“Framing” Kandinsky’s Painting with Red Spot (1914): An Intervention of Abstraction and Meaning Making in The Museum Space

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In contemporary museum studies discourse, scholars have begun to reexamine both the role of the curator and the exhibition space in their joint effect on visitor experience. One element that underpins the relationship of these combined parties is language, or more commonly known within this discipline, the wall label. This label intrinsically “frames” its adjacent artwork as it proposes a certain narrative, one that is crafted by curators and communicates ideas and themes deemed important by its writers. However, what about art that eludes one singular interpretation, such as abstraction? Could proposing an exclusive narrative be detrimental to the multiplicity of meaning that abstract art promotes?

Considering these issues, this paper examines Bild mit Rotten Fleck (Painting with Red Spot; 1914; Figure 1) by Wassily Kandinsky and its current “framing” at the Centre Pompidou in Paris to analyze both the relationship between language, abstraction and meaning making, and the complicated role of artist intent that accompanies exhibiting Kandinsky. This paper argues that “framing” Kandinsky’s Painting with Red Spot (P.W.R.S) in relation to the artist’s embrace of kitsch in 1914 will provide a framework for his stylistic experiments at this time in his career, one that offers the proper steppingstones to encourage visitor engagement while still leaving room for a multiplicity of meaning. Additionally, I will provide an in-depth examination of Kandinsky’s goals and expectations of the viewer leading up to and during 1914. This will be done to establish how the artist may have potentially wanted the viewer to engage with P.W.R.S., partly in contrast to the Centre Pompidou but also my own perspective of visitor engagement. In light of the issues raised here, I will then discuss whether Kandinsky’s aims are suitable for the modern-day museum space and how his desires of immediacy may challenge the mission of most artistic institutions.

Though P.W.R.S. is housed in the permanent collection of the Centre Pompidou, curiously enough, the work itself has not been exhibited on its walls in quite some time, having been loaned worldwide to various institutions to serve in multiple exhibitions. Despite this physical absence, the Centre Pompidou’s website provides a brief formal analysis of the painting accompanied by a contextualization, the latter written by a member of their curatorial team, Christian Derouet. In some ways, this information is almost more accessible than observing it in the gallery, as it can be viewed quickly and easily by audiences worldwide. In addition to this formal analysis that maps the relationships between some compositional elements using relatively charged verbiage such as “vibration,” “trembling,” and “shimmering,” Derouet contextualizes P.W.R.S. into two major events in Kandinsky’s personal life and artistic career. First discussed is the painting’s adjacency to his first major commission from the United States within the same year (1914) and the breakout of WWI. Secondly, Derouet details Kandinsky’s hasty exodus from Munich to Moscow as a result of the war and thus the marking the “end of his first career.” However, before these two historical elements are discussed, Derouet adds an additional layer of analysis that specifically addresses the red spot in the corner of the painting. Here, he labels it as an explicit reference to the red corner of the izbas (wooden log houses) that Kandinsky visited in Moscow, implying that the spot’s location in the corner of the composition is an allusion to its role as a “protective icon.” This is a typical spiritual adornment that can be seen in the folkloric interiors of the izbas, its name krasnyi ugol translating to “red or beautiful corner” and often seen housing imagery of saints and other religious icons.2

This is where my intervention originates. The anecdote to which Derouet is alluding to pre-dates P.W.R.S. by roughly a year, this being Kandinsky’s own publication, Reminiscences, in 1913. Here, the artist recalls the red corner as “thickly covered with painted and printed pictures of saints… burning in front of it the red flame of a small pendant lamp.”3 Now while it is certainly not implausible to make the association between the izba’s red corner and that of P.W.R.S., the issue comes from the semi-finite narrative that this establishes. If we follow the logic of Derouet, would the viewer not be inclined to assume that the entire composition is latent with symbolism of Kandinsky’s experience in Moscow? Ultimately, in some way, it is as if identifying the red spot as symbolic of the Russian izbas is the “solution” to P.W.R.S., an objective “truth” that mediates the uncertainty that typically accompanies non-objective art. It is here that I align myself with Rhonda Lane Howard’s critique of this practice, seen in her dissertation, “Avoiding Abstraction: An Investigation of The Average Museum Visitor’s Difficulty with Abstract Painting.” Here she asserts that evaluating art—and primarily abstract art—is a personal investigation, with no definitive right or wrong answer.4

This begs the question: how can we maintain this multiplicity of meaning while still providing sufficient context that helps engage the viewer critically with the artwork? In lieu of answers, I believe one should present the viewers with relevant history that will both supplement and enhance their own visual understanding of the work. Howard also discusses the institutional aversion to wall text, seen by consulting

the opinions of John Walsh—director of the J. Paul Getty Museum—who confesses that many museum professionals believe that an “unmediated encounter is the most meaningful approach to a work of art.” As Dutch artist Mieke Bal suggests in her book Double Exposure, this lack of language would thereby place a confidence in “the primary and sole power of visual images” as it keeps “verbal ‘noise’ to a minimum.”

