

WASSILY KANDINSKY

FROM On Stage Composition (1911-12)

The nineteenth century marks itself out as an era very distant from inner creation. The concentration on material phenomena and the material side of phenomena logically brought about in the inner sphere the decline of creative power, which appears to have sunk to the lowest ebb.

Out of this one-sidedness, naturally, other kinds of one-sidedness inevitably developed.

So too on the stage . . . there developed and petrified stage works of three kinds, divided one from the other by high walls.

- a Drama
- b Opera
- c Ballet

- a The drama of the nineteenth century is generally a more or less clever and probing narrative of events of a more or less personal nature. It is usually a depiction of outward life, where the life of the human soul plays a part only in so far as it has dealings with outward life. *The cosmic element is completely missing.*

Outward events and the outward linking of the action is the form of today's drama.

- b Opera is a drama to which music is added as a main element, with the result that the cleverness and penetration of the dramatic parts suffer badly. Both its elements are connected to one another in an entirely external fashion; i.e. either the music illustrates (or intensifies) the dramatic action, or else the dramatic action is drawn into helping explain the music. . . .

Outward events, the outward linking of its separate parts and the two modes (drama and music) is the form of today's opera.

- c Ballet is a drama with all the features already described and the same content. But here the seriousness of the drama loses even more than in opera. In opera, as well as love themes, there are also others: religious, political and social conditions are the ground on which grow rapture, despair, honesty, hatred and suchlike other feelings. Ballet contents itself with love in a childish fairytale form. Apart from music, solo

ON STAGE COMPOSITION

and group movement come to its aid. Everything remains in a naive form of external linkage. In practice it even happens that solo dances are inserted or cut out as convenient. The 'whole' is so problematic that such surgical measures remain totally unnoticed.

Outward events, the outward linking of its separate parts and the three modes (drama, music and dance) is the form of today's ballet.

Let us take the inner standpoint. The whole situation changes.

- 1 The outward appearance of each element suddenly disappears. And its inner value takes on fullness of sound.
- 2 It becomes clear that in using the inner sound, outward action can be not only subsidiary, but also, as an obscuring element, damaging.
- 3 The worth of outward links is shown in the right light, i.e. as needlessly limiting, and weakening of the inner effect.
- 4 There comes of its own accord the feeling that an *inner unity* is necessary; this is sustained and amplified by outward disunity.
- 5 The possibility is laid bare that each of the elements can retain its own outward life which outwardly is in conflict with the outward life of other elements.

Further, if we put these abstract discoveries into practice, we see that it is possible –

with regard to 1: to take only the inner sound of an element as medium

with regard to 2: to strike out the outward event (= the action)

with regard to 3: – whereby outward links fall apart of themselves, just like –

with regard to 4: – the outward unity – and –

with regard to 5: the inner unity puts in our hands a countless series of resources which before could not have existed.

Here inner necessity becomes the sole source.

Translated by Richard Drain and Anna Millan

Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Russian artist; also an accomplished musician. The larger article from which these passages are taken served as an introduction to his stage piece, *The Yellow Sound*. The idea of inner values taking on 'sound', which it attempts to realise, may seem odd, but would probably not if the milder word 'resonance' were substituted. Kandinsky's word underlines his interest in synesthesia, that interdependence of the senses from which some gather the impression of 'seeing' sounds in terms of colour, or 'hearing' colours as sounds. Our more normal dividing of the senses is analogous to the 'outward disunity' which only brings home the need for an inner unity. While insisting on the latter, Kandinsky licenses

any combination of outward elements in a work of art, thus propounding a crucial modernist principle (see for example its radical application by Robert Wilson, p. 9). Such ideas relate closely to those developed in his important *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (written 1910, published 1912). For Kandinsky, the function of a work of art was to produce a 'spiritual vibration' in the spectator, and it could do so only if its outward appearance was given depth by an inner resonance and internal meanings. For this, art needed to be autonomous, freed from its requirement to represent the outside world and free (in the case of painting) to explore the intrinsic qualities of pigment and artistic materials. The relation of such ideas to the theatre aesthetic of Witkiewicz and Kantor is worth noting.

Kandinsky moved to Munich to study art in 1896. There the abstract tendencies of *Jugendstil* (*art nouveau*), and the advanced theatre reform movement which found expression in the Munich Artists' Theatre, set up in 1908, arguably did much to stimulate his interest in artistic synthesis and his move to abstract painting (see Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky in Munich: The Formative Jugendstil Years*, Princeton University Press, 1979). Kandinsky knew Peter Behrens, who proposed the idea of theatre as a synthesis of the arts (*Festivals of Life and Art*, 1900), and who, as architect, worked with Georg Fuchs to devise a new 'total' theatre. He knew too Alexander Salzmann who designed lighting and sets for Dalcroze's 'light-theatre' at Hellerau which was designed in collaboration with Appia and opened in 1910. Kandinsky's artistic experiments took theatrical form in the four 'colour-tone dramas' that he composed between 1909 and 1914, of which *The Yellow Sound* was one. The outbreak of war brought to an end plans for a production at the Munich Artists' Theatre, and finally none of the four was staged.