Abstract Art: Pain and Discomfort

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Abstract art is often the most baffling to a viewer who may search in vain for a figurative reference or recognisable element. Abstraction may refer to "art that stylises, simplifies, or deliberately distorts something that exists in the real world" (Heller, 2002: 14). Further along the spectrum, however, is abstract art that is non-representational or non-objective and is based on the isolation or interplay between shapes, colours and forms.

The aim of this article is to illustrate how non-objective art can cause discomfort and pain. Here I am using the term 'non-objective' to refer to art that does not have recognisable and identifiable imagery. I will make a link between Munch’s The Scream or The Cry and non-objective painting, and argue for a similarity of intent between these works, the works of Kandinsky and of artists loosely described as ‘Op artists’.

I. Munch and Kandinsky

Munch’s The Scream, created in 1895, has become an iconic image, often co-opted and used to promote phenomena ranging from psychiatric conferences to forums on schizophrenia to demonstrations of existential anguish. Whilst the work is figurative it is also abstracted, and it is this abstraction that generates discomfort. The contorted face runs out of the frame; the diagonal lines of the fencing push your eye across the plane of the picture and generate energy that opposes the calmness of a horizontal line we tend to associate with horizons and Venetian blinds. Munch’s The Scream presents a disturbing and intense feeling where emotions overrule rationality and control. In effect, it is the harbinger of the dark side of a human psyche that is in disharmony with scientific precision.

It is significant that all the lines used are of varied thickness and intensity. If one isolates the lines from their figurative referents, their structural, non-representational, forms are revealed - and revealing. The lines are not uniform or consistent but rather jagged and edgy. There are lines that bend, come closer together and separate; there is no point of rest. I will return to this aspect later when discussing Op art, but here suffice it to say that the juxtaposition of lines can generate powerful emotive consequences. The emotive power of line was articulated in Wilhelm Worringer’s 1908 publication Abstraction and Empathy (1953).

Worringer’s writing proved influential in the art of Kandinsky, acknowledged as the artist who first introduced non-objective art into western painting (Long, 1980, Lindsay & Vergo, 1994). In contrast to Munch’s The Scream, Kandinsky’s oeuvre celebrated the
emotional effects generated by rational structures in geometric shapes. He became concerned with a grammar of forms. Line for him represented "the predominant means of expression...the degrees of intensity from pianissimo to fortissimo can find their equivalent in the increase or decrease in the size of line, or its degree of clarity" (Kandinsky: 1926). Whilst Kandinsky’s interest in abstraction can be traced to a variety of sources, such as the late 19th Century Jugendstil movement (a German art nouveau movement centred around Munich), and the writings of Endell and Worringer, he nevertheless managed to forge his own direction with a view to making his art accessible to the viewer (Long, 1980: 8).

Although Kandinsky formed a group known as Phalanx in 1902, whose purpose was to create an art for the future (Long, 1980: 8), it was not until 1910 that he established an abstract intention and direction for his work. Europe around 1910 exemplified a period of rapid industrial growth and concomitant scientific and technological progress. As science studied the structure of things and inner worlds through advances in the microscope, x-ray photography and so on, so too did art reflect abstract forms and shapes. Indeed, Kandinsky's determination to become a painter was strengthened by science’s discovery of sub-atomic particles. He wrote:

The collapse of the atom was equated, in my soul, with the collapse of the whole world...science seemed destroyed: its most important basis was only an illusion, an error of the learned, who...were groping at random for truth in the darkness and blindly mistaking one object for another (Lindsay & Vergo, 1994: 364).

Critics of scientific 'progress', however, worried that materialistic expansionism would lead to spiritual poverty, and from 1910 Kandinsky explored the spiritual dimension of his art, seeking to create an experience equivalent to that generated by music, appealing principally to the senses where colour and form equated to sound. As he observed, "Colour is the keyboard. The eye is the hammer. The soul is the piano with its many strings" (Lindsay & Vergo, 1994: 160). Kandinsky's abstract works attempted to create a transcendent experience that transported viewers to a spiritual realm via sensory engagement. They were anti-materialistic (Long, 1980: 6) and sought to avoid becoming too decorative or ornamental. His compositions point to a modernist fascination with formal structures and a spiritualism predicated on the transcendent qualities of colour.