Like Howard, I disagree with this belief. To the majority of museum visitors, despite competency level, language is often the primary way they have to make sense out of challenging artwork. If written properly, these labels will be supplemental and not commandeering to the work itself, “providing factual information or posing questions to both the uneducated and educated viewer.”

Also aligning with this perspective is Michael Baxandall, who, in his essay, “Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects,” examines the interwoven relationship between the three primary agents in the museum exhibition: the artist, the curator, and the viewer. With these three agents behaving in differently directed ways, Baxandall conceives of their convergence in the “space between object and label.” He acknowledges the label as a means in which the curator presents their own thinking about the object, one that they feel critical to communicate to the viewer. However, he argues that they must be aware that they are only one of three agents in the equation and should acknowledge that within the space between label and object, the viewer may act in their own right. Ultimately, he suggests that the curator should be less focused on directing the viewer’s mind in a particular way and instead focus on “enlarging the space,” something done by offering a relevant cultural fact that demands the viewer to make a connection.

In the case of P.W.R.S., I internalize the shared positions of myself, Howard, and Baxandall and turn to Bibiana Obler and her examination of Kandinsky’s ambivalent relationship with kitsch art. By utilizing these perspectives in tandem, I argue that the “cultural fact” within this context is Kandinsky’s contradictory embrace of kitsch in 1914, despite his earlier rejection of it, and that supplying the painting with this context will provide a framework for the artist’s stylistic experiments and visual language at this time in his career. While Obler’s dating of the artist’s relationship with kitsch is extensive, for the sake of relevancy I will be utilizing the following elements of Obler’s argument: the origins of Kandinsky’s aversion to kitsch and his often-failed attempts to avoid this “decorative” label, the introduction of reverse-glass painting into his artistic repertoire, and how kitsch became a purposeful tactic later in 1914 when the artist had completely abandoned representation in his abstraction.

Originating in Munich between 1860 and 1870, “kitsch” was a label that belittled the cheap, mass-produced art demanded by English tourists who were attracted to the quaintness of Bavaria. With this in mind, it was common for twentieth-century experimentations with folk art imagery to be conflated with kitsch; in some ways, this issue can be distilled to authenticity (folk art) versus commercialism (kitsch) and the supposed blurred line between them. This association began to trouble Kandinsky in his more formative years of representational painting where folk art dominated his earlier subject matter. The artist’s efforts to escape the relegation of his work to kitsch and his fascination with folk art go hand-in-hand, both fueled by the same desire to combat his current world that was plagued of materialism. While Kandinsky openly disapproved of artists desperate “scramble” for material rewards through their work—a goal often propelled by greed and littered with overproduction—his main issue stemmed from its theosophical implications. To Kandinsky, art was approaching the threshold of a spiritual awakening. This is discussed extensively in his treatise publication Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1912), where he urged artists to strive toward transcending the brute imitation of nature—the material world—and instead express their own “inner world,” one of unique desires and insights that could help capture the “inner value” of life around them. There is language used here that is rather esoteric in Kandinsky’s writings, such as “inner value” or “inner sound,” and these will be further expanded on in the discussion of the artist’s goals in the following section.

For now, this brief digression is to contextualize Kandinsky’s ideologies as they pertained to combatting the external world of materialism and advocating for spiritual revolution of the artist—the dominance of “inner necessity.” With Kandinsky’s fervent hopes for art to surpass its current materialist grasp, it is clear that his artwork being discredited as kitsch would be unfavorable. However, the folk-art imagery that the artist clung to at the early beginnings of the twentieth century only perpetuated this derogatory categorization, being seen as primarily “decorative” and for commercial appeal. In addition to plein air landscapes, Kandinsky would produce sketches of fantastical narratives or subjects of bourgeois leisure, some almost fairy-tale in nature, seen in his gouache painting, Once Upon a Time (Figure 2; 1904). Folk art itself occupied a somewhat ambivalent space during German industrialization, sliding between either a preservation of national folk traditions or an art that purposefully exploited this growing materialist society and capitalized off mass production. Avoiding this polarization, Kandinsky’s folk art, at least as it was intended, had a unique point of entry.
As Obler argues, Kandinsky’s relationship with folk art and kitsch, even this early on in his career, was a “self-conscious strategy” that aimed to expose the impossibility of ever recovering an innocent “primitivism” in the wake of industrialization and the tension between the two. However, the way in which this intention was translated into Kandinsky’s paintings—and eventually into the public eye—was not only counterproductive to the artist’s aims, but ultimately proved his point. In addition to being chastised by critics for producing paintings more akin to the applied arts, Kandinsky’s folk art was actually the source of his first public success. This brush with commercial profit only furthered the artist’s association with kitsch, and not in the ways he had hoped; to avoid further confusion between his art and materialist interests, Kandinsky decided to abandon the production of these drawings in 1907. The artist’s interest in folkloric themes and ways of living did not disappear however, and in 1909 he and his partner Gabriele Münter briefly settled in the town of Murnau, Germany. Here, their shared interests in “primitive” folk art and fantasies of purity flourished.

