedel and Annegret Hoberg. 296 pp. incl. 237 col. + 45 b. & w. ills. (Wienand Verlag, Cologne, 2008), €44. ISBN 978-3-87909-964-1.

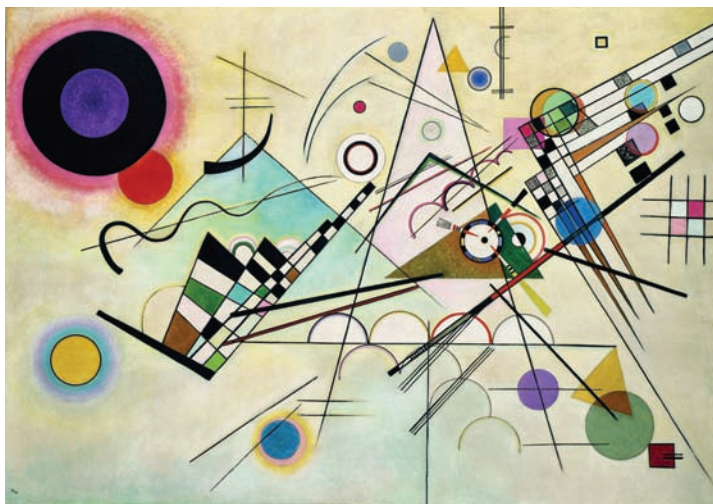
³ H. Friedel and A. Hoberg, eds.: *Kandinsky*, Munich 2008.

⁴ H. Friedel: *Wassily Kandinsky. Gesammelte Schriften 1889–1916*, Munich 2007, p.477.

⁵ The exhibition's press material, for example, carried only the title 'KANDINSKY'.



44. *Light picture*, by Wassily Kandinsky. 1913. Canvas, 77.8 by 100.2 cm. (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; exh. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris).



45. *Composition VIII*, by Wassily Kandinsky. 1923. Canvas, 140 by 201 cm. (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; exh. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris).

but perhaps still more so is the insight we are given into Kandinsky's capacity to deal with such situations. Thus, Derouet shows Kandinsky forming new alliances, such as that with *XXe Siècle* to which he gave financial backing 'to defend abstract art and "put a stop to *Cahier d'Art's* obsession with Picasso"',⁶ and in the first issue of which he published his manifesto dedicated to 'Concrete Art'. Just as Barnett focuses on the artist's capacity to surmount crises, so Derouet develops the image of the artist as a politically astute personality, always prepared to reposition himself according to artistic need. Tracey Bashkoff's relatively short essay entitled 'Kandinsky and "America in General"' attends to the presence of Kandinsky's work in the United States, looking in particular at his relations with Galka Scheyer, who had been promoting his work there since 1924, and with Hilla von Rebay who guided Solomon R. Guggenheim's purchases of European art, including that of Kandinsky. In establishing these positive links to the United States, Bashkoff also traces the difficulties Kandinsky encountered while in Paris, not least the appearance

of fourteen of his works in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition in Munich and elsewhere in 1937–38, and the differences with the Surrealists that his interest in Futurism (with its right-wing politics) served to compound.

Each of these essays attempts to synthesise important moments in Kandinsky's life in relation to his work, especially those on display in the exhibition. The only essay in the catalogue that does not do this is Matthias Haldemann's 'The Theatre of Pictures' which, instead, seeks to explore ways in which the paintings operate according to an order at odds with conventional logic. Most convincing is his account of what he calls the 'paradoxical pictures' in which he argues that Kandinsky sought to use contradictory elements, discontinuities, tension and paradox to 'keep the externally heterogeneous work open to our perception and the imagination'.⁷ I think this is correct and is possibly the best riposte to the expectation that the exhibition and any number of publications could reasonably constitute a summary or draw 'definitive conclusions' to the work of Kandinsky.