Long (1980) observes that Kandinsky was also, to some extent, influenced by the theosophical writings of Rudolf Steiner, and Kandinsky wrote several essays where he referred to creating vibrations in the spectator. In 1911 he wrote that the vibrations of the soul were "more complicated, more transcendental, than the soul-shaking caused by a bell, by the string of a musical instrument, by a falling board, etc." (cited in Long 1980: 33).

The use of dissonance employed by modern composers such as Schoenberg contrasted different stimuli. Kandinsky’s use of antithetical colours similarly worked on this principle, creating surprise and countering familiarity. Unlike posters, which sought to quickly convey a message, Kandinsky’s imagery demanded contemplation and reflection to reveal its truths. It was Kandinsky’s view that his paintings were meditative expressions that produced ambiguous and hidden images that, whilst initially confusing, created harmony and understanding through contemplation (Long 1980: 66). He observed that what may be perceived as anarchic "must be understood as order ... a kind of order, however, that has its roots in another sphere, in inner necessity" (Hahl-Koch, 1984: 88).

Kandinsky divided his work into three stages (Long, 1980:88) – Impressions or quick sketches inspired by external forms and natural elements; Improvisations that comprised spontaneous expressions of natural inner forms; and Compositions that were expression of inner feelings. Kandinsky’s non-objective works demonstrated the
interplay and rhythmic movement between colour and forms creating a contrast and resonance on the picture plane.

II. Kandinsky and Pain

What has Kandinsky’s works to do with pain and discomfort? Kandinsky was acutely aware of the physical and psychological effects produced through abstraction. In 1912 he wrote:

If you let your eyes stray over a palette of color, you experience two things. In the first place you receive a purely physical effect, namely the eye itself is enchanted by the beauty and other qualities of color. You experience a satisfaction and delight, like a gourmet savouring a delicacy ... And so we come to the second result of looking at colors; their psychological effect. They produce a correspondent spiritual vibration...Generally speaking, color directly influences the soul (cited in Heller, 2002: 133).

How unprepared, then, was Kandinsky for the co-opting of his art for evil and psychological torture. Recent research (Woolls, 2003) into the Spanish civil war of 1936-1939 has revealed that the Communists used Kandinsky's works as part of an experiment in torturing prisoners. The imagery of Kandinsky and Paul Klee were used in a handful of torture chambers in Barcelona. Within tiny chambers the size of a walk in closet and designed for sleep deprivation, walls were decorated with Kandinsky's non-objective imagery. It is ironic as well as tragic that the utopian visions that Kandinsky sought through his work could be put to the service of dystopian ideals.

Kandinsky’s quest for social change through transcendence into an aesthetic realm became bastardised and his works were employed for a different form of social change – totalitarianism. The cells, reproduced in Woolls (2003), incorporated one curved wall with the other walls featuring painted circles, cubes, slanted lines, spirals, checkerboards and other shapes. Terra-cotta bricks stuck up out of the floor at sharp angles and a cot and seat attached to the wall was at such a sharp incline that the in-mates could not effectively rest. At night a blinding red spotlight activated the space making it move and pulsate. During the day light filtered through a window dyed green. Colour was seen as a crucial element in affecting perceptions and feelings, but not as Kandinsky had envisaged. His extensive research, writings and teaching into the spiritual domain reached through abstraction were ignored as the Spanish Communists applied their perception of his art – dislocation and intense alienation – onto their prisoners.

The dimensions of torture are well enunciated in Scott (1995). Millett (1994) demonstrates the use of power and control in political contexts and the disempowerment of the individuals’ rights and conditions. Foucault’s sustained investigation into power and knowledge highlights the power relations evident between captors and captured, power and submission. As Foucault observes in relation to changes in political regimes,

in thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives (1980:39)

Perhaps it is not surprising that the works of Kandinsky were subverted by totalitarian ideals. His works had been interpreted in ways he would not have imagined. Kandinsky’s zeal and single-mindedness blinded him to the inaccessible nature of his works. Instead of transcendence, confusion often resulted. He had been an influential teacher at Germany’s influential design school, the Bauhaus, which the Nazi’s, who saw Kandinsky's works as degenerate, effectively closed in 1933. The Russian
Communists decried what they perceived in Kandinsky’s works as individual bourgeois sentiments that were socially irrelevant (Whitford, 1999: 74). In 1922 German critics had mocked and derided his works as wallpaper patterns and geometric decorations (Hahl-Koch, 1993: 294).