This experience, while the catalyst for many other artistic and ideological revelations, is appositely important for foregrounding Kandinsky’s interest in reverse-glass painting. The process of painting on glass encouraged—and practically required—a simplification of forms, seen in its use of bold black outlining and swaths of vibrant color pieced together behind it. While this style indeed embodied the illusion of “primitivism” and sincerity Kandinsky was looking to achieve, more importantly it acted as a critical steppingstone in the artist’s evolving visual language toward abstraction. Often times these glass paintings would act as early studies to larger oil paintings, allowing for a strong visual comparison of how the techniques of the former transferred into the latter. An example of this can be seen in Kandinsky’s Glass Painting with Sun (1910; Figure 3) and Small Pleasures (1913; Figure 4). A pronounced visual element that is consistent between the two is the dissolution of color and Quetschtechnik (meaning the “squashing” or scumbling of paint); often, these two go hand in hand. While the production of these glass paintings tapered off in 1913, the profound impact their visual language had on Kandinsky’s relationship with dissolving the object in his abstract is undeniable. This can be seen primarily in the use of Quetschtechnik to not only disrupt the smooth pigments around it—a technique that Lisa Florman claims results in spatial ambiguity—but also to blur traces of recognizable imagery.

This evolving relationship between Kandinsky and kitsch would come to a head in June of 1913, when he wrote to his artistic peer, Franz Marc, and voiced a decision that would ultimately dictate his visual language for the following years of 1914–1915. Here, Kandinsky expresses his intentions to “go to the border of kitsch (or as many will think, across the border),” and as Obler suggests, “give his critics exactly what they already thought he was giving them.” It is here that P.W.R.S. becomes of primary interest, seeing that it was created just about a year after this decision by Kandinsky. Though Obler does not speak explicitly nor too in-depth about P.W.R.S., her discussion of the contemporaneous commission by Edwin R. Campbell helps distinguish Kandinsky’s explicit acceptance of commercialist circumstances, but also how he managed to still set himself apart from traditional “ornamental” pictures. Campbell’s commission requested that four panels were to be created for the interior of his home, “strong, brilliant pictures” all of the “same mood… so that they will harmonize and make four beautiful walls.” While Kandinsky was granted artistic freedom, he was implored to produce a “pleasing set of pictures [landscapes],” ones that would satisfy even the most skeptical of customers and hopefully encourage subsequent commissions. It should be clear now that the circumstances of Campbells’ request practically frame Kandinsky’s work—and its best suited function—as ornamental, eye-pleasing wallpaper. This is only enhanced by the artist’s complete abandonment of any traceable figuring in 1914, allowing the extreme abstraction of these paintings to be versatile and appropriate for any potential home decoration.

However, to avoid falling too far into this trap, Kandinsky subverts any reference to a pleasing landscape and even abandons traditional representations of spatial configuration altogether. Works like Campbell’s panels (1914; Figures 5–8) and particularly P.W.R.S. are turbulent, undulating, and overall chaotic; there are no horizon lines or true ground to situate these forms into a real and cohesive space. In P.W.R.S. jagged zigzags and clouds of pigment enter the composition from each corner, alluding to their potential existence outside of the frame and densely converging in the center. Located in the bottom left quadrant are small, tightly bound clusters of color, bursting out from the confines of the upward reaching white form that encloses them. These clusters are mimicked in the upper right quadrant, this time given the extreme abstraction of these paintings to be versatile and appropriate for any potential home decoration. The upper left houses a vibrant red spot, an element so dominant that it dictates the painting’s title; its flat opacity stands out—or rather, sinks backward—when juxtaposed to the thicker Quetschtechnik surrounding it, disrupting the visual field by creating combatting spatial effects. Oddly enough, this red spot is somewhat echoed in the bottom right quadrant, where its shadowy, unrealized counterpart gently emerges from out of frame. These chaotic compositions, according to Obler, were Kandinsky’s attempt of approaching the ornamental—kitsch—

12 Obler, Intimate Collaborations, 27.
13 Obler, Intimate Collaborations, 35.
15 Lisa Florman, Concerning the Spiritual—And the Concrete—in Kandinsky’s Art (California: Stanford University Press), 103.
16 Obler, Intimate Collaborations, 57.
17 Obler, Intimate Collaborations, 61.
while forcefully setting himself apart from it, embodying more of the "sublime" than the "beautiful."18

Surely, as demonstrated here, Kandinsky's complicated relationship with kitsch was strained, ambivalent, and eventually receptive. His own interventions were made, and as Obler states, he embraced material "in order to transcend it."19 This context surrounding P.W.R.S., one that places in within a timeline of Kandinsky's evolving relationship with abstraction, is absent from the Centre Pompidou's description. Instead, the only major element being referenced is what the red spot symbolizes within the composition. Undoubtedly the chaotic configuration of P.W.R.S. could be intimidating to a modern-day museum goer, not just because of the intensity of its forms, but because they may not know where to start. The Centre Pompidou attempts to ease this, facilitating a point of entry: the red spot as symbolic of the red izbas that Kandinsky encountered in Moscow.