Another critical perspective on the exhibition of paintings was brought about by the exhibition devoted to Kandinsky's prints. *Kandinsky – Das druckgrafische Werk* consisted of the almost complete set of the artist's prints held by the Lenbachhaus (there are only five that it does not hold), supplemented by three works from the Centre Pompidou, and complemented by original woodblocks, trial proofs and examples of Kandinsky's original publications. The exhibition was beautifully presented in Munich using, for the majority of prints, a standard format for their display – dark grey frame with light grey mount, set against mid-grey walls. This neutral ground allowed the works' more subtle qualities to be heard. Most intriguing were the series of variations on individual works, such as the four versions of the woodcut *The night (Large version)* of 1903 (cat. nos.6.1–4), which included the first, second, fourth and sixth state of the print. Variations from black and white through different coloured versions of the same print led to significantly different effects; to Kandinsky, who repeatedly returned to the question of how different colours relate to different forms, these varied effects must have suggested many possibilities to his later colour theory. The inclusion of trial proofs, and of tests of details such as heads repeated several times on the same sheet, adds to the sense we have of Kandinsky's working method. If there was any question, the exhibition established beyond doubt the importance of the print within Kandinsky's *œuvre*.

Together, the two exhibitions provided an unprecedented opportunity to compare the prints with key paintings produced throughout Kandinsky's career. While iconography and abstract form are often similar across the mediums, the importance of the early prints, in particular, for the development of abstraction in the paintings becomes clear. The abstract qualities of a woodcut such as *Hill, tree, clouds and figure* of 1907 (Fig.46), for example – in spite of the betrayal of the title – are considerably advanced in relation to the paintings of the same year, largely as a result of the characteristics of the medium itself, but also because of the artist's exploitation of the medium to 'purely pictorial' ends. This observation is by no means new to the literature on Kandinsky, but the opportunity to test such relations between the two exhibitions was truly extraordinary.

⁶ C. Derouet: 'Kandinsky and the *Cahiers d'Art*, 1927–1944', in Friedel, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.270.

⁷ M. Haldemann: 'The Theatre of Pictures. Kandinsky's Abstraction of Abstraction',

in *ibid.*, p.253.

⁸ Friedel and Hoberg, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.260.

The quality of reproduction in the catalogue for the print exhibition is excellent. As well as Friedel's introduction, it contains three essays. Melanie Horst attends to Kandinsky's early woodcuts and bound editions (approximately two-thirds of his prints were executed during his time in Munich and on his travels until 1912), identifying key motifs and influences as well as exploring his working methods. Her readings of the works situate them in the same contexts as the paintings such that, for example, the same biblical themes are shown to appear in prints made about 1911. Volker Adolphs's essay examines the importance of prints among artists involved with the Blue Rider (Kandinsky, Marc, Macke, Münter and Campendonk) and he explores the place of the print in each artist's *œuvre*, noting, for example, that whereas Kandinsky often repeated in his paintings solutions found in his woodcuts, Marc 'instead strove for formulations that were completely independent and appropriate to the technique'.⁸ Christoph Schreier looks at the *Small Worlds* portfolio of 1922 to explore the works contained in it not only on their own terms, through careful scrutiny of technique, composition and style, but also in relation to Kandinsky's theory in which, for example, etching, as a medium that can only be reproduced in limited numbers, is described as 'aristocratic', while lithography, as a medium that can be reproduced in large print runs, is described as 'egalitarian'. The portfolio of prints is shown to look back as well as forwards, in the sense that the prints recover form from earlier works and predict the form of much later ones. In the latter, they suggest a significant shift in Kandinsky's method, Schreier argues, from a mystical 'inner necessity' to 'system and rationality'. The catalogue, available in German and English, is an excellent addition to the literature on Kandinsky's prints, especially given the limited material available on them in the English language.