III. Op Art

In a Bauhaus publication written in 1926 and titled *Point and Line to Plane*, Kandinsky drew upon the late 19th Century writings on Gestalt psychology. The Gestalt theory was predicated on the brain being active in seeing and its desire to create unity from disparate visual elements and the view that the whole is different from its parts (Rock, 1997: xv). In particular, the interplay between positive and negative forms (Whitford, 1999: 66), part to whole relationships and figure and ground were of interest to Kandinsky and re-emerged in a different form again in the 1960s with the emergence of the art movement known as Op art. Sharing a similar interest to Kandinsky in experimentation with colour, shape and pattern, works under the rubric of Op were often tightly structured and minimalist in approach.

The term Op referred to the work’s appeal and impact on vision. For example, several compositions in black and white were capable of generating colour imagery. However, many of the works impacted physiologically and psychologically on viewers. Whilst an extensive overview of Op art is beyond the scope of this article, I nevertheless want to comment on aspects of some works, in particular two examples that successfully created pain, distress and discomfort in viewers.

Returning to Munch’s *The Scream*, the juxtaposition and interplay between uneven lines and shapes created a sense of discomfort. Unlike Munch’s composition, however, many Op art works used sharply defined lines and forms that incorporated a number of binary opposites playing off each other: positive and negative forms, assimilation and contrast, order and chaos, regular progression and alternation.

The Gestalt notion of proximity was demonstrated in such works as Riley’s *Hidden Squares* (1961) where a regular progression of circles may be disrupted by a series of squares. Vision becomes disrupted as the shapes play off each other making assimilation impossible. Riley’s works can be viewed on the web at: www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/riley_bridget.html and www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/audiointerviews/profilepages/rileyb1.shtml.

Whilst the type of works shown on these sites demonstrate the application of optical non-objective strategies, two works stand out as strong examples that created pain and discomfort to spectators. Bridget Riley in 1963 experimented with a large installation based on her black and white paintings in a work entitled *Continuum*. The installation was coiled and invited one inside. Once inside the viewer was subjected to intense physical disorientation. A more alarming work, however, was a large circle painting, larger than human scale, by the Japanese artist, Tadasky. The artist had painted a series of large circle paintings that played with colour juxtaposition and the interaction that resulted. One such painting, using gold and silver, was so intense that some spectators became nauseous and vomited. It is interesting that a static form like painting can generate significant motion sickness.

A major exponent of optical art is Victor Vasarely whose work can be viewed on his official website: www.vasarely.org/intro.html. By the late ‘sixties, posters and record album covers featured the works of artists like Martin Sharp who incorporated psychedelic splashes of erupting colours, patterns and shapes, locatable at: www.collectable-records.rv/images/post/british-scene/martin_sharp/ and www.twtd.bluemountains.net.au/cream/gears/martin_sharp.htm The cool scientific work of the Op adherents gave way to the drug-induced, hallucinogenic eruptions of
energised colour and pattern that married popular culture with pop and op art. The championing of hallucinogenic drug taking for mind altering experiences by such people as Timothy Leary, influenced a bevy of poster works that attempted to reproduce altered states of mind. The experiential pioneering works of Kandinsky, that equated images to sound, developed into visual typography in Sharp’ work.

To conclude, whilst abstract art can often prove alienating to audiences searching for figurative references, some non-objective works are capable of disrupting our equilibrium, resulting in varying forms of pain and discomfort. Kandinsky’s abstract images of spiritual transcendence were, in the hands of others, transformed into images of psychological and physiological dislocation. Artists described as Op absorbed experiments in design, mathematics and science to create disturbing images through line and shape juxtapositions. Later exponents such as Martin Sharp combined abstract patterning and figurative referencing to generate and equate with hallucinogenic drug-taking experiences.

REFERENCES