While I find this choice understandable, I also find it reductive. As shown in this paper, there is a rich history of the artist's relationship with the concept of kitsch that directly involves P.W.R.S. and its unique visual language. I contest that by framing P.W.R.S with the historical context provided here, the viewer is ultimately urged to make their own informed analyses—both conceptual and visual. Kandinsky's version of kitsch in 1914 will function as the same sort of steppingstone of that at the Centre Pompidou. However, instead of telling the viewer what to look at, this will aid them in how to look.

A separate but equally important issue that complicates my own proposed framing of Kandinsky's P.W.R.S. (and potentially his abstraction as a whole) is the artist's own desires for viewer contemplation. How exactly did Kandinsky wish for his spectators to engage with his abstraction? Could these expectations extend to the modern-day museum visitor? Kandinsky has notably published extensive writings on his artistic process and philosophies behind the contemplation of art. Latent within these writings, often evolving with his own journey with abstraction, are the ways in which he feels his paintings—and ultimately abstraction—should be critically engaged with. I stress here the word "critically," because the type of engagement Kandinsky voices is not passive in nature, such as the kind seen in "ornamental" art that receives only surface level contemplation.20 In 1913, Kandinsky reflects on his approaches to painting within the past decade, insisting that his infusion of endlessly concealed color-tones, at first completely hidden, would "only in the course of time reveal themselves to the engrossed, attentive viewer."21

Kandinsky also voices the ways in which form and especially color affect the viewers. Not only does the artist critique how these formal elements have traditionally impacted viewers in the past, but he also details how they should do so in the new wake of spiritualist art. To this extent, he often speaks of colors by addressing their inner sound, the strong characteristics that these colors emulate in solitude and away from associations of external sources. Black embodies a certain pause, an eternal silence in which motion is absent, while red is lively and turbulent, full of action and burning intensity.22 Kandinsky criticizes the viewer's desire to seek associative explanations for color, claiming that this "conjuring up the memory of another physical agent" only dilutes the true effect of color on the psyche.23 This insinuates that association is tied to a more superficial engagement with color, while recognizing its "inner sound" will ensure a direct impact on the soul. Kandinsky uses a metaphor of the piano to demonstrate this type of immediacy, claiming that "color is the keyboard. The eye is the hammer. The soul is the piano, with its many strings."24 To him, viewers are often too preoccupied with trying to find a meaning, or an external connection between parts of a picture; this desire, like many others, arises from the materialist society that Kandinsky condemns. Ultimately, the viewers of his time do not try and experience the "inner life of the picture," or "to let the picture affect him directly."25

It is important to note that the positions that Kandinsky takes on the issues of experiencing painting are not unique. In fact, a majority of the artist's thoughts on color derive from the theory of Einfühlung, or empathy theory. In the late nineteenth century, empathy theory was introduced first by Friedrich Theodor Vischer and later expanded on by Theodor Lipps. This aesthetic theory ultimately aimed to provide some sort of psychological understanding on how we interact with forms and colors, particularly the way we "feel into" them and imbue them with life. The effects of color are extensively discussed in Lipps's Ästhetik: Psychologie des Schonen und der Kunst (Aesthetics: Psychology of Beauty and Art; 1903), and the influences that these ideas had on Kandinsky are quite clear when examining the language used by the philosopher. For instance, Lipps claims that colors are "lively of themselves" and "dipped in mood... giving them an inner life or power." This power, while attributed to the viewer, does not originate within them, but the color itself.26 However, while each color possesses its own character, Lipps insists that each is ultimately

18 Obler, Intimate Collaborations, 62.
19 Obler, Intimate Collaborations, 66.
20 The type of paintings that Kandinsky critiques with this sentiment are the ones praised most highly by Clement Greenberg—one of the artist's biggest critics as seen in his publications of the mid-twentieth century. In his essay Modernist Painting (1961), Greenberg gives accolades to works of art that adhere to "medium specificity." In terms of painting, this means that the techniques employed do not try and employ false realism other dimensions, like that of the Renaissance masters, but instead references and embraces the two-dimensional limitations of the paint itself. As Kenneth Berry states in "A Personal View on Greenberg and Kandinsky" (1995), Greenberg described Kandinsky's work as a "failure to acquire a modern sense of style," and that the artist's allusion to "illusionistic depth" and spatial ambiguity (expressive of a more cosmological perspective) was antithetical to the type of self-referential modernist painting that Greenberg highly regarded.
22 Kandinsky, "Concerning the Spiritual in Art," Complete Writings on Art, 185–186.
23 Kandinsky, "Concerning the Spiritual in Art," 158–159.
24 Kandinsky, "Concerning the Spiritual in Art," 160.
26 David Morgan, "The Idea of Abstraction in German Theories of the Ornam-ent from Kant to Kandinsky," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, no. 3 (Summer, 1992), 235.
determined by the viewer—each person “feels” this mood into the color.\textsuperscript{27}

