

## Stage - Icon - Face

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## REFERENCES

Goldberg, Itzhak. *Jawlensky ou le visage promis*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 1998

*Kandinsky : du théâtre*. Edition établie et présentée par Jessica Boissel avec la collaboration de Jean-Claude Marcadé. Paris : Adam Biro, 1998

*L'Avant-garde russe et la scène 1910-1930 : une sélection de la collection N.D. Lobanov-Rostovsky*, Paris : Plume, 1998

*Kandinsky-Albers : une correspondance des années trente = ein Briefwechsel aus den dreissiger Jahren*. Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne, hors-série/Archive, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 1998

- 1 Monumental composition was the bedrock of the art programme of the Monumental Art Section of the Institute for Artistic Culture (*Inkhuk*) set up by Kandinsky in Moscow. It was duly developed (even though it had already been outlined in writings published in Munich between 1908 and 1912) in a series of publications, the principal one being the Russian edition of the article *De la composition scientifique* (1918), which appeared in the *Der Blaue Reiter* almanac. The issue of monumental composition was closely bound up with the conception of theatre as psycho-sensory spectacle, giving the most comprehensive expression to the idea of artistic synaesthesia or concomitant sensation, the total work (*Gesamtkunstwerk*). By going beyond the formal restrictions of the respective arts, and combining word, colour and sound with form, movement and tone, theatre thus remained of paramount interest to Kandinsky until the 1930s.
- 2 The volume which presents a compilation of Kandinsky's theoretical writings and his theatrical pieces written between 1908 and 1926, brought out by the publisher Adam Biro and the Kandinsky Society, thus deals with the key questions of the artist's aesthetic programme and literary work. Prepared from manuscripts, original publications, and later versions, all painstakingly compared and rounded off by critical commentaries, this

book is a new descriptive catalogue of Kandinsky's theatrical work, published in the wake of the series of volumes describing the painted work (1982-1984, H.K. Roethel, J.K. Benjamin) and the watercolours (1992-1994, V.E. Barnett).

- 3 Kandinsky's theatre can be looked at from the standpoint of a more sweeping process to do with the "theatricalization of [Russian artistic] life", a fact to which several authors analysing contemporary culture have already drawn attention (Y. Lotman). In this sense, the catalogue for the Brussels exhibition (Ixelles Museum) prepared by an American researcher, John. E. Bowlt, who is a specialist in this field, and devoted to the costumes and set projects of the Russian avant-garde in the years 1910-1930, from the N.D. Lobanov-Rostovsky collection, is a publication which rounds off the series of works devoted to Kandinsky's theatrical work. The first of the two introductory articles outlines the history of the collection. The second offers a swift chronological overview of the relationships between the painters in question and the theatre, initiated by the sets made by L. Bakst for *Sheherazade*—and the constructivist projects of V. Stepanova and the Stenberg brothers, seen as an epilogue to the Russian avant-garde. In addition to being richly illustrated with plates of the works, some of which are already well known, the descriptive catalogue of the works forming the collection represents this book's undeniably valuable contribution. Missing copies of original works have unfortunately been replaced by replicas, which is especially shocking where Malevich's projects are concerned, these being represented by silk-screened versions produced in 1973.
- 4 We should emphasize here that Kandinsky had a sound knowledge of the Russian avant-garde's theatrical production, for, from April 1918 on, he co-directed the Theatre Section of the Commission for Education (*Narkompros*), whose programme was based on the principle whereby the theatre is an "aesthetic guide for the development of the proletariat". It was also these circles which came up with the earliest projects to set up an institute for theatrical and scenographic research, as well as experimental workshops. It goes without saying that Kandinsky was less interested by proletarian shows, and more concerned with monumental stages and sets—an idea which he was keen to get across to the various institutions of the Bolshevik government. Itzhak Goldberg has recently described the direction of Kandinsky's own particular strategy, in a book dedicated to A. Jawlensky, one of the artist's Russian companions in his Munich days.
- 5 Goldberg draws our attention to the history of the Munich *New Club*, and the creation of *Der Blaue Reiter* and, in so doing, stresses the importance of social success strategies, as undertaken by Kandinsky, which provided him with the chance to proclaim himself the leading light of that radical group. While Kandinsky recognized the important place of artistic institutions (exhibitions and shows), the need to spread the word about the theoretical bases of creative activity (programmes) and, last of all, the role of the public function of art (education), he also introduced his art into a new artistic milieu, which he could monitor. Goldberg tells us how Kandinsky and Jawlensky did indeed base their art on mystical experience, adding that the former was the "prophet" who socialized his faith, while the latter stayed with the role of "ascetic", to this day relegated to the fringes of the great debates of contemporary art history. Otherwise put, Kandinsky needed a stage, whereas, for Jawlensky, the studio sufficed.
- 6 So there is nothing that surprising about the fact that Kandinsky's last ten years of creative work, when the Bauhaus had been wound down and he had emigrated to France, were hard years; nothing surprising, either, about the great difficulty he had in redefining himself in art circles. After a brief visit to Berlin in 1933, Kandinsky set up

