



## CLUNKY, LOOSE & TIGHT (Yellow–Red–Blue)

“The ultimate objective of all creative activity is building!”<sup>i</sup>

### GROUND ZERO

Vasily Kandinsky conceptualised the picture plane as ground zero, a work starts with a point as its smallest form. “Canvas is a void – the world before the Creation, before chaos. The first sign of life is a *point* – the moment of the first contact with charcoal, pencil, or brush. The point is the germ of corporeality, the embryo of creation. Boundless possibilities are latent in it.”<sup>ii</sup>

### CONTRAST AND CONNECTION

Kandinsky adopted the model of music; constructing a limited abstract language from elemental forms. His ‘trinity of colour’, red, yellow, and blue corresponded to the primary geometric forms triangle, square and circle. He embraced logically contradictory elements, abstraction and representational fragments converged. It is the syntactical context of the whole, the “eloquent” contrasts and interplay of elements that is of concern. “The structure of those parts that are independent, that relate to one another, and that united within the picture, constitute the structure of the whole.”<sup>iii</sup>

In music, polyphony is a texture consisting of two or more independent melodic voices, as opposed to music with just one voice (monophony) or music with one dominant melodic voice accompanied by chords (homophony).<sup>iv</sup> The polyphony is typically composed via the “dyadic counterpoint”, a ‘point-against-point’ conception in which each part is written against one other part, with all parts modified if needed in the end.<sup>v</sup>

The Memphis group sought out possibilities not solutions. Their designs were conceived as semantic events, unstable entities that evolved through time. Incongruent elements such as cheap plastic laminate and luscious slabs of marble were bought together to spark new expressive circuits. The final structure was defined not by an overarching schema but by the variable logic of its constituent parts.

In *Yellow–Red–Blue*, 1925 we slip between the micro and the macro, shifting focus from individual elements to the whole, then finding ourselves simultaneously immersed in the contemplation of an expansive cosmos and the intricacies of molecular structures.

Opera composer Richard Wagner championed the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a unification of all art forms into a single, multifaceted entity. “Artistic Man can only fully content himself by uniting every branch of Art into the *common* Artwork: in every *segregation* of his artistic faculties he is *unfree*, not fully that which he has power to be; whereas in the *common* Artwork he is *free*, and fully that which he has power to be.”<sup>vi</sup>

### PROCESS

In a 1921 type written proposal for the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences (RAKhN) Kandinsky recommends the establishment of a “Physio-Psychology Department” in which artists, in collaboration with scientists, could carry out experiments in aesthetics.<sup>vii</sup> Later he taught in the Preliminary Course at the Bauhaus, where through the analysis of fundamental formal elements he attempted to develop a comprehensive schema of aesthetics.

**The Bauhaus was based on the workshop. In a reunification of the world of work with the creative arts, students were to learn by doing.**

Russian Constructivism abolished the traditional artistic concern with composition, replacing it with ‘construction.’ Constructivists were to be constructors of a new society, cultural workers on a par with scientists in their search for solutions to contemporary problems.

The dimensions and formal complexity of *Yellow–Red–Blue* approximates Kandinsky’s ten great ‘Composition’ works. Constructed over prolonged periods, these works were pedantically calculated. And yet, Kandinsky’s faith in magical intuition ultimately prevailed. “Here, reason, the conscious, the deliberate, and the purposeful play a preponderant role. Except that I always decide in favour of feeling rather than calculation.”<sup>vii</sup>

### TRANSMUTATION AND TRANSFORMATION

Concerned with the spiritual dimensions of the work, Kandinsky encoded and concealed the representational relics that lent the image its inner sound. Buried beneath the surface semantics of *Yellow–Red–Blue*, Saint George battles a dragon.<sup>ix</sup> The saint was an important talisman, symbolising the triumph of the spirit over materialism.

*Sigils represent a psychological approach towards magick. Predicated on the belief that symbols are the language of the unconscious mind, a statement of intent is reduced into an abstract design and then charged with the will of its creator.*<sup>x</sup>

Constructivist theorist Boris Arvatov foresaw the transformation of the passive capitalist commodity into an active socialist object. He argued that the subject is formed as much through the process of using objects in everyday life as by making them in the sphere of production.<sup>xi</sup> Thus, “socialist sculptures” “connected like a co-worker with human practice”, would produce new forms of consumption and subjectivity.<sup>xii</sup>

A virtuoso of the disassemblage and reassemblage, Kurt Schwitters constructed his *Merz* pictures by gluing and nailing fragments of urban detritus into elegant formalist schemes packed with a bone-rattling psychological punch. In the wake of WWI, Schwitters constructed new possibilities via a reconfiguration of the “broken pieces” of a failed society.<sup>xiii</sup>

Shelley McSpedden, August, 2012.

i Walter Gropius, *Manifesto of the Bauhaus*, April 1919.

ii Vasily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art: And Painting in Particular*, in Vasily Kandinsky, *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, New York: Da Capo Press, 1994, pp.183-85. Italics in original.

iii Vasily Kandinsky, “Letters from Munich” (1910), in Vasily Kandinsky, *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, New York: Da Capo Press, 1994, p.80

iv Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polyphony>, (accessed 15 Aug 2012)

v Margaret Bent, *Counterpoint, Composition, and Musica Ficta*, New York: Routledge, 2002

vi Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future* (1849), William Ashton Ellis trans., *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, Volume 1, The Wagner Library, p.75

vii Annegret Hoberg, ‘Vasily Kandinsky: Abstract. Absolute. Concrete.’ in *Kandinsky*, ex. cat., Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2009, p.37

viii Kandinsky, op. cit. (1994a), p.218

ix Hoberg, op. cit., p.238

x Austin Osman Spare, *The Book of Pleasure (Self-Love): The Psychology of Ecstasy*, London, printed by the Co-operative Printing Society Limited, 1913

xi Christina Kiaer, ‘Boris Arvatov’s Social Objects,’ *October*, Vol. 81, Summer, 1997, pp.105-118

xii Boris Arvatov, ‘Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)’, trans. Christina Kiaer, *October*, Vol. 81, Summer, 1997, p.126

xiii Kurt Schwitters, “Kurt Schwitters” (1930), in *Kurt Schwitters: Das literarische Werk*, ed. Friedhelm Lach, 5 vols., Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1973-81, 5, p.355, reprinted in Dorothea Dietrich, *The Fragment Reframed: Kurt Schwitters’s “Merz-Column”*, *Assemblage*, No. 14 (Apr., 1991), p. 85

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Ross Coulter, Sean Peoples and Meredith Turnbull  
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