Similarities can be seen between Lipps’s words and those of Kandinsky, recalling the artist’s discussion of the “inner sound” of colors and the role of the viewer in identifying it. Even Kandinsky’s desires of an “engrossed, attentive viewer” can be traced back to the ideologies of Robert Vischer, son of Friedrich Theodor Vischer, in his own publications on empathy theory. Vischer expresses the differences between ways of looking: seeing versus scanning. The former is a passive, almost unconscious process and only provides a broad understanding of a visual phenomenon as a whole—an act that is the opposite of Kandinsky’s wishes. Scanning, however, is more active and conscious than its counterpart; it involves contacting the intricacies of a visual object—examining left, right, up and down—and ultimately denotes the reflexes of Kandinsky’s “engrossed viewer.” This type of relationship, according to Vischer, animates and revitalizes a “dead phenomenon,” or in the case of this paper, a painting.\textsuperscript{28}

In 1914, the year that \textit{P.W.R.S.} was created, Kandinsky would address the current state of his abstraction in a prepared lecture for an opening exhibition in Cologne. It is here that he reflects on the role that “dissolution” (an effect potentially achieved in part by \textit{Quetschtechnik}) has played thus far in bringing him to the point of “absolute painting,” where he claimed to currently be. At the time of \textit{Composition VI} and \textit{Painting with White Border} in 1913, Kandinsky claims that he “…dissolved objects to a greater or lesser extent within the same picture, so that they might not be recognized all at once and so that these emotional overtones might thus be experienced gradually by the spectator, one after another.”\textsuperscript{29}

He notes, however, that this was only done because he had not yet reached the level of maturity to which he could experience purely abstract forms without bridging the gap through objects. In 1914, Kandinsky claims that the pictures painted since then have “neither a theme or point of departure,” and that slowly but surely, pure abstract elements have “crowded out” forms of representational origin.\textsuperscript{30}

We can assume, then, that Kandinsky anticipates his viewers to experience his abstraction from 1914 onward—including \textit{P.W.R.S.}—through the means of empathy theory. If there are, as he insists, no relation to objects or any narratives whatsoever, the viewer is forced to directly engage with the abstract elements in solitude—experience the painting as a painting. However, is this way of engagement accessible to most viewers of Kandinsky’s abstraction? I argue that the answer is ultimately no, and that the average spectator would not instinctually resort to this kind of contemplation. Perhaps this is why Kandinsky chose to write extensively about it in the first place, resorting to literature as a means of communicating his lofty expectations. The artist even acknowledges the possibility of failure at the end of his 1914 lecture, where he states his desire to paint “good, necessary, living pictures, which are experienced properly by at least a few viewers.”\textsuperscript{31} I believe that “properly” in this context refers to the tenants of empathy theory outlined above and not through external, material associations.

Now that we understand Kandinsky’s intentions in regard to his abstraction, the question arises: Is it necessary for us to take this into consideration when exhibiting his work? I find this question both interesting and relevant considering the rise in debate of “artist intent” in contemporary museum studies, particularly regarding when it does and does not matter. For example, in Glenn Wharton’s “Artist Intention and The Conservation of Contemporary Art,” he examines the complicated role that artist intent plays in acts of conservation and restoration. In some cases, consultation with artists is critical when conceptual themes become outdated and their display needs to be reconceived to stay up to date with technological advances.\textsuperscript{32} There are also some instances in which artist intention is critical to ensure proper representation of a minority group and to clarify a message; this is seen in Elizabeth Sweeney’s discussion of contemporary disability art, where disabled artists actively provide public statements of intention to assert the meaning of their work. Sweeney explains that in certain contexts, the curator may position artist intent as “the most discerning factor when considering if exploitation should be a concern.”\textsuperscript{33} Conversely, as also illustrated by Wharton, artists have claimed that their ideas evolve from materials and processes, and that they “rarely have preconceived images of the final product.”\textsuperscript{34} This would, in some way, make the artist intent nearly untraceable and potentially difficult to consider when exhibiting their work.

While the issues outlined above are relevant in understanding the role that artist intent plays in the curatorial process, they are by nature \textit{contemporary} examples. This means that, in most cases, the artist is present and able to be consulted with in some way. What about cases such as Kandinsky, where discussions of his intentions are all post-mortem? Though he cannot be contacted physically, it has been established that Kandinsky has published extensively on his own evolving views on abstraction, the viewer, and society overall. While this is only a tailored and restricted view of his outlook, this has not stopped both scholars and curators from referring to the artist’s writings in their publications and exhibitions alike. Exactly how, and what, should we consider

\textsuperscript{27} Morgan, “The Idea of Abstraction,” 235.