home in Neuilly-sur-Seine in 1934. A recently published (following a *Cahier* of letters to Zervos) volume of Kandinsky's correspondence with Albers, who had been teaching since the autumn of 1933 at Black Mountain College in the United States, attests to this new life and the new strategies he was developing in the 1930s.

- 7 Apart from his worries about his friends still in Germany, where things were fast becoming more and more fraught, we obviously find in these letters a great deal of personal information (Albers' writing tended to be full of enthusiasm) about day-to-day life. Kandinsky rarely goes back over his own purely artistic problems, even if, on several occasions, he stresses his determination to carry on his research into the spirituality of art. The predominant issue involves a general analysis of the European and American artistic arena, as well as an ever clearer conviction that abstract art was gaining momentum and becoming more and more important. Kandinsky's interest in exhibitions, reviews and groups bolstered this model of polarized artistic life. In Surrealism and its figuration, the artist saw a crisis of spiritual values. Kandinsky's strategy, which comes through clearly in his letters, no longer had his art school as a platform from which he could utter his persuasions, so it now turned into an interplay of personal contacts (about which he informed Albers "in confidence", "whispering words in his ear"), which gave him a suitable foothold (though not always) in exhibitions and in the pages of art magazines. The pressing need to keep a close eye on the way things were developing prevented Kandinsky from crossing the Atlantic, where Albers was forever inviting him. By siding with "modern" art against the wave of "modernity", Kandinsky nevertheless felt out on a limb. The emergent dispute with Zervos, which became more and more strident with the publication of the issue of *Les Cahiers d'art* devoted to Surrealism, attests to this.
- 8 Kandinsky's modernist isolation in the world of abstraction nevertheless had a dimension other than the nostalgic solitude of Jawlensky. In this context, it is worth returning once more to Goldberg's interesting book, and emphasizing—as the author himself does—not only his strategy which differed from Kandinsky's, but also the special place occupied by Jawlensky in contemporary art—the place of "the artist who, by taking part in modernity but not going along with it, experiences boundaries: between Expressionism and Fauvism, between figuration and abstraction, between the face and the icon". Kandinsky was looking for spirituality in the abstract synaesthesia of monumental composition. In Jawlensky's case, the issue of spirituality, and the dialectic of visibility/invisibility and figuration/abstraction associated with it, were focused on the concept of the face/icon. Conception of the face as an expression of absence, the expression of a reality "left behind, and freed by its figuration (as icon) of a mimetic rivalry".
- 9 Last of all, in the light of the concept of "the metaphysical image", which P. Sers re-interprets in his book on Kandinsky<sup>1</sup> (a stance which Goldberg does not take), we should ask ourselves if the modernism of the two Russian artists, essentially deeply rooted in oriental religiosity, is not all the same that selfsame modernism to which the issues of "pre-Renaissance" painting revert. Iconic hermeneutics—to use Sers' argument—is in no way a means of understanding the world, a sort of post-Renaissance Logos, but rather a Theo-logical grasp of the being in its distinctive form.

## NOTES

1. Sers, Philippe. *Philosophie de l'abstraction : l'image métaphysique*, Genève : Skira, 1995.