The final publication, not tied directly to either exhibition but clearly part of the same 'arsenal' of scholarship, is Friedel's and Hoberg's *Kandinsky*. It is a massive book with many large, high-quality colour reproductions and hitherto unpublished photographs. Included with the volume is a facsimile of *Small Worlds* which beautifully complements Schreier's catalogue essay on the portfolio. Again, Friedel introduces the book, this time with a short, sharp text that establishes fundamental issues of Kandinsky's theory and practice of abstraction. Seven substantial essays follow. Noemi Smolik draws attention to the particularly Russian context for Kandinsky's understanding of art and explores the place of Vladimir Solovyov among others in this. Unfortunately, while the essay covers important material, it overlooks the long-standing existence of some of this in published Kandinsky scholarship. Reinhard Spieler writes of Kandinsky's *A colourful life (A motley life)* of 1907 in the context of what he calls early twentieth-century 'visions of paradise', including those of Matisse and Derain, that Kandinsky saw during his stay in Paris from 1906 to 1907. Hoberg has two essays, the first being a thorough background to and account of the Blue Rider and its related exhibitions, and the second being an exploration of Kandinsky's relationship to contemporary music, and Arnold Schoenberg in particular. Evelyn Benesch looks at the development of Kandinsky's art in Russia during and after the War, calling attention to the difficulties encountered in these years, to the stylistic diversity of his paintings and to the development of a



46. *Hill, tree, clouds and figure*, by Wassily Kandinsky. 1907. Woodcut, 4.1 by 7.2 cm. (Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich; exh. Kunstmuseum, Bonn).

new (more geometric) style of painting that develops from about 1919 in works such as *In grey*. Christian Wolsdorff's essay, in attending to Kandinsky's teachings at the Bauhaus, manages also to describe the important story of political and economic tensions that existed at the school, with Kandinsky often involved in – and sometimes engineering – these. In addition to describing Kandinsky's work and relationships of the Paris years, Derouet's essay develops his account of Kandinsky as a shrewd strategist in the *Absolut. Abstrakt* catalogue such that, for example, we are told how Kandinsky, in his break with the Surrealists and open interest in Marinetti, 'was most certainly conducting a charm offensive in order to get Rome or Venice to stage a major retrospective of his work'.⁹ The observation that Kandinsky was capable of such manoeuvring is not new, but the way these essays locate this in the broader context of his life and the development of his work is important.

Friedel's and Hoberg's *Kandinsky* is similar to the *Absolut. Abstrakt* catalogue, in that it is ordered chronologically, spanning the key 'episodes' in Kandinsky's life, and exploring works and ideas in relation to these. Again, much familiar ground is covered, but in the process, new and significant observations are made, in places drawing on and developing recent research. Both publications repeat the more or less temporal trajectory of the exhibitions and in so doing, perhaps inevitably, develop a 'life and works of Kandinsky' approach. However, it is not necessarily the most productive way of moving towards the kind of summary or conclusions that the exhibition concept suggests. So much excellent scholarship on Kandinsky, particularly in recent decades, of necessity remains unmentioned. An alternative approach might have been to construct a series of 'cross sections' that bring together a more limited number of Kandinsky's key works and related studies, with works by other artists who influenced them, and with other forms of visual 'evidence' beyond the world of art that is known to have inflected his development. Such an approach might establish a model for recognising the multi-layered and even contradictory nature of so many of Kandinsky's works.¹⁰ In the artist's words: 'The plurality of a work is not a fault [. . .] but a quality which permits every one of us to resound with that which has necessity'.¹¹ Future scholarship would do well to build on existing research to explore the diversity and richness that this 'plurality' suggests.

¹⁰ In my forthcoming study, *The Art Theory of Wassily Kandinsky, 1909–1928: The Quest for Synthesis*, to be published by Peter Lang later this year, I use this method in my consideration of *Through-going line* (Fig.43).

¹¹ P. Sers, ed.: *Wassily Kandinsky: Ecrits Complets, La Synthèse des Arts*, Paris 1975, p.290.