\textsuperscript{30} Kandinsky, “Cologne Lecture (1914),” 399.

\textsuperscript{31} Kandinsky, “Cologne Lecture (1914),” 400.


\textsuperscript{34} Wharton, “Artist Intention and the Conservation of Contemporary Art,” 4.
of Kandinsky’s intentions when discussing and displaying *P.W.R.S.*?

As presented thus far, there are two primary intentions of Kandinsky that are addressed in the context of this paper: his purposeful decision to “go to the border of kitsch,” a move that dictated his visual language in works like *P.W.R.S.*, and how he subsequently intended the viewers to engage with his abstraction at this time. The former takes place during the stage of production, or the moment between Kandinsky’s ideas and the painting’s creation. The latter, however, encompasses issues that post-date the work’s contemporary context, or the moment between the painting’s display and viewer reception. It is here that Kandinsky advocates for a purely visual and formal contemplation from the spectator. Though I argue that Kandinsky’s embrace of kitsch should be considered in the framing of *P.W.R.S.*, I subsequently argue that his intentions of display and viewer engagement should not. These two issues, embodying two different modes of intention, will be addressed via the perspectives of Michael Baxandall and David Summers.

The issues that accompany this retrospective method are detailed by Baxandall in *Patterns of Intention*, where he illustrates the nuanced relationship between the two main agents in art historical analysis: the *participant* (the artist), and the *observer* (the inferential critic). The term inferential, in this context, refers to the form of art criticism that “reconstructs purposiveness and intention,” positing the maker of a picture as someone “addressing a problem of which his product is a finished and concrete solution.”

A main problem that Baxandall addresses between the *participant* and the *observer* is the spectrum of advantages and disadvantages that either party has regarding knowledge of the artist’s cultural climate. Chiefly, this pertains to the different modes that each agent is engaging with said climate: the artist operates within his milieu with flexibility, internalizing the stimuli that in turn affects their actions and ultimately behaving without rational self-consciousness. The observer, however, has perspective. This allows them to reflect, work from comparisons and generalizations that—as a result—give special prominence to certain elements of the artist’s culture over others.

In the case of *P.W.R.S.*, I believe that this relates to the Centre Pompidou’s association of the red spot with the red corner of the izbas. While yes, Kandinsky had—on record—encountered the izbas a year prior to this painting, by using Baxandall’s logic, how can one be certain that Kandinsky intended for this explicit association between the two? Although this proposed narrative has its own scholarly voice, that of the curator at the Pompidou and not Kandinsky himself, the language of this writing appears matter of fact: “the red color refers to the ‘red corner’ of the izbas where the protective icon sits.” No allusions to inferences or theorizations, but that this is indeed the answer to the red spot’s existence. It is here that I find the Centre Pompidou falling into the trap that Baxandall discusses between participant and observer. Perhaps their retrospective analysis posits too much of a presumptuous relationship between Kandinsky, the izbas, and the creation of *P.W.R.S.* In opposition of this, I argue that framing the painting with Kandinsky’s embrace of kitsch in 1914 adheres to Baxandall’s proposal of the artist as “problem-solver” as a way of understanding intent. Kandinsky, having voiced his problem of properly achieving his own mediation of kitsch into his abstraction, attempts to solve this by actively embracing kitsch in its near entirety, providing a unique intervention on commercialism with truly sublime and fervently abstract compositions.

The issue arises when we consider Kandinsky’s intentions that take place after creation, ones that closely involve the way the viewer engages with his abstraction and specifically works like *P.W.R.S.* As discussed previously, I argue that this is intention relates to that of empathy theory and experiencing the painting as a painting, “feeling into” its forms and colors to cultivate an unmediated interaction. While I believe that Kandinsky’s intentions—as ambitious as they are—could be suitable for an informative wall text, I do not think that they should permeate into certain curatorial decisions, such as labels—or lack thereof. This is where I turn to David Summers and his discussion of the “symmetry of intention,” a phenomenon that can only occur if an intention is adequately expressed through the artwork and whose success is contingent on if the intention and result are indeed symmetrical. In the case of *P.W.R.S.*, Kandinsky had made it clear—particularly around this time in 1914—that he aspired for an “attentive and engrossed viewer,” one that would recognize the inner sound of form and color through a pure, direct experience. I believe that Kandinsky’s attempt to realize this intent was his gradual but determined process in “dissolving” the object and painting *truly* abstract compositions, something that he claims he had achieved by the time that *P.W.R.S.* was created. By using the logic proposed by Summers, I argue that Kandinsky’s aspirations for his viewers align with this symmetry of intent; to the artist, *P.W.R.S.* materialized at a time where his abstraction relied on no “points of origin,” no external content, and whose subsequent composition embodied that of “pure abstract form.” This, in Summers’ analogy, is the result. In the same breath Kandinsky also acknowledges his *intent*, this being the desire to paint “living pictures” that are “experienced properly by at least a few viewers (my italics).” When consulting the artist’s words, though he acknowledges its potential of failure, we can presume that Kandinsky is purposefully trying to realize his intentions of viewer engagement through his choices in abstraction.

