



"On the Problem of Form"

by Wassily Kandinsky

from *Der Blaue Reiter*

(The Blue Rider, 1912)

At the appointed time, necessities become ripe. That is the time when the Creative Spirit (which one can also designate as the Abstract Spirit) finds an avenue to the soul, later to other souls, and causes a yearning, an inner urge.

This yearning--this inner urge--acquires the power to create in the human spirit a new value which, consciously or unconsciously, begins to live in the human being. From this moment on, consciously or unconsciously, the human being seeks to find a material form for the new value, which already lives within him in spiritual form.

In this process, the spiritual value, searching for a form of materialization, finds matter. Matter is merely a storeroom. It is from this storeroom, that the spirit chooses what is specifically necessary for it to reveal itself--just as a cook chooses what he needs from a pantry.

This act of choosing, so that the spiritual may take form, is the positive, the creative; the good: The white, fertilizing ray.

This white ray leads to evolution, to elevation. However, the Creative Spirit is not only hidden behind matter, but also concealed within matter. The veiling of the Spirit in the material is often so dense that there are generally few people

who can see through to the Spirit (since the eyes of people, generally at such times, cannot see the Spirit). It was so in the nineteenth century and is on the whole still so today.

People are blinded. A black hand is laid over their eyes. The black hand belongs to the person who hates. He who hates, endeavors with all means at his disposal to hold back this evolution, this elevation. This holding back is the negative, the destructive. This is the evil: The black, death-bringing hand.

This evolution, this movement forward and upward, is only possible if the path in the material world is clear, that is, if no barriers stand in the way. This is the external condition. Then the Abstract Spirit moves the Human Spirit forward and upward on this clear path, which must naturally ring out and be able to be heard within the individual; a summoning must be possible. That is the internal condition.

To destroy both of these conditions is the intent of the black hand against evolution. The tools for it to do so are:

- (1) fear of the clear path;
- (2) fear of freedom (which is Philistinism); and
- (3) deafness to the Spirit (which is dull Materialism).

Therefore, such people regard each new value with hostility; indeed they seek to fight it with ridicule and slander. The human being who carries this new value is pictured as ridiculous and dishonest. The new value is laughed at as absurd. That is the misery of life.

The joy of life is the irresistible, constant, victory of the new. The victory proceeds slowly. The new value conquers people quite gradually. And when it becomes undeniable in many eyes, this value which was absolutely necessary today, will be turned into a wall--a wall which is erected against tomorrow. The changing of the new value (of the fruit of freedom) into a petrified form (a wall against freedom) is the work of the black hand.

This whole evolution, inner development and outer culture, is then a shifting of the barriers. The barriers are constantly created from new values which have overthrown the old barriers. Thus one sees that basically the new value is not the most important thing, but rather the Spirit which has revealed itself in this value. And furthermore, the freedom necessary for the revelation.

Thus, one sees that the Absolute is not to be sought in the form (Materialism). The form is always bound to its time, and is relative, since it is nothing more than the means necessary today, in which today's revelation manifests itself, and resounds. This resonance is then the soul of the form (which only becomes alive in the act of resonating outwards) and which works from within to without. The form is the outer expression of the inner content. One should not make a deity of form. And one should fight for the form only insofar as it can serve as a means of expression of the inner resonance. Ultimately one should not seek salvation in one form.

This statement must be understood correctly. Every creative artist's own means of expression (that is, form) is the best for him, since it most appropriately embodies that which he feels compelled to proclaim. From that, however, the conclusion is often falsely drawn that this means of expression is, or ought to be, the best for other artists also. Since the form is only an expression of the content and the content is different with different artists, it is then clear that there can be many different forms at the same time which are equally good. Necessity creates the form. Fish which live in great depths of water have no eyes. The elephant has a trunk. The chameleon changes its color, and so forth.

Thus the spirit of the individual artist is mirrored in the form. The form bears the stamp of the personality. The personality, however, naturally cannot be conceived as something which stands outside of Time and Space. Rather, it is subject to a certain extent, to Time (epoch) and to Space (people). Just as each individual artist has to make his word known, so does each People, and consequently, also that People to whom this artist belongs. This connection is

mirrored in the form and is characterized by the national element in the work.

And finally each age has its especially assigned task, the revelation possible at a specific age. The reflection of this temporal element is recognized in the work as Style. All these three elements inevitably leave their stamp on a work of art. It is not only superfluous to worry about their presence, but also harmful--since forcing such focus can achieve nothing but a delusion, a temporal betrayal. It is superfluous and harmful to want to lay particular stress upon only one of the three elements. Today, too many people concern themselves with the national element in a work of art, still others with the style, and recently great homage has been paid to the cult of the personality (of the individual element).

As I have stated, the Abstract Spirit takes possession first of a single Human Spirit; later it governs an ever-increasing number of people. At this moment, individual artists are subjected to the spirit of the time, which forces them to use particular forms which are related to each other and therefore, also possess an external similarity. This factor is called a Movement. It is completely justified and indispensable to a group of artists (just as the individual form is indispensable for one artist).

And as no salvation is to be sought in the form of a single artist, it is not to be sought in this group-form. For each group, its own form is best--since it is the form which most effectively embodies that which the group feels duty bound to make known. One should not thereby conclude, however, that this form is, or ought to be the best for all. Here also full freedom shall prevail: one shall consider valid every form, deem correct (artistic) every form, which represents an inner content. If one acts otherwise, one is no longer serving the free spirit (white ray) but the petrified barrier (black hand).

Here also, one arrives at the same conclusion (which was established earlier): the form (the Material) in general, is not the most important thing, but rather the content is the most important thing (the Spirit). Consequently, the form can have a pleasant or unpleasant effect without effecting the content. The form can appear to be beautiful, ugly, harmonious, disharmonious, skillful,

unskillful, fine, coarse--all of which is unimportant. The form must not be accepted or rejected either for the qualities, which are held to be positive, or for the qualities, which are felt to be negative. All of these notions are completely relative, as one observes instantly, in the endless, changing, series of forms--which have already existed. And like these changing notions of what is beautiful, what is ugly, the very form itself is just as relative. This manner of observation is the way in which the form is to be appreciated and understood for what it is: a vehicle. One must approach a work of art in such a way that its form has an effect on the soul. And through the form, the content (the Spirit, inner resonance). Otherwise one elevates the relative to the absolute.

In practical life... one will hardly find a person who, if he wants to travel to Berlin, gets off the train in Regensburg! In spiritual life, getting off the train in Regensburg is a rather usual thing. Sometimes even the engineer does not want to go any further, and all of the passengers get off in Regensburg. How many, who sought God, finally remained standing before a carved figure! How many, who sought art, became caught on a form which an artist had used for his own purposes, be it Giotto, Raphael, Durer, or Van Gogh!

And so as a last conclusion, it must be established that it is not most important whether the form is personal, national, or has style; whether or not it is in accordance with the major contemporary movements; whether or not it is related to many or few other forms; whether or not it stands completely by itself: but rather the most important thing in the question of form is whether or not the form has grown out of the inner necessity. The greater the epoch is--that is, the greater (quantitatively and qualitatively) the strivings toward the spiritual are--the richer in number the forms become.