40 Kandinsky, “Cologne Lecture (1914),” 399.
41 Kandinsky, “Cologne Lecture (1914),” 399.
However, as Summers continues, this symmetry of intention assumes an innate fallacy: “through the work, we should all ‘see’ the intention.” The issue is one of perception: we all see art differently, and PWRS is surely not exempt from this. In addition to the Centre Pompidou’s discussion of the red spot as an explicit allusion to an external experience, scholars like Rose-Carol Washton Long insist that even Kandinsky’s paintings of 1914 whose titles “only relate to color and form,” like PWRS, “can be shown to have themes consistent with Kandinsky’s messianic world view.” Though she does not examine PWRS specifically—perhaps because it does not support her own investigation—she examines one of the panels for Edwin R. Campbell that was created contemporaneously, one colloquially referred to as Summertime. Here, within the extremely turbulent merging of colors, Washton Long identifies an angel in the upper-left corner. Though emphatic in her claims, this angel is indicated only by four parallel black lines and whose red “trumpet,” stretching diagonally across the canvas in the center of the painting, is designated simply by a sweeping red stroke.

I find that the main detriment to Washton Long’s argument comes from her heavy reliance on water-color studies that predate the final painting, such is the case with Campbell’s piece. Ultimately, this implies that these parallels can only be drawn when the two are juxtaposed. What about very abstract works like this panel that are not exhibited with its accompanying study? What kind of conclusions is the viewer inclined to draw when relationships to external content are absent? Though Kandinsky believes that the answer to the latter question should be an unmediated, pure meditation on color and form, it seems that both scholars like Washton Long and museums alike find this to be an unsatisfactory and potentially impossible solution. While scholarly approaches may seek external contextualization for more thesis-oriented research, museum institutions likely make these decisions based on elements of visitor engagement and accessibility.

Considering Kandinsky’s attitudes toward color and his expectations of the viewer, it is clear that the choices of the Centre Pompidou— in respect to framing PWRS—disregard this element of the artist’s intentions entirely. The museum’s dictation of the red spot as symbolic of the Russian izbas that Kandinsky encountered is a true embodiment of the “associations” he warned against. That being said, my proposition of contextualizing PWRS with Kandinsky’s relationship with kitsch ignores this type of intent just the same, instead favoring Baxandall’s notion of the artist as “problem-solver.” My intervention of the choices made by the Centre Pompidou constitute a reframing, not an absence of a label entirely, even though I stand to believe that the latter would be most in-line with Kandinsky’s desires. Theoretically, if we adhere to Kandinsky’s symmetry of intent, this is true; if PWRS were to simply have a tombstone label—artist, title, date—then surely the viewer would be encouraged to experience the painting as a painting. In this case, there are no references to external sources—like the red corner of the izbas—and no historical contextualization that could influence the way the forms and colors are understood. However, when revisiting Gail Gregg, we can see exactly why an absent label would be unsuccessful. Gregg addresses some of the following issues whose results were gathered by institutional focus groups: visitors spend roughly ten seconds in front of an object—seven to read the label and three to look at the work—and often visitors think to themselves “I don’t know what to look at first.” Considering this, it is possible that if PWRS were to not have a label, it would only exacerbate this issue. It appears that the Centre Pompidou attempts to explicitly counteract this problem, utilizing the “red spot” and its reference to an external source as an accessible point of entry. By instead framing PWRS with the historical contextualization of Kandinsky’s relationship with kitsch, visitors will be provided the proper steppingstones to encourage engagement with the artist’s abstraction while allowing for a multiplicity of meaning within the painting.

Ultimately, I argue that Kandinsky’s desire for immediacy—as in colors “exerting a direct influence onto the soul” and without association—challenges the missions of most museums. Accessibility is typically a paramount concern for institutions, and despite the somewhat “universal” potential of Kandinsky’s wishes, I contest that the average museum visitor may not be inclined to experience abstraction in this way. As E. H. Gombrich states, “it is instinctual for human beings to want to find the familiar.” Even when a narrative might not be immediately present, it may be our instinct to search for one. As Cristina Silaghi suggested in her analysis of PWRS, the painting’s visual language, while almost completely non-objective, possesses the qualities that one may be exposed to in representational paintings, such as animation, gesture, and inflection. Therefore, despite Kandinsky’s intentions of appreciating the painting as “living on its own,” the viewer may frequently be inclined to search for a narrative within its composition.

While I have discussed here the issues with Kandinsky’s intentions and expectations, there is one theme that is heralded throughout his writings that I believe can be maintained within the museum space: the critical role of the spectator in the “making” of the work. By consulting Kandinsky’s desires, what he deems the engrossed viewer, it is evident that spectator engagement was a primary concern, and while it may not be in the manner in which museum studies addresses it today, I find the overlap to be substantial. Though the issue of immediacy may not translate successfully into the modern museum, it is

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44 Washton Long, Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style, 124.
47 Silaghi, “Plenitudes of Painting,” 349.
undeniable that the viewer is often the catalyst of meaning within the painting. If we revisit the pillars of empathy theory, while the colors themselves are predisposed with their own “moods” and “inner lives,” it is the individual viewers who feel these moods into the colors themselves. It is with this positing of the viewer as “maker” that I argue for a recontextualization of P.W.R.S., one that provides a historical framework to understand its visual language while still allowing visitors to maintain their agency in the creative process. This is addressed in Beverly Serrell’s Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach, where in her chapter “The Label’s Voice: Who is Talking to Me?” she emphasizes the importance of letting the viewer “do some of the talking.”48 According to Serrell, labels should aim to encourage participation and avoid too much “you” voice; arguably, the text by the Centre Pompidou eliminates any potential participation by providing a near-definitive solution to the viewer: the red spot is ultimately symbolic of the red corner of the Russian izbas. Is this perhaps too much “you” voice on the part of the institution? I believe that by framing Kandinsky’s P.W.R.S through the historical context of the artist’s relationship with kitsch, the subjectivity of the curator’s “you” voice is subsided while the agency of the viewer is prioritized.

As Baxandall proposes in the content of wall labels, the viewer looks for causes.49 Though Baxandall speaks explicitly here about exhibiting non-Western culture, I believe that this can be applicable to abstraction. Typically, as seen in the Centre Pompidou’s prioritized information, the work’s accompanying information describes the curator’s perception of the object and puts forth what they feel necessary to comprehend the viewer. Though Baxandall proposes that viewers may be more interested in causes rather than effects, I argue that in the case of P.W.R.S., understanding the cause can inform the effect.50 I argue that the historical context of Kandinsky’s relationship with kitsch supplies the cause for the visual language of P.W.R.S., and the effect is, as a result, an individualized analysis on the part of the viewer. Baxandall claims that the “space” between object and label is where the visitor exists, making intellectual connections between the artist and the curator. The role that the viewer plays in this scenario is critical and should be (and is being) taken into consideration in contemporary museums studies scholarship. Baxandall suggests that, to ensure the importance of the viewer’s disposition in the space, that curators should focus on “enlarging the space” rather than directing the viewer’s mind in a particular way.51 An example that he offers is to provide a cultural fact that demands the viewer to work and make a connection, an idea that is more “tactful and stimulating than explicit interpretation.”52 In regard to P.W.R.S., Kandinsky’s relationship with kitsch serves as the cultural fact to enlarge the space, ideally encouraging viewers to make the connection between kitsch, Kandinsky’s glass paintings, and the visual language of the painting overall.

The multiplicity of meaning that I acknowledge here does not only apply to viewers but to curators also; P.W.R.S. is bound to see different interpretations by scholars and curatorial teams, each time being re-framed slightly differently. However, by providing the viewer with tools on how to look at abstraction as opposed to some concrete “solution,” the role of the curator becomes transformed into that of a facilitator, one that utilizes this subjectivity as the crux of critical visitor engagement. Instead of seeing this as a detriment to establishing a “true” meaning of P.W.R.S., I believe this embodies an element of Kandinsky’s aspirations all along: a painting continuously subject to re-interpretation, heightened levels of engagement, and whose ubiquity has permeated into prominent discourse today.

Through a combined and complimentary art historical examination of Kandinsky’s abstraction and the role of the wall label, this paper proposes a different kind of solution to the difficulty of facilitating abstract art to its audiences in contrast to the approach of the Centre Pompidou. By providing more historically based context to the viewer as opposed to curatorial interpretations of certain formal elements, the viewer is given a kind of creative agency that potentially mimics that of the curator. With the historical steppingstones present to ease audiences into looking closer, Kandinsky’s P.W.R.S. now becomes an incredibly vibrant and turbulent exploration of the artist’s critical yet playful experimentation with kitsch. However, the intense interactions between the formal elements, fraught with endless interpretations, are now placed in the hands of the viewers to discover.

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51 Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention,” 40
52 Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention,” 40.
Bibliography


Figure 2. Kandinsky, *Once Upon a Time*, gouache on colored card, 1904, Städtische Galerie im Lebachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich, Germany. In *Intimate Collaborations: Kandinsky & Münter, Arp & Taeuber*, by Bibiana K. Obler, plate 13.
Figure 3. Kandinsky, *Glass Painting with Sun*, tempera and oil with silver and gold bronze on glass, 1910, Städtische Galerie im Lebachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich, Germany. In *Intimate Collaborations: Kandinsky & Münter, Arp & Taeuber*, by Bibiana K. Ohler, plate 29.

